

Extended Abstract

Background

Over the past few years, many reports on disadvantage in Australia have been released by government, philanthropy and academics. These reports have provided informative statistics on the extent and depth of disadvantage in Australia, stressing the importance of establishing holistic policies, programs, and practices that help reduce disadvantage. Some of these reports indicated that the risk factors of disadvantage commence in childhood and acknowledged the importance of targeting disadvantage in the early years. Some of these reports also acknowledged the importance of integrated data and data analytics in helping provide an evidence-base for those programs, policies, and practices. The Life Course Data Initiative serves as one such data integration program.

The Life Course Data Initiative

The 2023-24 Commonwealth (Australia) Budget delivered a \$199.8 million package to target entrenched community disadvantage with a focus on intergenerational disadvantage and improving child and family wellbeing. The Treasury and Department of Social Services are leading the implementation of the package, with the support of the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). Further information on the [Targeting Entrenched Disadvantage Package](#) is available. As part of the Budget commitment, the ABS received \$16.4 million to deliver the Life Course Data Initiative, commencing July 2023. The Life Course Data Initiative is a four-year program that will create a dataset and associated statistics to inform responses to address child disadvantage, particularly that which is entrenched.

The Life Course Dataset

The Life Course Dataset will include new administrative data safely linked to the [Person Level Integrated Data Asset \(PLIDA\)](#), which is a secure data asset that includes information on health, education, government payments, income and taxation, employment, and population demographics (including the Census) over time. Additional data linked to PLIDA will include national child care data and birth registries data, Australian Capital Territory Government health and education data, and South Australia Government Health, Education, Housing, and Homelessness data from the Better Evidence Better Outcomes Linked Data Asset. This Life Course Dataset will, therefore, improve data coverage for Australian children, particularly those born from 2006-07, providing from the antenatal period, through to birth, and up to 14 years of age cutting across multiple domains

important to a child's development and outcomes. The Dataset will also include information on the families and households, and spatial communities, of children.

The ABS Statistical Program

The value of the Life Course Dataset is in how it can be used to help further understandings of child disadvantage experienced in Australia. One of those uses is the ABS Statistical Program. This program aims to identify child-centred indicators of disadvantage available within the Life Course Dataset that can be used to provide statistics of a broad national interest on the width and depth of child disadvantage, in addition to the paths, predictors, and protective factors.

Theoretical framework

In identifying suitable indicators, the ABS Statistical Program will be guided by consultations with stakeholders, including communities, and existing multi-dimensional frameworks of child wellbeing and disadvantage. Some of these frameworks, such as the Material, Opportunity, and Relational Framework, highlight the importance of understanding child experiences of access to material resources (what are they doing without?), exclusion (what opportunities are they left out from?), and nurturing relationships (by what strong relationships are they supported?). Other frameworks also highlight the importance of understanding the social determinants of child disadvantage in their bioecological settings. It is important to note that the child-indicators used within the ABS Statistical Program must not only be theoretically driven, but also available for measurement within the Life Course Dataset, and relevant to informing progress over time and responses related to disadvantage.

Methodological approach

The ABS will first conduct desktop reviews to identify concepts of child disadvantage, dimensions of child wellbeing, and identify indicators that can be used to understand child experiences. Identified indicators will be narrowed down based on data quality and availability within the Life Course Dataset, and other criterion related to indicator relevance and meaning. A final list of indicators will be compiled in consultation with stakeholders. The ABS will then use the indicators to publish statistics relating to child disadvantage. The ABS will seek to strike a balance between delivering a simple measure, which is easy for users to understand and use, and presenting the breadth of the underlying data and the different trends in the underlying data.

Anticipated findings

Measuring child disadvantage is important for understanding who is in need, determining and deciding on actionable solutions, and measuring progress over time. The pilot Life Course Data Initiative will provide a roadmap to creating and using integrated data to inform understandings of, and decisions relating to, the delivery of targeted, timely and coordinated support to children at risk of experiencing disadvantage. This roadmap will also consider approaches to conveying information on child disadvantage in ways that are considerate of user needs, and sensitive to the lived experiences of the people about whom the data relates, which can be used to inform future programs related to disadvantage.