



CERTIFY HOPE

# The social return on birth registration

Achieving universal birth registration in Australia

DEVELOPED WITH 

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## About UNICEF Australia

UNICEF believes in a fair chance for every child and we are the world's leading organisation working to protect and improve the lives of children in over 190 countries. At UNICEF Australia we work to protect and promote children's rights by advocating for the rights of children in Australia and overseas, and elevating their voices.

## About Social Ventures Australia

Social Ventures Australia (SVA) is a leading social impact organisation. We help solve challenging social problems by putting our extensive know-how to work redesigning systems. We help institutions think differently and work hand in hand with our partners and communities to take real action on social change.

**Thank you** to The Ian Potter Foundation for their generous support of this report and ongoing collaboration.

**We would also like to thank** the Registries of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Services Australia, Pathfinders, The Hive, and the Australian Bureau of Statistics for the generous insights and advice they shared throughout this research.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

UNICEF Australia acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the land and communities in which we and our partners work throughout Australia, and their connection to their lands, waters, and communities. We pay respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures, and to Elders past and present, and to the children of today who are the Elders of the future.



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There is growing recognition that universal birth registration is a smart investment.<sup>i</sup> It lays the foundation for children’s development and wellbeing, while unlocking social and economic gains for children, their families and governments alike.

On average, 12,600 births go unregistered each year in Australia, with delays disproportionately affecting babies born in remote areas, babies born in areas of socio-economic disadvantage, First Nations babies and babies born to mothers under the age of 25.<sup>ii</sup>

While birth registration is free, the cost of a birth certificate, which ranges from \$56 in the Northern Territory to \$74 in the ACT,<sup>iii</sup> remains a major barrier, compounded by remoteness, the complexity of the process, lack of proper identification, and other challenges. These barriers fall heaviest on families already facing financial hardship and structural disadvantage. One or more of these barriers means that the current registration and certification process just doesn’t work for some families.

A birth certificate is a child’s passport to protection and a gateway to early learning, school, specialised healthcare and other services that are critical for their development and wellbeing. It is also required to obtain a driver’s license, tax file number and open a bank account. Over time, these pathways have the potential to drive stronger educational and health outcomes, higher workforce participation, and reduced reliance on health and welfare systems.

With economic inequality at an all-time high,<sup>iv</sup> rising cost-of-living pressures, and rural and remote children still experiencing poorer health and education outcomes than children in major cities,<sup>v</sup> improving access to birth



Universal birth registration in Australia is achievable with the right investments, and the return on making these investments is clear.

certificates is a practical and high-value step forward to reduce disparities and tackle intergenerational disadvantage.

## A first-of-its-kind analysis

To better understand the potential benefits of addressing these barriers, UNICEF Australia commissioned Social Ventures Australia (SVA) to conduct a forecast Social Return on Investment (SROI) analysis. The analysis suggests that increasing birth registration and certification rates among families facing the greatest barriers could generate **almost \$67 million in social and economic value from each year of investment**, with a potential **return of \$6.10 for every \$1 invested**.

Universal birth registration in Australia is achievable with the right investments, and the return on making these investments is clear. Prioritising families facing the greatest barriers offers a powerful lever to advance equity, productivity and inclusion, and ensure every child – no matter where they are born – has the best start in life.



## Recommendations

UNICEF Australia is calling on the Federal Government to work with State and Territory Governments to:

- 1**

**Improve the affordability of birth certificates**  
Introduce free first birth certificates for babies born in remote areas, babies born in areas of socio-economic disadvantage, First Nations babies, and babies born to mothers under the age of 25, putting us on a pathway to universal birth registration.
- 2**

**Expand community outreach and support**  
Increase investment in Registries of Births, Deaths and Marriages and community-based organisations to provide further targeted, culturally safe and accessible support for families who face the greatest barriers.
- 3**

**Simplify processes and strengthen systems integration**  
Reduce the administrative burden of birth registration and certification by streamlining procedures and embedding registration processes more fully within health and education systems.
- 4**

**Elevate universal birth registration as a national priority**  
Position universal birth registration and certification as a core commitment within the Outcomes Framework and next action plan of the Early Years Strategy 2024–2034.

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# KEY FINDINGS

**\$11 million**

The proposed annual investment to increase birth registration and certification nationwide is comprised of:

**\$7 million**

To provide **free first birth certificates** to ~90,000 babies born each year who fall within one or more of four priority groups: babies born in remote areas, babies born in areas of socio-economic disadvantage, First Nations babies and babies born to mothers under the age of 25.



