



# Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care

Session 1 – Wednesday 25 January 2023

**How are South Australia's children going overall?**

**How are they going in the early years?**

**Intended outcome:**

**Understand how South Australia's children are developing relative to other jurisdictions, especially in the early years; understand what South Australian cohorts are at risk of poorer development**

**Submission from the Child Development Council prior to the appearance as a witness by Adjunct Associate Professor Victoria Whittington, Presiding Member, Child Development Council**

**13 January 2023**

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# Session 1: Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care

The Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care has posed the following two questions for consideration at session 1, Wednesday 25 January 2023:

## **How are South Australia's children going overall?**

### **How are they going in the early years?**

#### **Intended outcome:**

**Understand how South Australia's children are developing relative to other jurisdictions, especially in the early years; understand what South Australian cohorts are at risk of poorer development**

These key questions are supported by seven specific topic areas and/or questions that have been provided to the Child Development Council for consideration, namely:

- 1 Function of the Child Development Council
- 2 Process by which measures are developed and agreed
- 3 An overview of young South Australians
- 4 How do we know how South Australia's children are faring in the early years?
- 5 Gaps in our knowledge
- 6 South Australian early childhood development outcomes vs other jurisdictions
- 7 South Australian cohorts at risk of poorer development outcomes.

This submission from the Child Development Council responds to the above seven topic areas and/or questions for consideration by the Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care.

Annexures to this submission are provided in a separate document.

# 1 Function of the Child Development Council

The Child Development Council (Council) is an independent statutory body, under Part 6 of the [Children and Young People \(Oversight and Advocacy Bodies\) Act 2016](#) (OAB Act). The OAB Act is committed to the Minister for Education, Training and Skills.

The Council operates in accordance with the provisions of the OAB Act and the [Children and Young People \(Oversight and Advocacy Bodies\) Regulations 2017](#) (OAB Regulations).

The Council's key function is to establish and maintain SA's [Outcomes Framework for Children and Young People](#) (framework), to promote uptake of the framework and to report how children and young people are faring with the objective of improving outcomes for children and young people in SA.

Annually, the Council publishes a report card of population-level data outcomes for children and young people (birth to 18 years) in SA. This publication reports data in the five legislated dimensions of health, safety, wellbeing, education and citizenship. Other Council publications include policy briefs and dashboards. An annual report of the Council's operation in each financial year is submitted to the Minister for Education, Training and Skills by 31 October for tabling in Parliament.

## Purpose of the framework

The purpose of the framework is to:

- help ensure that children and young children in SA experience a good life, now and into the future
- facilitate a whole-of-government approach to creating strategies, setting objectives and developing/implementing policies relating to children and young people
- report how children and young people are developing and progressing over time.

The framework guides all State authorities<sup>1</sup> in SA, individually and collectively, to improve outcomes for all children and young people in SA. Embedded in the framework, is the

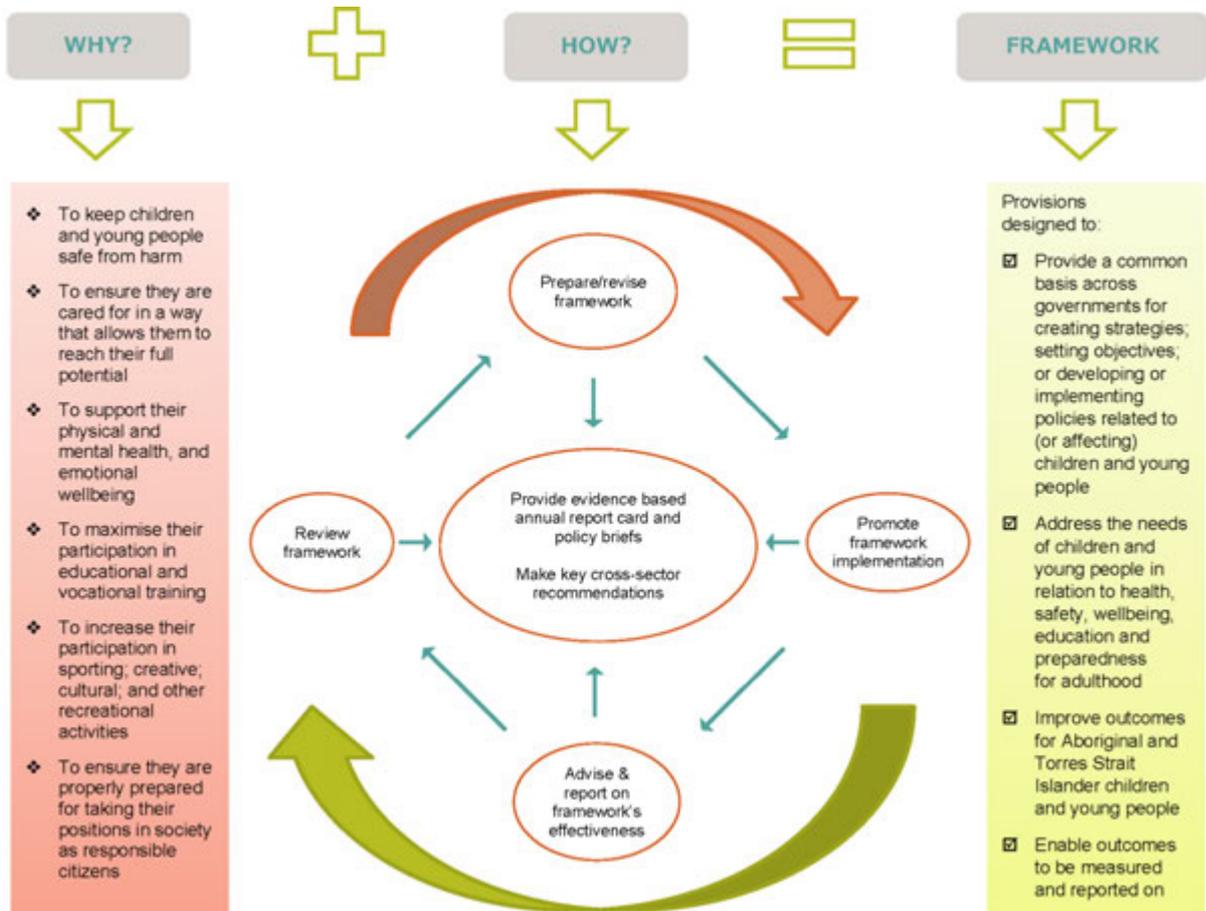
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<sup>1</sup> State authorities are defined in the Act to include statutory officials, public sector agencies, the South Australia Police, local government ie, councils, incorporated or unincorporated bodies established for a public purpose by/under an Act (other than incorporated companies, associations, cooperatives, societies or other voluntary organisations) and established or subject to control or direction by the Government a Minister of the Crown or a local council (whether or not established under an Act) and any other person or body declared by the regulations to be a State authority.

Charter for Children and Young People (Charter) with 20 essential life conditions, that all children and young people can and should have to thrive and have opportunities.

The Council’s mandate to establish and maintain the framework, the legislated provisions, and the intended purpose of the framework are depicted in Figure 1 below.

**Figure 1 Mapping the process followed by the Council in carrying out its functions**



**Annexures – refer to separate document**

Annex 1 Key messages about the Council, the framework including the Charter and the Charter Ambassador Program are attached.

Annex 2 The relevant legislative provisions of the OAB Act are appended.

## 2 Process by which measures are developed and agreed

### **Inaugural Outcomes Framework for Children and Young People**

Targeted consultation on preliminary indicators and indicative measures occurred from 12 December 2018 to 31 January 2019. This was followed by open consultation on revised indicators and measures from 5 April 2019 to 12 June 2019.

Specific consultation with prescribed government agencies on these revised indicators and measures occurred throughout August 2019, eg with the four chief executives of the Departments of Education, Health and Wellbeing, Human Services and Child Protection. The Council also consulted with the Senior Management Council, ie state government agency chief executives.

The Regulations contain additional consultation requirements with prescribed persons or bodies including the Guardian for Children and Young People (Guardian). The Guardian twice commented on the proposed indicators and indicative measures.

Stakeholder feedback resulted in changes to the framework, including, for example, the addition of disability-specific measures. Further information about refining the indicators and measures through consultation is in the separate Annexures document (Annex 3).

