

# The Future Healthy Countdown 2030: holding us to account for children's and young people's health and wellbeing

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**T**oo many Australian children and young people are faring poorly across key measures of health and wellbeing, and too often these reflect systemic inequities that could be mitigated or eliminated through policy change. Despite Australia's abundant resources and wealth, we are failing a key test of societal progress: that our children have opportunities to live as well or better than their parents.

The prospects for Australian children, young people and future generations are not only stagnating, they are moving backwards in several key domains. This includes increasing wealth inequality,<sup>1</sup> low levels of children achieving physical activity recommendations,<sup>2</sup> high numbers of food-insecure children,<sup>3</sup> and higher rates of psychological distress than for older adults.<sup>4</sup> Urgent and sustained societal action is needed to ensure a positive trajectory across the life course. The evidence to support children and young people to live happy, healthy lives is available but seldom drives policy decisions.

Launched for World Children's Day, the Future Healthy Countdown 2030 will provide an annual report on key measures of children's health and wellbeing. The first issue is published today in the *Medical Journal of Australia* as a supplement, entitled *Future Healthy Countdown 2030: measuring what matters for good health and wellbeing for all of Australia's children and young people*. From 2024, each Countdown will include a themed deep dive into a critical issue.

Through the Countdown, a national collaboration of experts and young people aim to influence changes across social, economic and political domains to improve the prospects of Australia's children, particularly those experiencing socio-economic disadvantage.

## Lost policy opportunities are compromising child health and wellbeing

Social, economic and political systems have a profound impact on children's health and wellbeing and should be primary considerations when shaping policy. Currently, there is both a will and some good progress in policies that support children and young people. However, gaps in reliable data, a siloed approach in policy making, and competing interests of the market economy and industries mean policies are not always considered in a joined-up way. Some of these include:

- poor regulation of marketing practices for harmful industries, including highly processed foods, alcohol, tobacco products and/or gambling;
- policies directly affecting childhood poverty, including access to healthy housing and communities; and
- policies regulating access to quality and affordable education.

Other issues cut across these domains. For example, the continuing support of many extractive or harmful practices for planetary health are leading to unprecedented changes in global weather patterns, creating climate anxiety in children and young people.<sup>5</sup> Another example is how historic and present-day experiences of colonialism and racism,<sup>6,7</sup> all too often embedded in institutions and systems,<sup>8</sup> can entrench structural racism and corrode cultural strengths, which underpin concerning differences in population-level health and wellbeing measures for Australia's First Nations peoples.<sup>9</sup>

## The Future Healthy Countdown 2030 puts policy levers in focus

The Countdown is framed by the domains for children's health and wellbeing developed by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY)<sup>10</sup> which include valued, loved and safe; material basics; healthy; learning and employment pathways; participating; positive sense of identity and culture; and an additional domain that has been added for environmental and sustainable futures, which is a major concern for today's children and young people. The Countdown identifies the concerning trends in children's health and wellbeing status and pinpoints critical indicators that call for immediate attention. The first issue includes articles that identify the critical needs and potential measures for the domains, authored by prominent academics, practitioners and young people (Box).

The Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth), in partnership with the Murdoch Children's Research Institute and ARACY, is pleased to support this initiative which will provide a targeted accountability framework to examine policy with a

### Articles included in the MJA Future Healthy Countdown 2030 supplement

- Lycett et al. *A framework for the Future Healthy Countdown 2030: tracking the health and wellbeing of children and young people to hold Australia to account*<sup>11</sup>
- Calder et al. *Valued, loved and safe: the foundations for healthy individuals and a healthier society*<sup>12</sup>
- Goldfeld et al. *Having material basics is basic*<sup>13</sup>
- Lycett et al. *Monitoring the physical and mental health of Australian children and young people: a foundation for responsive and accountable actions*<sup>14</sup>
- Taafua et al. *New foundations for learning in Australia*<sup>15</sup>
- Kapeke et al. *Who holds power in decision making for young people's future?*<sup>16</sup>
- Brown et al. *Aragung buraay: culture, identity and positive futures for Australian children*<sup>17</sup>
- Sly et al. *Sustainable environments for Australian children and young people's health and wellbeing: our young's welfare is threatened*<sup>18</sup>

health and wellbeing lens for Australia's children, young people and future generations. This is in alignment with the Australian Government's commitment to an economy that supports wellbeing<sup>19</sup> and should be a priority to all Australians. The Countdown will focus efforts on critical and achievable actions to improve the health and wellbeing of children and young people.

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**Competing interests:** Sandro Demaio and Susan Maury are VicHealth employees.

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