**\$4 million**

To expand **targeted outreach** to 18,500 babies and their families – the level of coverage estimated to be required to reach the **12,600** babies at risk of delayed registration.

## The Forecast Social Return on Investment



**\$67 million** Total social value generated



**12,600** Children who would be impacted



**\$5,317** Benefit generated for each certificate provided

Every dollar invested to increase birth registration could generate an estimated \$6.10 of social and economic value.

**\$1 = \$6.10**

## Key social & economic benefits

Based on extensive consultations directly with families, community sector and government partners, and existing research, the SROI analysis identified four key areas where the proposed investment could generate the greatest social and economic value:

**1**

### Increased access to education

Almost 70% of families reported challenges enrolling their children in early learning, primary or high school without a birth certificate. Ensuring children can obtain a birth certificate would remove this administrative barrier to enrolment and support stronger access to education. Studies demonstrate that over time, improved educational participation is associated with better wellbeing, stronger academic outcomes, enhanced future employment prospects and increased earning.<sup>vi</sup>

**2**

### Greater fitness and improved health amongst children and young people

A birth certificate is often required to enrol in club-based sports. When children can obtain a birth certificate, they are better able to participate in organised sport, which supports higher levels of physical activity, fitness and overall physical health. Physical activity has also been linked with psychological and social benefits and improved cognitive development.<sup>vii</sup> Increased activity is particularly valuable in the context of rising inactivity and higher rates of obesity among children and young people.

**3**

### Improved mental health and wellbeing for carers and children

Nearly half of the families we consulted described experiencing stress and anxiety when trying to obtain a birth certificate, especially when delays affected a child's access to school or sports. Improving access to birth certificates could help reduce this source of stress for families and may support children's wellbeing and mental health through greater participation in education and recreational activities.