Children and young people informed the development of the indicators and measures through nine forums or focus groups, a short online survey from 5 April to 7 June 2019 and 660 postcards to the (then) Minister for Education (Minister) with messages and drawings about what makes 'a good life' in terms of health, safety, wellbeing, education and citizenship.

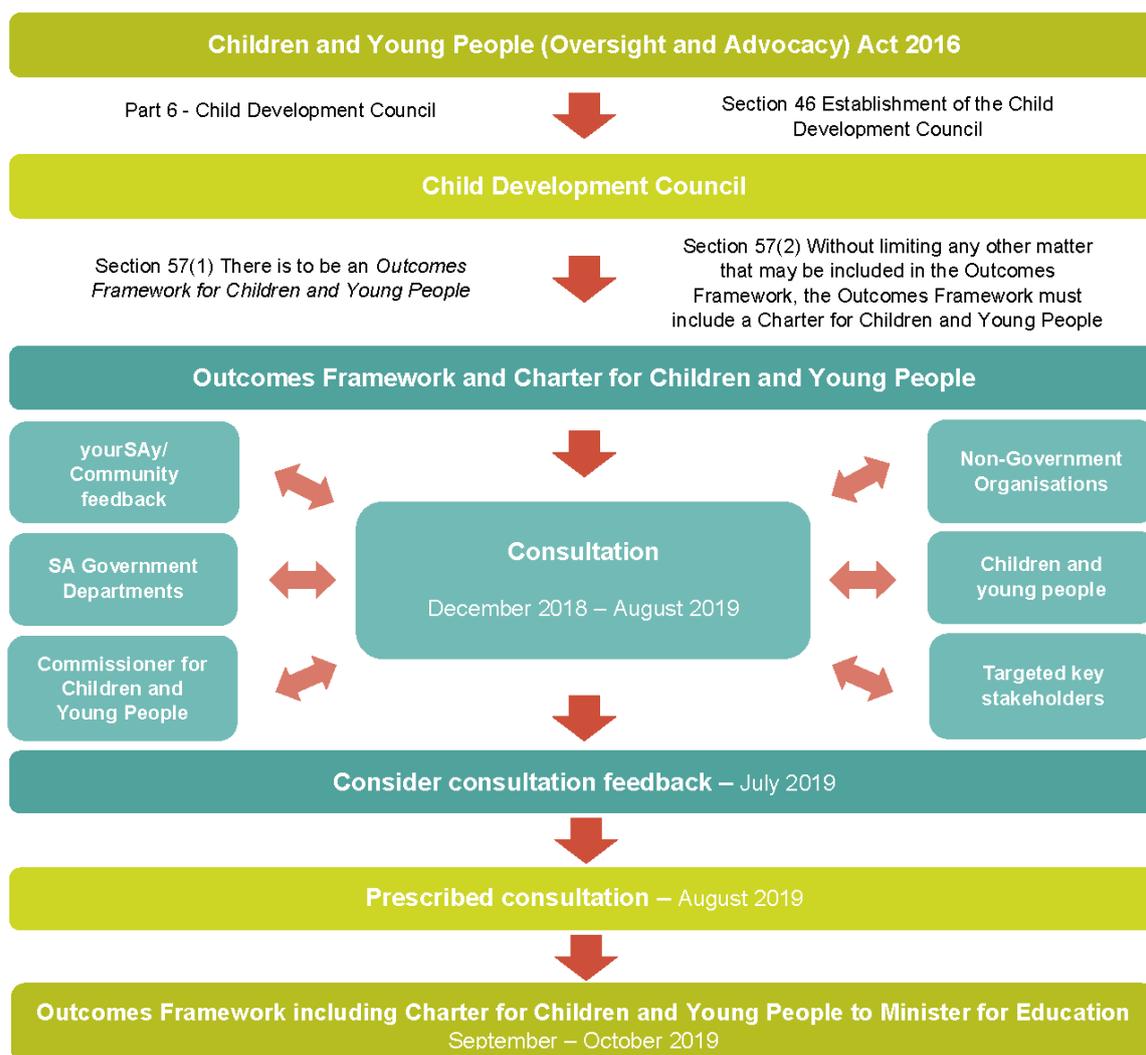
The consultation requirements in the OAB Act and the Regulations for the development of the framework are extensive. More detail about the targeted, open, specific and prescribed consultation undertaken for the development of the inaugural framework is provided in the Annexures document (Annex 4).

The process by which indicators and measures were developed for the inaugural framework in 2018-19, prior to the establishment in the OAB Act of the Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People, are depicted in Figure 2 below.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People (CACYP) was appointed in late 2018 and based in the office of the Commissioner for Children and Young People (CCYP) until mid-2022. The CACYP was established under the OAB Act in late 2021. In 2018-19, the OAB Act required consultation with the CCYP and the Regulations required consultation with the Guardian for Children and Young People. Nevertheless, the Council specifically consulted the CACYP.

**Figure 2 Consultation process in 2018-19 for the inaugural framework indicators and measures**



## Outcomes Framework Data and Technical Report

The *Outcomes Framework Data and Technical Report* (technical report) was published in February 2020. The technical report sets out the detailed specifications for the measures in the framework and captures the latest available data from a variety of state, national and international sources to monitor, track and report the outcomes of children and young people under 18 years.

The specifications form the basis for reporting the evidence and include information and definitions for the measures. Each specification states the data availability and, where possible, the disaggregation for the identified sub-categories. This is done to inform, and promote greater equality of outcomes for all children and young people and to identify any limitations, such as a lack of accessible, current data that are valid and reliable. Refer to the Annexures for the technical specification for the measures (Annex 5).

## **First mandated review of the Outcomes Framework for Children and Young People**

The Act provides that the framework must be reviewed at least once in each three-year period. The first review of the framework commenced in early 2022, with open consultation from 1 February to 30 June 2022. A total of 33 online surveys were completed and 12 formal submissions were received until late July 2022.

The OAB Regulations specify that the framework should contain provisions designed to improve outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people in each of the five dimensions (reg 12(2)(d)). Targeted consultation with Aboriginal stakeholders and communities in regional and remote SA occurred from 1 June to 31 August 2022 in Port Lincoln, Port Augusta, Adelaide, Mt Gambier, Riverland, Point Pearce and with the Ngaanyatjara, Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (NPY) Women's Council directors in Alice Springs. In total, more than 80 people engaged in the targeted consultation for the review. More details about the consultation are provided in the Annexures document (Annex 6).

The Council partnered with the Youth Affairs Council of South Australia to deliver two youth forums in SA. This was an opportunity for children and young people (12 to 18 years) to have input into the framework review. The first forum was held in Whyalla during the school holidays, hosted by Plaza Youth. Nine children and young people participated, five were 11 years of age or under and four were 12-18 years of age. All of these children and young people identified as Aboriginal. The second forum was held at Salisbury High School. A total of 19 students aged 12-18 years participated. Three of these students identified as Aboriginal.

The children and young people were asked a series of questions to find out what they considered made a good life. They were also asked to advise if/how areas of the framework could be improved, from their lived experience and perspectives.

In summary, the things that children and young people said they would like included:

- better access to free physical and mental health care services
- more affordable housing and safe places for them to go
- more supports to feel connected and cared for at home and school
- more learning support and better relationships with teachers
- more people who care about, support and understand children and young people.

At the time of writing this submission, December 2022, the Council is in the process of working through the framework review feedback.

### 3 An overview of young South Australians

How are they faring? South Australia's 2022 Report Card for Children and Young People (SA's 2022 Report Card) includes similar infographics to these below.

#### South Australia's children (birth to four years) – infographics

##### All children



During Census 2021, there were 94,200 children **under five years** estimated to be living in SA.

Census 2021 indicates children **under five years** made up 26% of SA's population **under 18 years**; slightly more than half (51%) were male and 49% were female.

Source: Census of Population and Housing, 2021, TableBuilder

##### Location

The latest available data:

- 2021, indicate that 79.0% of children **under five years** in SA were living in the Adelaide metropolitan areas (ie, Greater Adelaide) and less than one quarter (21.0%) were living in rural and regional areas
- 2016, indicate that more than half (53%) of Aboriginal children **under five years** were living in major cities in SA.

Sources: Australian Bureau of Statistics, cat no. 3235.0 Regional Population by Age and Sex, Australia, June 2021; Australian Bureau of Statistics 3238.0.55.001 Estimated resident Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous population, states and territories, Remoteness Areas - 30 June 2016.



