

Thursday 14 November, 2002

Embargo: Tuesday 19 November, 2002

UNICEF report paints bleak picture of the health and well-being of New Zealand children

A major report commissioned by the international research unit of UNICEF has found New Zealand's children have borne the brunt of economic and social reforms.

The report *When the Invisible Hand Rocks the Cradle; New Zealand children in a time of change* says the reforms, which started in the 1980s, were among the most sweeping in scope and scale in any industrialised democracy, but New Zealand governments have not systematically monitored the impact of reform on children.

UNICEF commissioned a group of Massey University researchers to look at the effect of the reforms on income, health and access to education. Lead author Dr Alison Blaiklock says the researchers have found the transformation of the economy and government in the 1980s and 1990s has not delivered major benefits to children.

Consequences of the reforms are seen in growing inequality in indicators of family income, housing, health and educational achievement, and absolute and relative declines in some measures of health status, according to Dr Blaiklock.

The Innocenti Research Centre of UNICEF, which is based in Italy, commissioned this report because of widespread international interest in the New Zealand reforms and the impact on New Zealand society and children.

Findings of the report include: (see attached fact sheet for more detail)

- Households with children were more likely to be in the bottom two-fifths of income distribution.
- In 1996 twenty-six percent of all children and young people were in the bottom income quintile and 23 percent in the next-to-bottom quintile.
- In 1960 New Zealand's infant mortality rate was fifth in the world. In 2000, New Zealand's rate was nineteenth equal in the world.
- Injuries and poisonings –NZ is fifth worst in OECD.
- Youth suicide among males (15-24 years) doubled between 1985-1989 and continues at a high level.
- New Zealand has high rates of communicable diseases such as meningococcal disease and TB.

- Children – especially children from one parent families and Maori and Pacific children – have become more likely to live in rented accommodation.
- The increase in unemployment disproportionately affected youth. The rate of unemployment among 15 to 24 year-olds has been approximately double that of older age groups since 1986, rising to a greater proportion during peaks of unemployment.

Dr Blaiklock points out the effects of income, health and education are inter-related - low household incomes are exacerbated by high housing costs. She says overcrowding and poor nutrition can lead to ill health and lower educational achievement - which limits opportunities for future employment and income.

“Greater choice may have improved the situation of some New Zealand children, but increased inequality has prevented these benefits from being available to many others.”

The report says the New Zealand experience demonstrates that when governments make changes, they must consider the effect on children and young people - and protect them from harm.

“Relying on the social and economic reforms alone to improve the situation of children has been the major failing of the reform process. Successive governments dealt with problems by increasing the emphasis on targeting and were slow to respond to the inability of the market place to improve children’s well being.”

The report concludes the Government needs to develop a broad and comprehensive policy framework for children which goes beyond the needs of those children most at risk.

"As a society, we have a responsibility to try to put right the harm that has been done to many children and young people."

The report is being launched at 12.30 pm, Tuesday 19 November at Turnball House in Wellington. A 17-year-old Onslow College student Tristram Cheer will launch the report and the authors will give a short presentation.

A full copy of the report, along with the media materials, can be downloaded from Innocenti Research Centre's website www.unicef-icdc.org

For more information:

Authors

Dr Alison Blaiklock Honorary Research Fellow, School of Social and Cultural Studies, Massey University Albany	Phone: 09-8282209 Mobile: 021-382209 Email: alisonb@iconz.co.nz
Dr Cindy Kiro Massey University Albany	Phone: 09-4439700 ext 9082 Mobile: 021-396782 Email: c.a.kiro@massey.ac.nz
Dr Michael Belgrave Massey University Albany	Phone: 09-4439700 ext 9083 Email: m.p.Belgrave@massey.ac.nz
Dr Ian Hassall Institute of Public Policy and the Domestic Violence Centre, Auckland	Phone 021 1888 639

Specialists who would be prepared to comment on their professional experience of the reforms:

Dr Peter Watson (youth issues)

Adolescent paediatrician and senior lecturer, Auckland School of Medicine – (03) 326 4822

Professor Innes Asher

Chair of Paediatrics, Auckland School of Medicine

Pager 09 358 0825 number 4377

Email: v.strong@auckland.ac.nz (Professor Asher's personal assistant)

Background

The Innocenti Research Centre, based in Florence, Italy, is UNICEF's (United Nations Children's Fund) main research institution. Its work helps inform UNICEF's work and contributes to UNICEF priority setting. The research conducted at the Innocenti Centre provides reliable information on the changing needs of children in developing and industrialised countries.