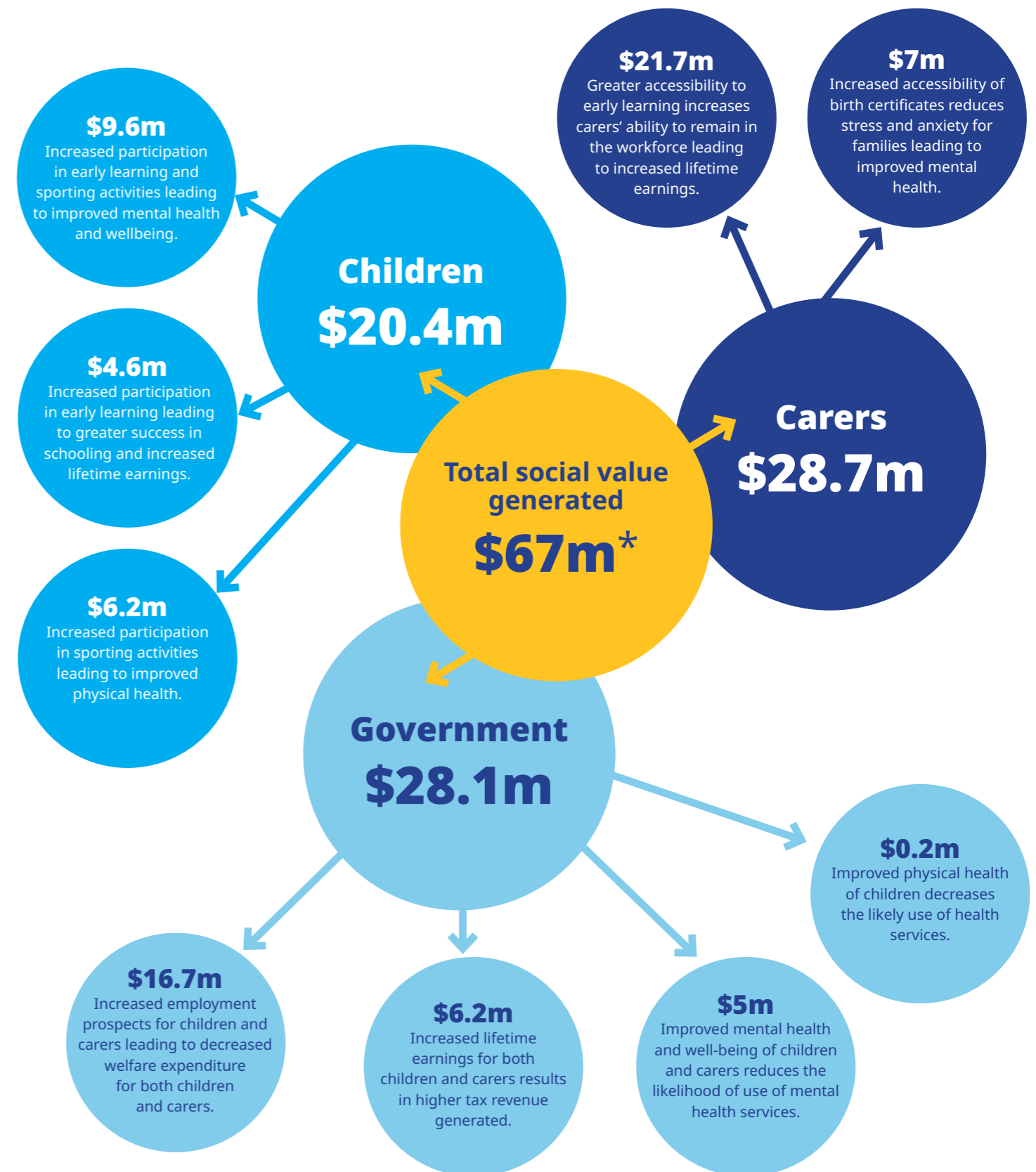
**4**

### Reduced pressure on health and welfare systems

Improvements in the physical and mental health of children and their families – as well as stronger education outcomes and economic prospects – can help reduce demand on health and welfare systems over time.<sup>viii</sup> Strengthening these foundational pathways through improved access to birth certificates could deliver long-term value to government through reduced service use and increased economic participation.

# Social value breakdown

The forecast SROI analysis identified the potential positive outcomes enabled by having a birth certificate and estimated the social and economic value they could generate.



\*In line with best practice requirements, an annual real discount rate of 7% has been applied to the total social return on investment. This results in a total net present value of \$67m.



PHOTOGRAPHY: ©UNICEF Australia/2024/Moran.

# SOCIAL RETURN ON INVESTMENT ANALYSIS

A forecast SROI analysis is an internationally recognised, principles-based methodology to assess the potential impact of an investment by expressing its social value in monetary terms.

**The estimated social return was informed by:**

- **Family consultations:** We consulted 25 families in regional and metropolitan locations in Queensland and NSW who belonged to at least one priority group, and who had experienced both the challenges obtaining a birth certificate and the impact of living without one. In total, **40 individuals** from these families required support to obtain their certificates.
- **Community sector and government partner consultations:** We held two workshops with seven key partner organisations engaged with the birth registration process, including government agencies and community organisations.
- **Existing research:** We reviewed existing studies to understand and quantify the potential secondary impacts of improved access to birth certificates.

The resulting SROI ratio summarises the total social value created for all three stakeholders relative to the investment. It provides an intentionally conservative estimate based on the best available data. While not a precise forecast, the analysis offers a useful evidence base to inform future policy and highlight the potential benefits of investments. See Appendix for further details of the methodology and limitations.