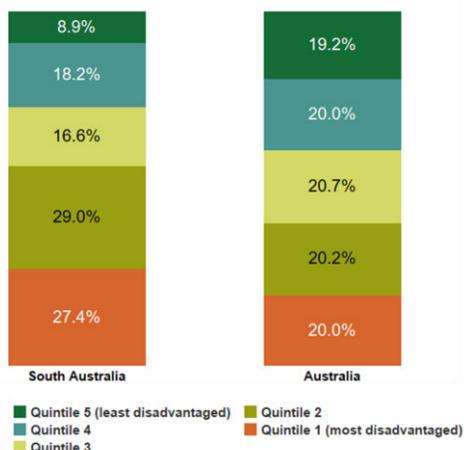
In 2021, national comparison shows that of all children **under five years** in SA:

- **8.9%** were estimated to be living in the **least** disadvantaged socio-economic circumstances (**19.2%** nationally)
- **56.4%** (more than half) lived in disadvantaged socio-economic circumstances, compared to **40.2%** nationally
- **27.4%** lived with the **most** disadvantage (**20.0%** nationally).

## Socioeconomic level (IRSD)

The latest available data, 2021, for children and **under five years** in SA indicate that:

- 27.4% (25,800), (*more than one quarter*) were estimated to be living in the *most disadvantaged* socio-economic circumstances (20% nationally)
- 63.8%, more than six in 10, were estimated to be living in the three middle quintiles (60.9% nationally)
- 8.9% (8,300) were estimated to be living in the *least disadvantaged* socio-economic circumstances (19.2% nationally).



Sources: Australian Bureau of Statistics, cat no. 3235.0 Regional Population by Age and Sex, Australia, June 2021 and Australian Bureau of Statistics, cat no. 2033.0.55.001 Census of Population and Housing: Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA), Australia, 2016.

Notes: Due to rounding the proportions may not add up exactly. IRSD cuts are based on ranking within Australia, and it excludes Unknown IRSD.

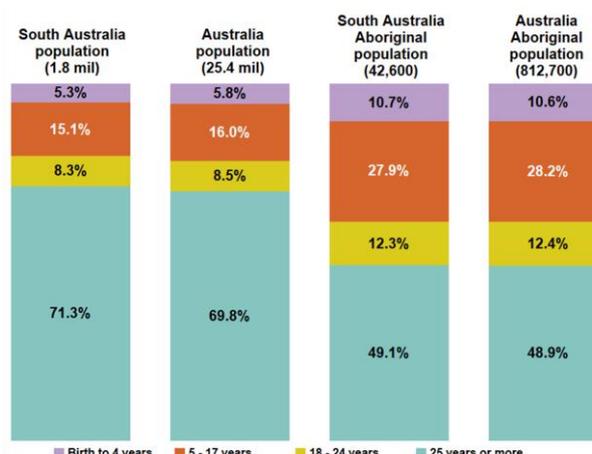
## South Australia's population by age groups

Census 2021 indicates that:

- children **under five years** made up 5.3% of SA's population (1.8 million)
- Aboriginal children **under five years** made up 10.7% of SA's Aboriginal population (42,600)
- 20.4% of SA's population were **under 18 years**
- 38.6% of SA's Aboriginal population were **under 18 years**.

Sources: Census of Population and Housing, 2021, TableBuilder

Note: Due to rounding the proportions may not add up exactly.



## Children under five years by age



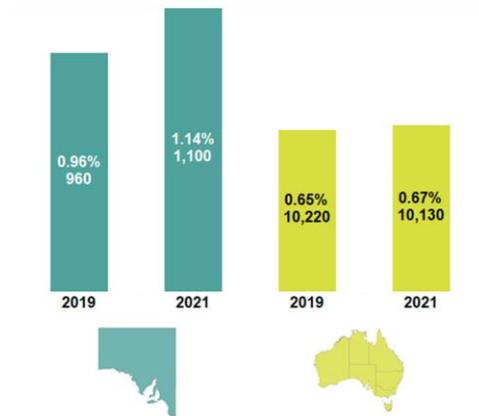
The Census data disaggregated by age for children in SA indicate that in 2021:

- 19,100 (20.3%) were **three-year-olds**
- 19,400 (20.6%) were **four-year-olds**.

Source: Census of Population and Housing, 2016 and 2021, TableBuilder

Note: Due to rounding the proportions may not add up exactly.

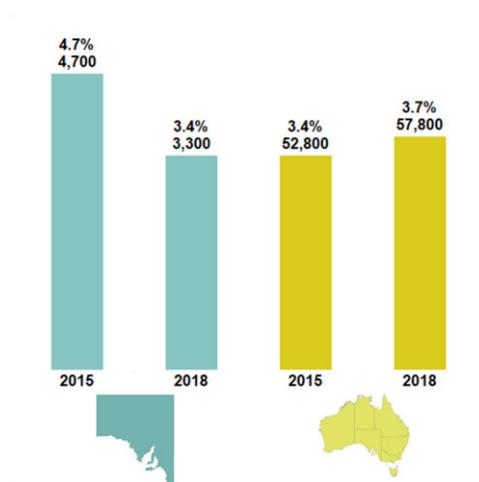
## In out-of-home care



The latest available data, 30 June 2021, indicate that 1,100 (1.14%) of all children **under five years** in SA were in out-of-home care (0.67% nationally).

Source: AIHW Child Protection Collections 2018–19 and 2020–2021

## Disability



The latest data, 2018, indicate there were 3,300 children **under five years** with disability in SA.

The prevalence of disability among children **under five years** is 3.4% in SA in 2018.

Nationally, children with disability made up 3.7% of children **under five years** in Australia in 2018.

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia, 2018, cat. no. 4430.0

**Note: The data have a high relative standard error and therefore should be used with caution.**

The latest data, 2021, estimated approximately 97.5% children **under five years** living in SA were born in Australia.

Of children **under five years** born overseas, and living in SA, the top five countries of birth were India, England, Pakistan, United States of America and China (excludes SARs and Taiwan).

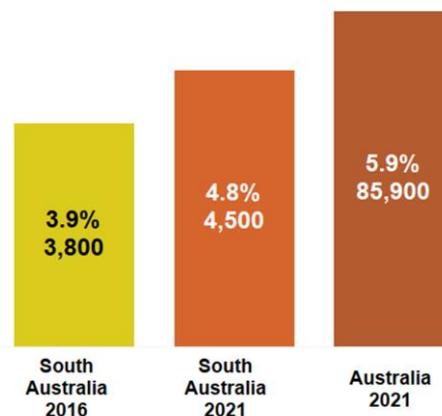
## South Australia's Aboriginal children (birth to four years) – infographics

### Aboriginal children – numbers and proportions

The 2021 Census data indicate that:

- 4,500 Aboriginal children **under five years** were estimated to be living in SA, making up 4.8% of all children **under five years** in SA
- Nationally, Aboriginal children **under five years** comprised 5.9% of all children and **under five years**.

Source: Census of Population and Housing, 2016 and 2021, TableBuilder



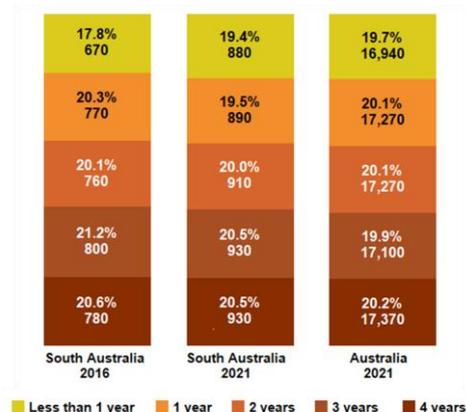
### Aboriginal children under five years by age

The 2021 Census data, disaggregated by age for Aboriginal children **under five years** in SA indicated that there are approximately 4,500 Aboriginal children in this age group:

- 930 (20.5%) were three-year-olds
- 930 (20.5%) were four-year-olds.

