

Lift children out of poverty for the benefit of all New Zealanders

Public Health Association National Executive Officer Dr Gay Keating argues that in the upcoming election, voters casting a ballot to lift Auckland children out of poverty and ill health are voting to grow the economy and ease the burden on taxpayers.

There are 230,000¹ New Zealand children and teens said to be living in deprivation. All struggle with frequent bouts of ill health, live in cold, often overcrowded houses and within financially stressed families with insecure or no employment.

We know the statistics, but they are so significant they bear repeating. Our rheumatic fever rate (a Third World poverty disease) is *increasing* and children in poor families are 29 times more likely to suffer from it than their richer counterparts.²

According to the OECD, New Zealand ranks 29th out of 30 nations for the health and safety of its children³ and New Zealand's young are among the least likely to survive into adulthood.⁴

And New Zealand is one of the most unequal countries in terms of infant mortality. Rich children do well – their infant mortality rate is the same as for Norway and Japan – but poor children die at a faster rate than every other OECD country except Mexico and Turkey.⁵ And a child growing up in a low-income household in New Zealand is one and half times more likely to die prematurely than a child from a wealthier home.

It's easy for us to just blame these children's parents because that means the rest of us can feel okay about doing nothing. But when we do nothing the number of children in poverty only grows, social cohesion breaks down further and the health and welfare dollar is stretched to breaking point and beyond. Taxpayers must increasingly underwrite the support of these children as they grow into adults with their ability to make a great contribution to society or the economy stolen from them.

The New Zealand Treasury says those with better health status tend to have greater productivity, higher incomes and longer working lives, all of which contribute to New Zealand's net wealth.⁶

Based on international research, Infometrics Analyst David Grimmond recently put the cost of children in poverty at about 3 percent of Gross Domestic Product.⁷ That's \$6bn a year in health, justice and welfare costs that all New Zealanders could have benefited from in other ways.

So not only is doing something about children in poverty fair and just, it is also in the country's economic self interest. And don't forget it's today's children who will be funding and providing the care and support of the rest of us in our old age. The healthier and more productive they become as adults, the better it will be for all.

¹ <http://www.msd.govt.nz/about-msd-and-our-work/publications-resources/monitoring/household-incomes/index.html>

² <http://www.listener.co.nz/commentary/life-span-discrepancies-between-rich-and-poor/>

³ <http://www.pha.org.nz/onlinenews/PHANews1108web.pdf>

⁴ http://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/rc7_eng.pdf p16

⁵ <http://www.pha.org.nz/onlinenews/PHANews1108web.pdf>

⁶ <http://www.cpag.org.nz/assets/sm/upload/jq/66/v2/dv/WEB%20VERSION%20OF%20LFB.pdf>

⁷ <http://www.everychildcounts.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/david-Grimmond-pres-8-Sept.pdf>

So what does “doing something about children in poverty” actually mean? Well, appointing a Minister for Children would be a good start. What does it say about a country when it has a Minister for Racing and one for the Rugby World Cup, but not for children? New Zealand’s youngest citizens desperately need an advocate at the highest level to champion their interests.

It means putting the wellbeing of New Zealand children front and centre of all government policy. Because if a government can ensure children are healthy, warm, well-fed, safe and happy, everything else important fits into place.

So what can a government do in concrete terms? It can ensure children of parents who lose their jobs don’t suffer further by also losing the \$60 tax credit per child central to the Working for Families programme. It can make sure every child lives in a warm, dry home they don’t have to share with numerous other families. It can underwrite a national Breakfast in Schools programme so that children can get the nutrition they need to do the best they can at school. It can subsidise, or remove GST from, nutritious foods such as milk, vegetables and fruit so those products become the “easy choice” for family shoppers.

By taking the lead in focussing on children’s welfare, the government can help ensure New Zealand will once again be a great place to raise children.

What can the rest of us do in concrete terms? Well, there’s an election coming up, so the first step’s an easy one. Let’s vote for the candidate or party with both the compassion and the foresight to value the wellbeing of our children above all else.