

Research snapshot

Hidden vulnerabilities in our communities



Background

The effects of growing up in poverty have been well documented (1). Children who grow up in families with access to adequate resources and economic security, tend to have better education and health outcomes over time than those who don't. Communities with limited access to quality housing, education and care, health services, and employment can contribute to such inequalities.

The Socio-Economic Indices for Areas (SEIFA) – created by the Australian Bureau of Statistics – are often used as indicators of the social disadvantage in Australian communities. Typically, SEIFA scores are grouped into five categories (or quintiles) with the most socio-economically disadvantaged Australian communities classified into Quintile 1, and the least disadvantaged (most affluent) communities classified as Quintile 5.

Across each of the four Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) collections, a clear gradient of socio-economic inequality is evident in child development outcomes for communities. That is, in communities with fewer socio-economic resources (categorised

by lower SEIFA quintiles) the percent of children with developmental vulnerabilities tends to be higher than in more affluent communities (categorised by higher SEIFA quintiles). As a result of the socio-economic gradient in the AEDC data, services and supports are often targeted to the most socio-economically disadvantaged communities. It is, however, important for policy makers and service providers to consider what every community needs to support children and families. AEDC data show us that there are children who are developmentally vulnerable at the start of school in every community across Australia. In fact, the AEDC shows us that the largest number of children who are developmentally vulnerable live in communities in the middle of the socio-economic spectrum.

Aim

This research snapshot aims to summarise research that has explored developmental vulnerability in relation to community and family level socio-economic measures.

Key findings

Within each Australian community, families are not all the same; some have more stable access to employment, health services, education, and care for their children than others. Research has demonstrated that community level socio-economic measures, like SEIFA, hide this variation in family level variation in access to resources. Differences in children's outcomes relative to family level socio-economic resources has been explored using variables collected within the AEDC (e.g., parental education) but also by linking individual child level AEDC data to other data sets with family level information.

In 2018, the highest level of parental education was collected alongside the AEDC. Figure 1 shows that decreases in socio-economic disadvantage (SEIFA) are associated with decreases in developmental vulnerability, but also that within communities with the same level of disadvantage children tend to do better when parents have higher levels of education. For example, children living in the most disadvantaged communities (quintile 1) who had a parent with a bachelor's degree or higher had the same prevalence of developmental vulnerability (21%), as those children living in the least disadvantaged communities, whose parents had a year 12 education or lower.

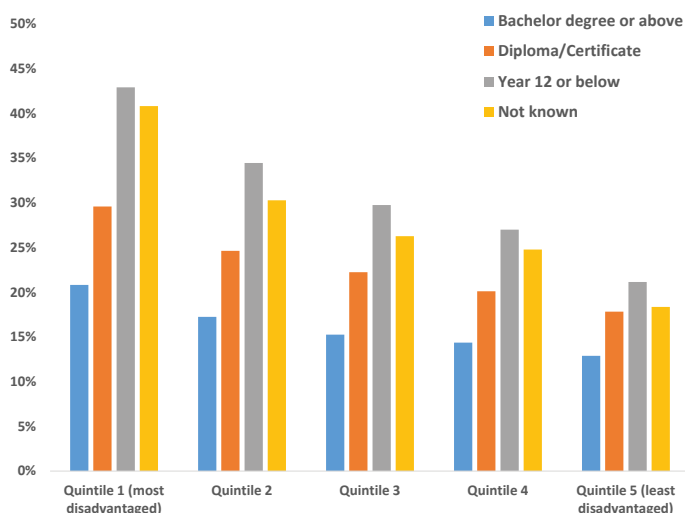


Figure 1 Developmental vulnerability on one or more domains of the AEDC by SEIFA IRSD quintile and highest level of parental education

Similarly, studies in QLD and Tasmania linking individual child level AEDC data (2009 & 2012 collections) to Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Census of Population and Housing data at the family level, demonstrated the relationship between both community level socio-economic disadvantage and family level income and developmental vulnerability on the AEDC (2) (3). Figure 2, shows that children from families with higher incomes tending to do better, regardless of how disadvantaged the community is that they live in. Again, those in high income households in the most disadvantage communities (Quintile 1) fared similarly to those in low income households in the most affluent communities (Quintile 5; 15% and 14% respectively).