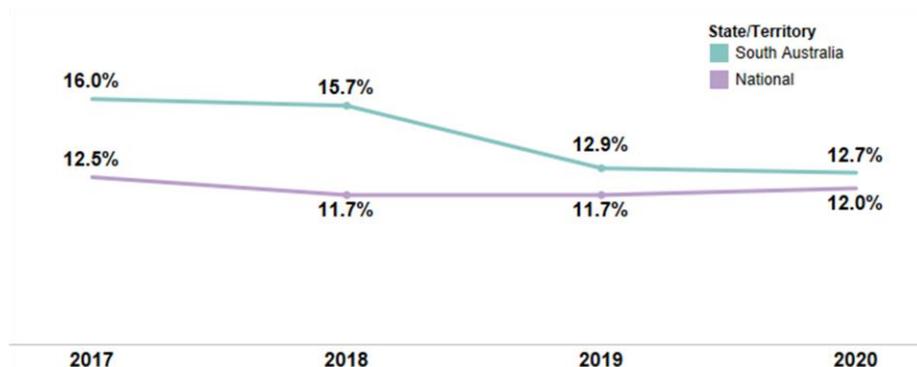
Source: Sources: Census of Population and Housing, 2016 and 2021, TableBuilder

Note: Due to rounding the proportions may not add up exactly.



## Framework measures relevant to the National Closing the Gap Agreement targets for Aboriginal children under five years

### Proportion of Aboriginal babies born with low birthweight



### Profile of Aboriginal mothers



The proportion of Aboriginal mothers **under 20 years** when giving birth declined from 15% in 2015 to **9%** in 2019 (11% nationally in 2019).



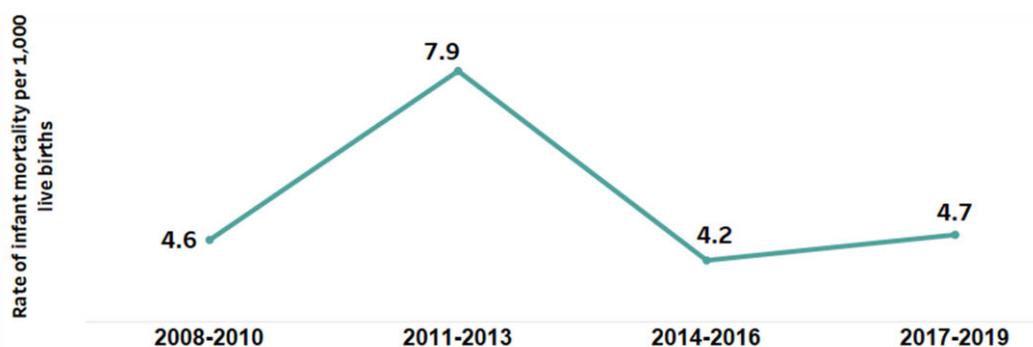
**45%** of Aboriginal women **smoked in the first 20 weeks of pregnancy** in 2019.



An increasing proportion of Aboriginal women attended a first **antenatal visit** in the first 14 weeks of pregnancy in 2019, still significantly lower than the proportion for all women in South Australia.

*Data are available for all women in South Australia for 2020; however, not for Aboriginal women in South Australia.*

### South Australia's infant mortality rate for Aboriginal babies under 12 months



The mortality rate for Aboriginal infants under 12 months per 1,000 live births, fluctuated widely between 2008-10 to 2017-19.

## How are they faring? South Australia's 2022 Report Card for children and young people

The third report card under the framework, SA's 2022 Report Card, provides population-level outcomes for children and young people (birth to 18 years).

Part A reports for all children and young people<sup>3</sup> and Part B reports for Aboriginal children and young people. The data in both parts are reported for the framework's five legislated dimensions – health, safety, wellbeing, education and citizenship – to provide an evidence-base that informs strategies, objectives, policies and funding decisions.

The data indicate that *most* children and young people in SA appear to:

- be in good health
- be safe from preventable abuse and neglect
- be happy, inspired and engaged,
- have positive experiences of learning
- be preparing for adult life.

A summary of SA's 2022 Report Card is provided in the separate Annexures (Annex 7).

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<sup>3</sup> References to 'all children and young people' are inclusive of Aboriginal children and young people.

## 4 How do we know how South Australia's children are faring in the early years?

### Enrolment in preschool

In 2021, the **enrolment rate** in SA<sup>4</sup> for:

- all four-year-olds was 84.1% (85.1% nationally)
- Aboriginal four-year-olds was 90.4% (comparable to the national average)
- all three-year olds was 63.7% (65.9% nationally)
- Aboriginal three-year-olds was 81.5% (54.9% nationally).

The universal preschool *enrolment age* in SA is four years of age, however, in comparison to other states and/or territories, the four-year-old enrolment rate was lower in SA than in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), Western Australia (WA) and the Northern Territory (NT). See Tables 1 and 2 for more information.

**Table 1 Children's preschool enrolment statistics, by selected ages – 2021**

Age	Measure	New South Wales	Victoria	Queensland	South Australia	Western Australia	Tasmania	Northern Territory	Australian Capital Territory	Total
Three-year-olds	Number of children	70,487	48,055	42,246	<b>12,259</b>	20,205	3,011	1,823	4,195	202,277
	As a proportion of the population	72.3%	61.0%	67.3%	<b>63.7%</b>	58.9%	54.0%	53.4%	77.9%	65.9%
Four-year-olds	Number of children	81,550	66,512	54,736	<b>16,735</b>	33,950	4,736	3,116	5,765	267,106
	As a proportion of the population	82.2%	83.0%	85.2%	<b>84.1%</b>	96.3%	80.1%	88.9%	101.9%	85.1%

Source: RoGS report on *Early childhood education and care 2022 (Table 3A.18)*

Notes:

- Proportion calculated as the number of enrolments (from the August National Early Childhood Education and Care Collection:) divided by the number of children in each jurisdiction (using ABS ERP at 30 June 2021), by age
- A child may attend both a preschool and a separate or adjoined child care facility, such as family day care, outside school hours care, vacation care, in-home care and occasional care services. Participation in preschool is not compulsory and is influenced by parental preference and other factors, such as school starting age in the particular jurisdiction

<sup>4</sup> The ABS definition of a preschool program: A preschool program is defined as a structured, play-based learning program, delivered by an [early childhood] degree qualified teacher, aimed primarily at children in the year or two before they commence full-time schooling. A preschool program can be delivered in a variety of settings such as stand-alone preschools, preschools co-located as part of a school (both government and non-government), and centre-based day care (CBDC) services. A child may attend both a preschool and a separate or adjoined childcare facility, such as family day care, outside school hours care, vacation care, in-home care and occasional care services. Participation in preschool is not compulsory and is influenced by parental preference and other factors, such as school starting age in the particular jurisdiction. (Preschool Collection 2021).

- (c) Data are not fully comparable over time, or across jurisdictions, due to differences and changes in coverage and methodologies. Refer to the methodology section of Preschool Education, Australia on the ABS website and the ECEC National Minimum Data Set specifications on the AIHW website for more information
- (d) Data are perturbed and data discrepancies may occur between sums of the component items and totals.
- (e) May includes data for children in receipt of a preschool program across both preschool and centre-based day care settings
- (f) A preschool program can be delivered in a variety of settings such as stand-alone preschools, preschools co-located as part of a school (both government and non-government), and centre-based day care (CBDC) services.

**Table 2 Aboriginal children's preschool enrolment statistics, by selected ages – 2021**

Age	Measure	New South Wales	Victoria	Queensland	South Australia	Western Australia	Tasmania	Northern Territory	Australian Capital Territory	Total
Three-year-olds	Number of children	4,280	1,122	2,859	<b>830</b>	718	245	374	123	10,559
	Estimated and projected Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population, Series B, Single year of age, at 30 June 2021	6,581	1,473	5,639	<b>1,018</b>	2,307	634	1,411	178	19,247
	<i>As a proportion of the population</i>	65.0%	76.2%	50.7%	<b>81.5%</b>	31.1%	38.6%	26.5%	69.1%	54.9%
Four-year-olds	Number of children	5,190	1,370	5,202	<b>902</b>	2,419	486	1,094	225	16,894
	Estimated and projected Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population, Series B, Single year of age, at 30 June 2021	6,405	1,425	5,509	<b>998</b>	2,276	622	1,407	169	18,815
	<i>As a proportion of the population</i>	81.0%	96.1%	94.4%	<b>90.4%</b>	>100%	78.1%	77.8%	>100%	89.8%

Source: ABS Table Builder, Preschool Education 2021; 3238.0 Estimates and Projections, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, 2006 to 2031

Notes:

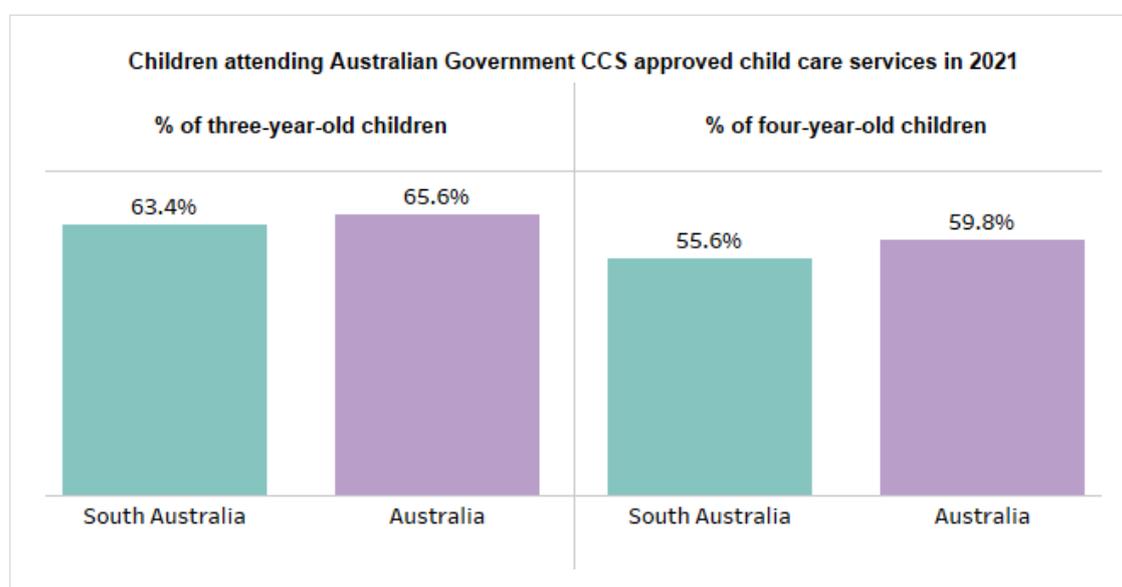
- (a) A child may attend both a preschool and a separate or adjoined child care facility, such as family day care, outside school hours care, vacation care, in-home care and occasional care services. Participation in preschool is not compulsory and is influenced by parental preference and other factors, such as school starting age in the particular jurisdiction
- (b) Data are not fully comparable over time, or across jurisdictions, due to differences and changes in coverage and methodologies. Refer to the methodology section of Preschool Education, Australia on the ABS website and the ECEC National Minimum Data Set specifications on the AIHW website for more information
- (c) Data are perturbed and data discrepancies may occur between sums of the component items and totals.
- (d) May include data for children receiving a preschool program across both preschool & centre-based day care settings
- (e) A preschool program can be delivered in a variety of settings such as stand-alone preschools, preschools co-located as part of a school (both government and non-government), and centre-based day care (CBDC) services.

## Attendance at approved childcare services

In 2021:

- 63.4% of **three-year-olds** were *attending* an approved childcare service in SA, a rate slightly lower than the national average of 65.6% (see Figure 3). New South Wales (NSW), Queensland (QLD) and the ACT had much higher proportions than SA.
- 55.6% of **four-year-olds** were *attending* an approved childcare service in SA, a rate slightly lower than the national average of 59.8% (see Figure 3). New South Wales (NSW), Queensland (QLD) and the ACT had much higher proportions than SA.

**Figure 3 Participation in early childhood education and care by three- and four-year-old children in South Australia in 2021**



Source: Report on Government Services (RoGS) Early childhood education and care 2022 (Table 3A.14)

Notes from RoGS:

- Data are drawn from the Child Care Subsidy System (CCSS)
- Attendance data relate to the March quarter
- Children can use more than one type of care. Children attending approved services may be counted more than once if attending more than one service during the reference period but are counted only once in the total. Also, data for Australia may not equal the sum of states and territories because children are included only once in the Australia total but may be captured attending services in more than one jurisdiction
- Children from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander play groups and enrichment programs were not included because ages are not collected for these children
- Proportion calculated using ABS estimated resident population (ERP) as at 31 December of the previous calendar year. Population data for 31 December 2016 onwards are the first preliminary ERP.

## 5 Gaps in our knowledge

### Developmental milestone data

A Council policy brief in August 2020, [\*South Australia's surprising downward trend in AEDC results\*](#) highlighted a lack of population wide data on child development in SA prior to the federally implemented triennial AEDC. The AEDC data indicate that a large number of children were developmentally vulnerable across the entire socio-economic distribution upon starting school. The policy brief is included in the Annexures (Annex 8).

On 22 June 2021, new funding of \$50.1 million for an [\*Early Learning Strategy\*](#) was announced in SA's State Budget, including funding for two additional universal checks at key stages between birth and school age. The existing checks are available soon after birth, at 6 to 9 months, 18 to 24 months and preschool. These two new universal checks when added would be at 12 month and 3 years, increasing the total number of universal checks between birth and 5 years to six. The Council welcomed news of this addition because accessing help and services in the early years, eg for disability or developmental delay, can significantly improve a child's outcomes at every stage of life.

A key goal of Education's new *Early Learning Strategy 2021 to 2031: All young children thriving and learning* is 'to increase the number of South Australian children who are developmentally on track when they start school' (p.16). Planned activities include expanding the reach, frequency and number of child development checks and equipping parents and families to support their children's development. The Year 1 highlights of the Office for the Early Years 'Early Learning Strategy Report Card' included:

- June 2021 – A two-year grant funding agreement with Playgroups SA to deliver new universal, not targeted, community playgroups
- June 2021 – A two-year grant funding agreement with Raising Literacy Australia to build a coalition of non-government and government partners to develop and disseminate clear and consistent early childhood development messages and resources to families with children (birth – three years)
- June 2022 – Development and launch of a new Children's Centres outcomes framework.

On 2 August 2022, the Head of the Office for the Early Years, Early Years Division, Education, advised the Council that the funding for additional developmental milestone checks pilots will be in addition to, and separate from, existing checks offered by Child and Family Health Service (CAFHS) and use a different modality. These pilots will be tested over 18 months and provide 'moment in time' checks and not track children.

[South Australia's surprising downward trend in AEDC results](#) had recommended that the development of all children in SA from birth to school age be monitored proactively and regularly and that universally applied checks be delivered in the first two weeks after birth, at 8 weeks, 12 months, 2 years and 3 years at a minimum. It would appear that these pilots **will not address** the Council's recommendations nor provide population wide data on child development prior to commencing school.

## **Early intervention**

Early identification of, and support for, children with developmental delays and disability is essential to children gaining the skills needed to thrive.<sup>xviii</sup>

The National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) early childhood intervention approach aims to support children with a developmental delay or disability to develop the skills they need to take part in daily activities and achieve the best possible outcomes. In quarter 4, 2020-21, the numbers of children under six years receiving early childhood early intervention (ECEI) supports and children with an approved NDIS plan before entering school were:

- 680 children under six years received ECEI supports through the NDIS
- 5,651 children under six years had an approved NDIS plan.

The Council welcomes the [Words Grow Minds](#) campaign launched on 24 October 2022, aimed at bringing together early years services from across SA.<sup>xix</sup> The campaign is being piloted with families and early years services in Mount Gambier and Whyalla.

The Early Years Taskforce, set up in 2021, is charged with improving early childhood developmental outcomes for children in SA. Members include government and non-government services working with young children and their families. Taskforce members are working to improve developmental outcomes by:

- increasing collaboration across services
- forming clear and consistent messaging for parents and caregivers on the importance of brain development in the early years
- showing families simple things they can do in their child's very early years to help strengthen their brain architecture, positively impacting on their lives in the future.

The Early Years Taskforce and Words Grow Minds campaign are funded by the Department for Education.

## Addressing data gaps and data quality

Good quality data are fundamental to government and policy makers for creating strategies, setting objectives or developing and implementing policies. Data gaps inhibit SA's decision-makers from making informed decisions to improve the outcomes of children and young people (birth to 18 years).

South Australia's framework exists to improve the outcomes of children and young people in five specified dimensions. For the framework to be effective in improving outcomes, the data reported under the framework should be used to evaluate proposed policies and funding allocation in SA, eg using a set of agreed principles.

