

# Tackling child poverty: will the nation's political leaders honour Richie Poulton's legacy?

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# Summary

Professor Richie Poulton's recent death brings into sharp focus the extraordinary achievements, significant findings, and policy relevance of the Dunedin Multidisciplinary Health and Development Study which he led for over 20 years.

Crucially, the Dunedin Study has highlighted the enduring and often profound impact of individuals' early life experiences and environment on their subsequent life-course. This robust evidence shows that childhood poverty, especially when severe and/or prolonged, has significant negative long-term impacts (e.g. for health, educational achievement, employment, and income). It points to the vital need to achieve low rates of childhood poverty.

Although recent governments in Aotearoa New Zealand have implemented, with some success, a range of anti-poverty measures, the issue of child poverty has barely figured during the 2023 election campaign. Worse, there is a risk that many low-income families will end up poorer, at least in relative terms, if they help fund tax cuts for middle-income earners. This change in policy direction would dishonour Professor Poulton's remarkable legacy.

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One of the country's most distinguished social scientists, Professor Richie Poulton, died very recently of cancer. For several decades, Professor Poulton directed the Dunedin Multidisciplinary Health and Development Study (commonly known as the 'Dunedin Study'), based at the University of Otago.

We all had the privilege of knowing Professor Poulton, and we take this opportunity to reflect briefly on his legacy and the challenge it poses to our nation's political leaders amid a general election campaign. In particular, we highlight the damaging impacts of child poverty and the need for governments to take effective policy measures to minimize such poverty and alleviate its effects.

## The Dunedin Study

The Dunedin Study has made an extraordinary contribution to our understanding of human health and development. Above all, it has highlighted how our early life experiences and environment affect the subsequent course of our lives.

In summary, the Dunedin Study has followed nearly a thousand babies born at Dunedin hospital during 1972-73.<sup>1</sup> Their life circumstances and development were closely tracked as they grew into teenagers, then adults. The participants are now in their early fifties and the study continues. And we know a great deal about their lives: their parents, childhood experiences, education, employment, their DNA, and their physical and mental health across the entire lifespan.

No two lives, of course, are the same. Nevertheless, when we collect enough lives together, patterns emerge. And these can help illuminate the causes of societal problems such as crime, violence, low educational attainment, and poor health, and how such problems can be ameliorated.

Examples of significant findings from the Dunedin Study include providing concrete evidence on the link between childhood television viewing and adult obesity<sup>2</sup>, the enduring effects of lead exposure on intelligence<sup>3</sup>, and the importance of self-control in childhood for predicting adult health and wellbeing.<sup>4</sup>

## **The lasting impact of child poverty**

No pattern appears more starkly in the Dunedin Study than the fact that people born into poverty are more likely to suffer hardships of various kinds throughout their lives.<sup>5-7</sup> These negative effects include lower income, less education, and poorer health. And the more severe and/or prolonged the experience of childhood poverty, the greater the long-term effects.

Hence, if we want to improve key indicators and dimensions of societal wellbeing, a goal supported by our political leaders, then the Dunedin Study offers a powerful and unequivocal message: **reduce childhood income-related poverty and material hardship**. In his final interview – for TVNZ’s current affairs programme ‘Sunday’ – Professor Poulton stressed this point:

...you can't really undo what happens during childhood...  
experience of intense or regular poverty is long-lasting.

## **Taking child poverty seriously**

Fortunately, some of the evidence from the Dunedin Study and other high-quality research about the harmful impacts of child poverty has been used by our political leaders. During the 2017 general election campaign, for instance, both the leader of the National party, Sir William English, and the leader of the Labour party, Dame Jacinda Ardern, committed to significant and sustained reductions in child poverty.

Subsequently, in 2018, the Labour-led government secured multi-party support for a Child Poverty Reduction Act, under which the government is required to measure poverty (in at least 10 ways) and set medium-term and long-term poverty reduction targets. Partly driven by these targets, and the political accountability they engender, recent governments have implemented policies which have helped reduce child poverty on most of the relevant measures. For example, child material hardship, using the standard rate, fell from approximately 25% in 2011 to around 13% in 2018 and then to about 10% in 2022.<sup>8; 9</sup> Nevertheless, poverty rates remain well above those in the best performing countries, especially for Māori and Pasifika children, highlighting the scope for significant additional progress.

Unfortunately, the issue of child poverty, and how it might be reduced, has barely registered during the 2023 election campaign. Moreover, a National-led government, if formed after the election, has indicated it will repeal some of the recent policy initiatives, such as indexing core welfare benefits to average wages rather than prices, which have helped reduce child poverty rates. Indeed, the nation’s poorest families may well end up worse off, at least in relative terms, if they help fund tax cuts for middle-income earners.

Over the medium-term, therefore, material hardship in low-income families may well increase again, along with the various negative long-term effects associated with such developments. For Professor Poulton and his colleagues, this would be an extremely disappointing outcome.

Different policy choices are possible. But voters often prefer short-term gains over long-term investments, and tax cuts are generally easier to ‘sell’ than tax increases. Moreover, children cannot vote and, for various reasons, poorer families vote rather less than wealthy ones. Such factors inevitably affect the politics of child poverty.

Reducing child poverty not only requires robust evidence of the kind provided by the Dunedin Study, but also a society that values such evidence and seeks a long, secure, and rewarding life for all its citizens, whatever their gender, ethnicity, or beliefs. Aotearoa New Zealand has yet to fully embrace such a culture.<sup>10; 11</sup>

Let us hope that Professor Poulton’s legacy, including his deep desire for human flourishing and social justice, will continue to inspire able students to pursue careers in the social and health sciences, and encourage political leaders to harness the best available evidence to build a better tomorrow.

## **What is new in this Briefing?**

- We highlight the impact of the late Prof Richie Poulton and the Dunedin study which provides some of the most robust evidence available internationally on the effects of early life conditions on health and wellbeing as adults.
- People born into poverty are more likely to suffer hardships of all kinds throughout their lives, including lower income, less education, and poorer health.

## **Policy implications**

- Reducing child poverty is one of the most effective, evidence-informed ways to improve societal wellbeing.
- Politicians and policymakers will serve us better by taking a long-term perspective and using high-quality evidence in developing and implementing policies.

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