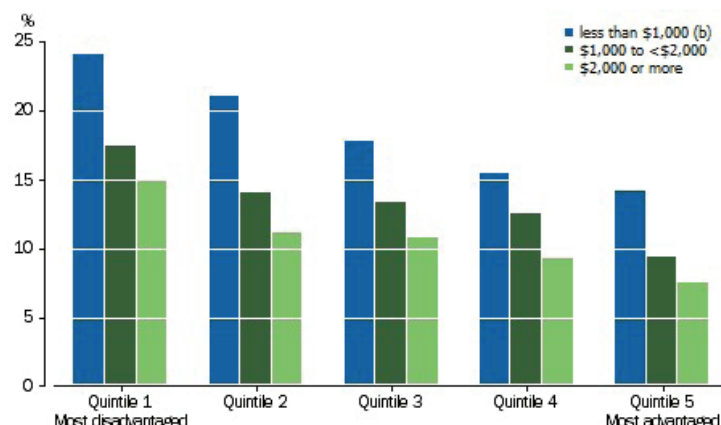


Figure 2 Proportion of children in QLD developmentally vulnerable on two or more domains by SEIFA (a) index of advantage/disadvantage and weekly household income

Source: Integrated Queensland AEDC and ABS Census Dataset

The QLD study also found that while there tended to be higher rates of developmental vulnerability for children living in families with lower incomes, there were differences in the strength of the relationship between socioeconomics and child development depending on the domain. In the low income households, children were most likely to be developmentally vulnerable in the Communication and General Knowledge domain and least likely to be vulnerable in the Emotional maturity domain. In contrast, children in high income households were most likely to be developmentally vulnerable in the Physical Health and Wellbeing and Social Competence domains and least likely to be vulnerable in the Language and Cognitive Skills (School based) domain.

Another study linking ABS census and AEDC data in Tasmania found the same pattern between parental income, community socio-economic disadvantage (SEIFA) and child development outcomes. Additionally, the study explored the relationship between developmental vulnerability on two or more AEDC domains and labour force participation. Again the association between community level disadvantage (SEIFA) and child development was evident but within areas with the same level of disadvantage, children living in families where parents were employed had lower rates of developmental vulnerability than those living in families without employment (see Figure 3).

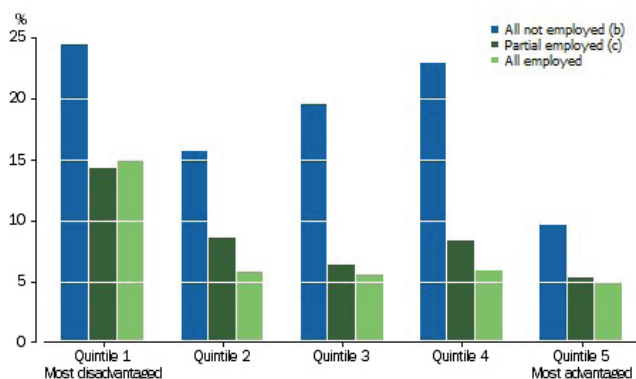


Figure 3 Proportion of children in TAS developmentally vulnerable on two or more domains, by SEIFA (a) and parental labour force status

Source: Integrated Tasmanian Education and ABS Census Dataset

These findings highlight the substantial degree of hidden variation that exists within communities that is not captured by community measures of disadvantage alone. The findings demonstrate the importance of recognising that although SEIFA can tell us a great deal about the socio-economic background and developmental risk of children, it cannot tell us the whole story. Without incorporating family level measures such as parental education, income, or employment, we risk missing vulnerable children hidden in broad classification categories of socio-economic disadvantage.

Implications

For policy and practice and Further Research

A strategy of targeting support to specific communities with high levels of socio-economic disadvantage, results in missing families in need of support who live in areas designated as having lower levels of risk. There are children and families in all communities who could benefit from additional support, and this tends to be obscured by area level socio-economic data. The findings highlighted here, demonstrate the importance of a service system in the early years that provides universal services to all families (such as maternal child health, immunisations, playgroups, and preschool) with families able to connect to more intensive support from this universal base if needed irrespective of

where they live. A strong universal service base not only provides some support to everyone, but also provides a platform for identifying who may need additional support. Jurisdictions seeking to reduce the rate of developmental vulnerability of children entering school, must consider not only how they support their communities with high proportions of children with developmental vulnerability, but also how to connect families to timely supports irrespective of where they live.

For further information

About research snapshots

AEDC Research Snapshots provide a brief and accessible overview of research being undertaken in relation to the AEDC. The AEDC programme is funded by the Australian Government. For further up-to-date information consult the AEDC website and its many resources: www.aedc.gov.au.

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About the Telethon Kids Institute

The Telethon Kids Institute is one of the largest, and most successful medical research institutes in Australia, comprising a dedicated and diverse team of more than 750 staff and students. Our vision is simple – happy healthy kids. We bring together community, researchers, practitioners, policy makers and funders, who share our mission to improve the health, development and lives of children and young people through excellence in research. Importantly, we want knowledge applied so it makes a difference. Our goal is to build on our success and create a research institute that makes a real difference in our community, which will benefit children and families everywhere.