Measures with known data gaps were included in the inaugural framework because they were considered fundamental to outcomes. These measures are 'placeholders' to highlight where data are needed. South Australia's 2022 Report Card highlights the data gaps in all five dimensions. the current lack of developmental milestone data for children under five years remains of grave concern and means that SA has no information regarding how many children in this age range are developmentally on track.

Some of the available data are too old for a contemporary evidence-base to inform decision-making, eg the *National Oral Health Plan 2015-2024* calls for a population-based epidemiological study of the oral health of children and young people to be conducted every 10 years. Oral health is important to overall health, development, wellbeing and social inclusion and it is concerning that current data are not available.

Measurement and reporting is a means to an end and to be effective in improving outcomes, data must be timely, able to be disaggregated, have some consistency of indicators and measures and reflect data gaps with placeholder measures.<sup>ii</sup>

At a population level, most children and young people in SA appear to be doing well, however, SA's 2022 Report Card highlights areas of concern that should be prioritised, eg data limitations are more pronounced for Aboriginal children and young people.

The 2020 National Agreement on Closing the Gap (National Agreement) was developed in partnership with the Coalition of Peaks. The National Agreement has 17 targets for eight subject areas (health and wellbeing, education and employment, justice, safety, housing, land and waters, languages and digital inclusion).

The National Agreement targets include all Aboriginal four-year-olds being enrolled in early childhood education by 2025 and, that by 2028:

- 90-92% of babies born to Aboriginal mothers have a healthy birthweight
- 45% of Aboriginal children are assessed as developmentally on track in all five domains of the AEDC
- the rate of Aboriginal children and young people in detention has reduced by 11-19%.

Since the framework commenced in 2019, yearly report cards have shown how children and young people under 18 years are faring in the five dimensions. Wherever possible, data disaggregated for Aboriginal children and young people have also been reported. Specific areas of concern for Aboriginal children under five years that have been highlighted in report cards in 2020 and 2021, and that are of some relevance to the National Agreement targets, have included:

- babies born with low bodyweight
- infant mortality rate for infants under 12 months
- mother's age at birth; smoking and seeking antenatal care in pregnancy
- rates of apprehension, arrest and reporting by police
- rates of children and young people (birth to 18 years) being *in* OOHC
- school attendance rates for students in Year 1 to Year 10.

The Council is raising awareness of the data gaps with SA's decision makers and data custodians. To comply with the statutory duty of State authorities regarding the framework, the Chief Executives and leadership teams of state government agencies and councils should lead their organisations and staff in:

- 1 Endorsing the framework in high-level planning and strategy processes and documentation, thereby publicly committing to improving agreed outcomes for children and young people. It is important that all governments work towards this shared set of outcomes as legislated and gazetted.
- 2 Applying the framework and proactively:
  - determining how the organisation's policies, programs and services align with the five dimensions and outcome statements
  - embedding the dimensions and outcome statements in the organisation's policies, programs and services ie, into all existing aspects and mechanisms to give effect to the framework
  - considering the indicators and the outcomes statements and asking: *Are we collecting and/or reporting data that provide evidence of how children and young people are doing?*

## 6 South Australian early childhood development outcomes vs other jurisdictions

In 2022, Victoria (VIC) has become the first Australian state to roll out universal access to kindergarten for three-year-old children.

A lack of data<sup>5</sup> prompted the Victorian Department of Education and Training to commission ‘*The Educational and Developmental Gains in Early Childhood (EDGE) study*’<sup>6</sup>, a five-year research project to evaluate the roll out.

The EDGE study is being carried out by the University of Melbourne in partnership with The Front Project. The EDGE study aims to provide evidence by:

- measuring the impact of two years of universal kindergarten on children’s learning and development and, in doing so, contribute to an international and Australian evidence base for early childhood education
- evaluating the effectiveness of implementing universal three-year-old kindergarten across Victoria and opportunities to improve/revise implementation at each stage
- highlighting insights for policymakers and decision-makers, reflecting the cycle of policy design, implementation and the evaluation of outcomes, with a focus on equity and quality
- providing practical information to the early childhood sector – teachers, educators, centre leaders and providers – on the programs, practices and learning experiences that encompass three-year-old kindergarten programs across Victoria
- demonstrating the return on investment of two years of early childhood education, taking into account the educational, social and economic benefits of the policy, and building a case for future investment in children – particularly children experiencing disadvantage – and society as a whole.

The EDGE study will run from 2022 to 2026.

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<sup>5</sup> Professor Tricia Eadie, Director of Research in Effective Education in Early Childhood, Melbourne Graduate School of Education reportedly said: ‘*Currently, there is limited Australian evidence on the impact of three-year-old kindergarten on children’s outcomes, and on how to best achieve an equitable and impactful early years’ experience that narrows the disadvantage gap and sets children up for future educational and life success.*’ <https://www.thefrontproject.org.au/news-and-events/media-releases/143-evidence-base-vital-to-inform-three-year-old-kindergarten-programs-in-victoria-and-beyond>. Accessed 13/12/22.

<sup>6</sup> Information sourced from <https://education.unimelb.edu.au/REEdCh/assets/the-edge-study>. Accessed 2/12/2022.

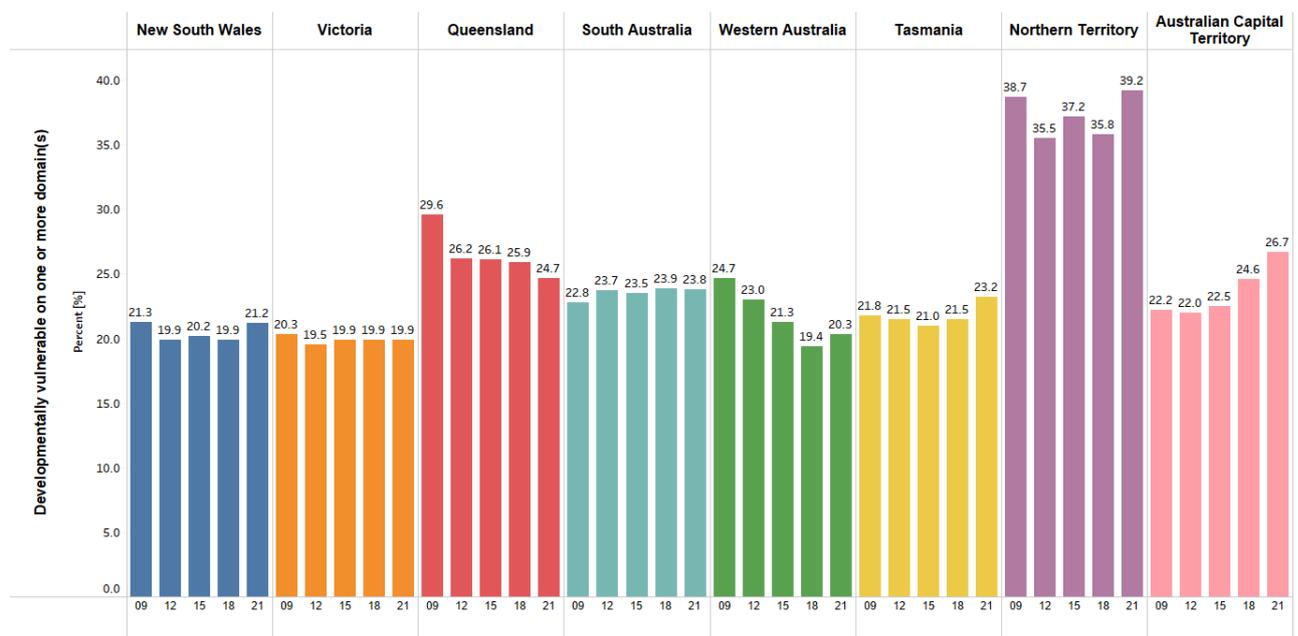
## What is the Australian Early Development Census telling us?

Minor movements occurred in the SA's AEDC results between 2018 and 2021.

The 2021 AEDC results indicated that a quarter (23.8%) of children in SA were developmentally vulnerable in one or more domains in their first year of full-time schooling. As shown in Figure 4 below, this is a one percentage point increase from 2009.

Queensland has continued to show improvement from 2009 to 2021. Western Australia's results showed improvement from 2009 to 2018 (inc), however, 2021 saw a slight increase in developmental vulnerability in that state in one or more domains.

**Figure 4 AEDC results regarding developmental vulnerability by year of collection, states and territories, 2009 - 2021**



Source: Australian Early Development Census (AEDC), 2021 results

Table 3 below indicates that, in 2021, there were proportional more children developmentally vulnerable across all five domains in SA, than the national average.

National comparison indicates that SA has significant higher proportions of children developmental vulnerability in the following domains:

- emotional maturity domain (10.3% vs 8.5%)
- physical health and wellbeing (10.7% vs 9.8%)
- social competence (11.2% vs 9.6%).

**Table 3 Percentage of children developmentally vulnerable in 2021**

State / territory	AEDC domains					Developmentally vulnerable in one or more domains
	Physical	Social	Emotional	Language	Communication	
New South Wales	9.4%	9.4%	7.3%	6.2%	8.4%	21.2%
Victoria	8.1%	9.0%	7.7%	7.2%	7.4%	19.9%
Queensland	11.6%	10.6%	10.0%	8.4%	9.1%	24.7%
<b>South Australia</b>	<b>10.7%</b>	<b>11.2%</b>	<b>10.3%</b>	<b>7.9%</b>	<b>8.6%</b>	<b>23.8%</b>
Western Australia	9.4%	7.6%	7.8%	7.2%	8%	20.3%
Tasmania	11.1%	9.3%	10.3%	9.2%	6.6%	23.2%
Northern Territory	18.3%	21.7%	17.7%	21.2%	16.8%	39.2%
Australian Capital Territory	12.8%	12.2%	10.6%	6.5%	9.2%	26.7%
<b>Total</b>	<b>9.8%</b>	<b>9.6%</b>	<b>8.5%</b>	<b>7.3%</b>	<b>8.4%</b>	<b>22.0%</b>

Source: Australian Early Development Census (AEDC), 2021 results

The data indicate that children in SA who received some ECEC were less likely to be developmentally vulnerable in one or more domains of the AEDC (22.9%), compared to children who did not receive any ECEC (45.6%). While data may appear to show a positive correlation between ECEC participation and development outcomes, it is yet to demonstrate a cause-and-effect relationship regarding ECEC on development outcomes. Research to date has demonstrated that factors such as the amount of time young children spend in quality educational settings, the level of staff qualifications and the quality of staff-child interactions have an impact on their development.<sup>7, 8, 9</sup>

To understand the causal effect, if any, of children attending ECEC on development outcomes, a more detailed statistical analysis is required. *Propensity Score Matching* is appropriate in this context. Such statistical matching exercises are commonly used to estimate the effects of programs or interventions by considering the child’s characteristics (eg, gender, disability status, Aboriginal status, SEIFA, ECEC location and/or level of contact with the child

<sup>7</sup> Melbourne Graduate School of Education (2016). The E4Kids study: Assessing the effectiveness of Australian early childhood education and care programs. Overview of findings at 2016. Final report to the Partner Organisations of the Effective Early Educational Experiences (E4Kids) study. [E4Kids-Report-3-0\\_WEB.pdf \(unimelb.edu.au\)](https://www.unimelb.edu.au/e4kids-report-3-0-web.pdf). Accessed 21/12/22.

<sup>8</sup> New South Wales Government (2018). A review of the effects of early childhood education. Literature review. Department for Education Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (6 March 2018). <https://education.nsw.gov.au/content/dam/main-education/about-us/educational-data/cese/2018-effects-of-early-childhood-education.pdf>. Accessed 21/12/22.

<sup>9</sup> Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Sammons, P., Siraj-Blatchford, I. & Taggart, B. (2004). The Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) Project: Findings from pre-school to end of key stage 1. Nottingham, United Kingdom: Department for Education and Skills. <https://ro.uow.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3155&context=sspapers>. Accessed 21/12/22.

protection system) within the sample population. Without randomisation of groups, an imbalance of sample characteristics is likely to occur. Applying this statistical method, essentially removes/neutralises the influence of any observable confounders.<sup>10</sup>

Table 4 below shows the proportions of children developmentally vulnerable in one or more domains of the AEDC, by ECEC experience.

**Table 4 Children developmentally vulnerable in one or more domains of the Australian Early Development Census by ECEC experience**

	All children			Received some ECEC			Did not receive any ECEC			Unknown ECEC experience		
	2015	2018	2021	2015	2018	2021	2015	2018	2021	2015	2018	2021
New South Wales	20.2%	19.9%	21.2%	18.0%	18.0%	19.2%	35.3%	37.4%	38.6%	27.6%	27.1%	28.0%
Victoria	19.9%	19.9%	19.9%	18.2%	18.3%	18.4%	44.2%	43.9%	40.6%	34.0%	31.0%	29.9%
Queensland	26.1%	25.9%	24.7%	22.7%	23.0%	22.1%	40.6%	41.3%	42.4%	34.2%	33.9%	32.5%
<b>South Australia</b>	<b>23.5%</b>	<b>23.9%</b>	<b>23.8%</b>	<b>22.5%</b>	<b>23.1%</b>	<b>22.9%</b>	<b>41.6%</b>	<b>41.1%</b>	<b>45.6%</b>	<b>34.1%</b>	<b>31.9%</b>	<b>32.9%</b>
Western Australia	21.3%	19.4%	20.3%	20.3%	18.3%	19.4%	39.6%	37.5%	39.8%	33.3%	33.5%	29.7%
Tasmania	21.0%	21.5%	23.2%	20.2%	21.2%	22.9%	46.2%	35.2%	33.8%	30.6%	30.9%	29.4%
Northern Territory	37.2%	35.8%	39.2%	34.5%	35.0%	38.4%	66.9%	62.2%	70.8%	46.0%	36.0%	35.6%
Australian Capital Territory	22.5%	24.6%	26.7%	21.2%	23.9%	26.1%	49.2%	56.1%	45.1%	31.2%	29.0%	32.4%
<b>Australia</b>	<b>22.0%</b>	<b>21.7%</b>	<b>22.0%</b>	<b>19.9%</b>	<b>19.8%</b>	<b>20.3%</b>	<b>38.9%</b>	<b>39.8%</b>	<b>40.7%</b>	<b>32.0%</b>	<b>30.9%</b>	<b>30.2%</b>

Source: Report on Government Services (RoGS) Early childhood education and care 2022

Notes:

- Children classified as developmentally vulnerable score below the 10th percentile (in the lowest 10 per cent) of the national AEDC population for an AEDC domain
- Received some ECEC includes any formal childcare or preschool. Family day care and informal care are not included
- Data are reported by school teachers and are therefore, dependent on the teacher's knowledge of the child's ECEC experience
- ECEC experience is just one factor contributing to development. A range of other factors also influence development outcomes, including parental and family circumstances and other services such as health and parenting support
- The data do not include how much ECEC children received (eg, hours per week)
- Not all children in the dataset have a complete response for if they attended ECEC.

<sup>10</sup> Confounders have the potential to change the results of research because they can influence the outcomes that the researchers are measuring. Research that concludes that there is an association or a 'correlation' between a factor and an outcome (for example high alcohol consumption and liver disease) should also consider whether there might be any confounding factors. If researchers do not consider confounders, the results of their research might not be valid. <https://www.understandinghealthresearch.org/useful-information/confounders-17>.

## 7 South Australian cohorts at risk of poorer development outcomes

### Profile of SA children (birth to four years)

Census 2021 reported that there were 94,200 children under five years living in SA, including 4,500 Aboriginal children (4.8%).

At 30 June 2021, more than half of all children under five years in SA were from low socioeconomic communities with 27% living in the most disadvantaged socio-economic conditions (Table 5 below).

Compared to the national average, SA had a higher proportion of children living in the most disadvantaged socio-economic conditions than NSW, VIC, QLD, WA and the ACT.

**Table 5 Percentage of children (birth to four years) by socioeconomic level (IRSD), 30 June 2021**

State / territory	Quintile 1 (Most disadvantaged)	Quintile 2	Quintile 3	Quintile 4	Quintile 5 (Least disadvantaged)	Total
New South Wales	24.3%	24.3%	19.1%	12.6%	19.7%	100%
Victoria	13.3%	18.5%	21.7%	23.6%	22.9%	100%
Queensland	21.9%	16.7%	22.3%	23.8%	15.3%	100%
<b>South Australia</b>	<b>27.4%</b>	<b>29.0%</b>	<b>16.6%</b>	<b>18.2%</b>	<b>8.9%</b>	<b>100%</b>
Western Australia	11.3%	19.5%	25.1%	24.2%	19.8%	100%
Tasmania	44.3%	18.3%	18.3%	16.2%	3.0%	100%
Northern Territory	28.1%	7.5%	22.1%	17.3%	25.0%	100%
Australian Capital Territory	0.1%	0.9%	5.2%	33.4%	60.4%	100%
<b>Australia</b>	<b>20.0%</b>	<b>20.2%</b>	<b>20.7%</b>	<b>20.0%</b>	<b>19.2%</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, cat no. 3235.0 Regional Population by Age and Sex, Australia, June 2021 and Australian Bureau of Statistics, cat no. 2033.0.55.001 Census of Population and Housing: Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA), Australia, 2016.

Notes:

- Due to rounding the row percent may not add up exactly to 100%. IRSD cuts are based on ranking within Australia. Excludes Unknown classification of IRSD.
- Quintiles are used for the Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA). The lowest quintile (Quintile 1) represents the most socio-economically disadvantaged areas; the highest quintile (Quintile 5) represents the least socioeconomically disadvantaged areas.

**Table 6 Number of children developmentally vulnerable in one or more domains by socioeconomic quintiles, 2021**

State / territory	Quintile 1 <sup>(a)</sup> (Most disadvantaged)	Quintile 2	Quintile 3 <sup>(b)</sup>	Quintile 4	Quintile 5 (Least disadvantaged)
New South Wales <sup>(c)</sup>	5,808	3,963	3,075	2,946	3,191
Victoria <sup>(c)</sup>	3,444	2,941	2,967	2,732	1,669
Queensland <sup>(c)</sup>	4,153	3,585	3,029	2,660	1,653
<b>South Australia<sup>(b)</sup></b>	<b>1,663</b>	<b>1,067</b>	<b>779</b>	<b>646</b>	<b>335</b>
Western Australia <sup>(c)</sup>	1,386	1,380	1,509	1,573	989
Tasmania <sup>(b)</sup>	602	312	236	102	45
Northern Territory <sup>(c)</sup>	482	157	165	176	164
Australian Capital Territory <sup>(b)</sup>	16	104	302	424	628

Source: Australian Early Development Census (AEDC), 2021 results

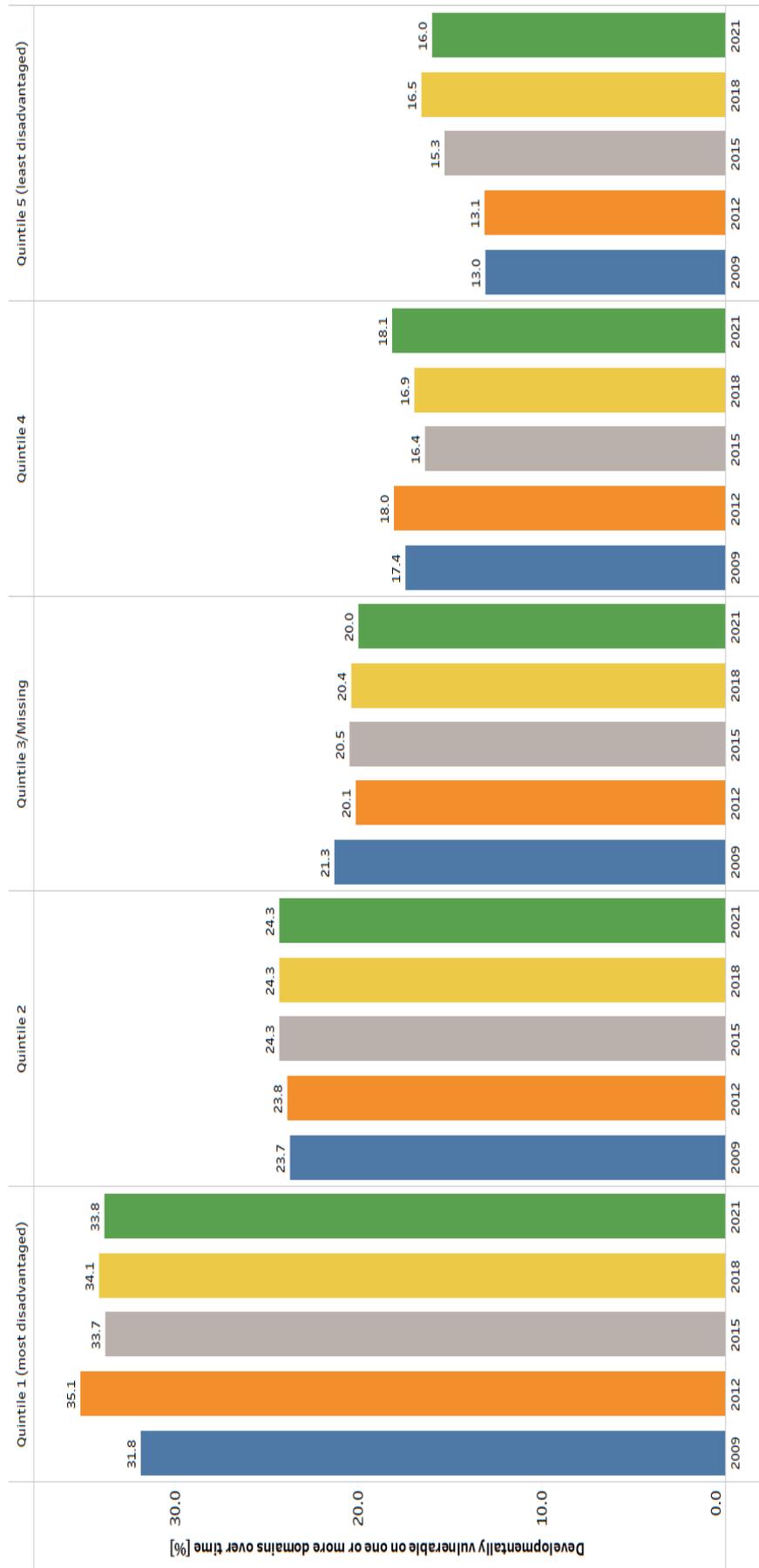
Notes:

- (a) Quintiles are used for the Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA). The lowest quintile (Quintile 1) represents the most socio-economically disadvantaged areas; the highest quintile (Quintile 5) represents the least socioeconomically disadvantaged areas
- (b) Data from missing / unclassified SEIFA are added into the Quintile 3
- (c) Data from missing / unclassified SEIFA are not shown in the table.

## Children who are developmentally vulnerable in South Australia

Regarding children's developmental vulnerability in one or more domains in SA by socioeconomic quintiles across the five AEDC data collection periods, it is evident that since 2009 there has been an increase in vulnerability in all quintiles except quintile 3 where the decrease is slight (see Figure 6).

**Figure 6 Change in developmental vulnerability in one or more domains in SA by socioeconomic quintiles, 2009 - 2021**



Source: Australian Early Development Census (AEDC), 2021 results

Note: Unclassified socioeconomic quintiles are reported Quintile 3 as one category ' Quintile 3/Missing' .



## Key takeaways from the 2021 AEDC results for South Australia

The main messages from the AEDC results in 2021 are that:

- there are vulnerable children at every socioeconomic level of the whole population in SA (Figures 6 and 7)
- the largest numbers of children developmentally vulnerable in SA live in quintiles 2, 3 and 4. In fact, three-fifths (56%) of all children (birth to five years) who are developmentally vulnerable live in the three middle socioeconomic quintiles (2,492 out of 4,490) (Table 6)
- from 2009 to 2021, the proportions of children developmentally vulnerable in one or more domains are from the lowest socioeconomic quintiles (Figure 6)<sup>11</sup>
- since 2015, there has been a steady rise in the proportion of children (birth to five years) who are developmentally vulnerable in one or more domains living in the two **least disadvantaged** circumstances, ie quintiles 4 and 5 (Figure 6)<sup>12</sup>
- the proportion of children developmentally vulnerable in one or more domains in socioeconomic quintile 4 was 1.2 percentage points higher in 2021 than in 2018. There were also minor changes for the other socioeconomic quintiles (Figure 6).

<sup>11</sup> In 2021, the highest numbers of children who were developmentally vulnerable in one or more domains were in quintiles 1 (1,663) and 2 (1,067) (Table 6).

<sup>12</sup> Smaller proportions of children who are developmentally vulnerable in one or more domains are associated with higher socioeconomic levels (Figures 6 and 7).