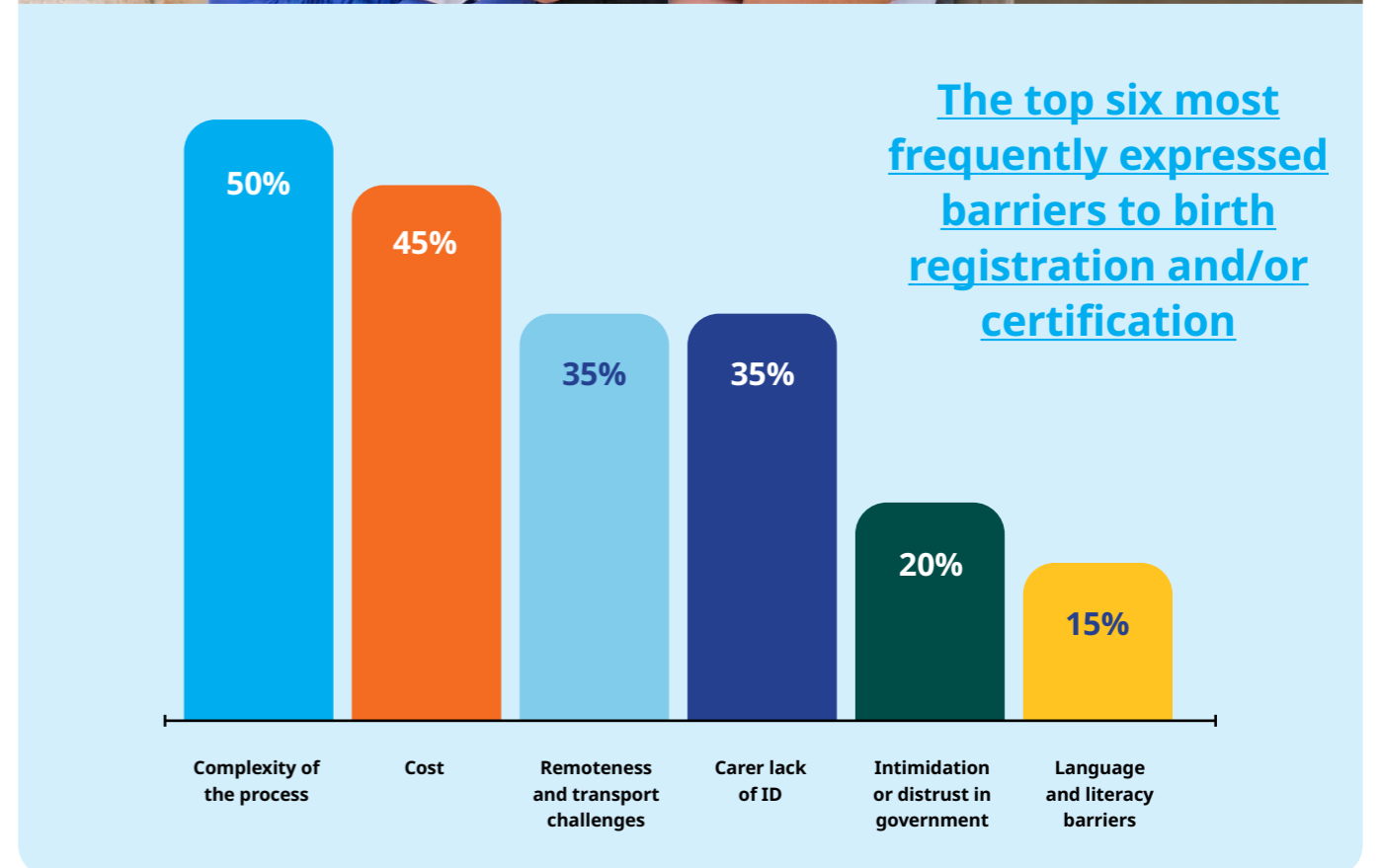
## Barriers to registration and certification

Responsibility for birth registration sits primarily with Australian States and Territories. The process is managed by Registries of Births, Deaths and Marriages (BDMs), which fall under the responsibility of State and Territory Attorneys-General, justice or customer service portfolios. Despite significant progress in recent years to improve access to birth registration, barriers persist. National data indicates that, on average, around 12,600 births are not registered each year. In addition, a substantial number of children have their birth registered but do not have a birth certificate.



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### Cost

The cost of a birth certificate can deter registration due to confusion between the free registration process and the paid certificate. Forty-five per cent of families identified cost as the biggest barrier to registering a birth and/or obtaining a certificate.

Most States and Territories offer some form of fee relief through BDMs. While some have clear, published fee-waiver policies, others are less clearly defined. Where fee waivers exist, they are not always well promoted and can be difficult to navigate.

BDMs, community organisations and other agencies deliver important community outreach programs to support families experiencing hardship and vulnerability, including through sign-up days offering free birth certificates with more flexible identification requirements. Identifying and reaching families who would benefit most from this support, however, remains a challenge. Increased and sustained investment in outreach, education and awareness would enable this valuable work to be expanded in both frequency and reach.

Some families noted that the potential fine for registering a birth after 60 days – which has a maximum penalty of over \$2,000 in Victoria – was an additional deterrent, even though they are rarely imposed.<sup>ix</sup>

*“I’ve got like five kids I’ve got to feed. That’s 50 bucks, that’s one meal for them gone on something that I can’t generally afford.”*

*“The cost is massive as a single mother.”*

### Complexity of the process

Across all jurisdictions, hospitals or attending clinicians must notify BDMs of a birth. Parents, guardians or custodians are then expected to register the birth and provide some of the same information recorded on the Services Australia Newborn Child Declaration form they receive at the hospital. Families reported misplacing this form, delaying the process and imposing an extra burden on hospitals. The process is more complex for births outside of hospital.

Partners also noted that some families assume their child is registered because they were able to enrol in Medicare or access Centrelink payments, which are separate processes that do not require a birth certificate.

*“Hospitals in WA say they are getting so many calls from parents to confirm that information because they’ve lost the [Services Australia Newborn Child Declaration] form. As a result, they have started handwriting that information and stapling it to the birth registration form they give to parents.”*

*“I tried to apply online and it was really, really difficult for me, I just found that there was so many different like, document, photo ID documents that they wanted me to supply things I didn’t have.”*

*“Registering my children was not an easy process – I had to get three people to help me with the paperwork.”*

*“I would have given up on the paperwork without... help, because it’s too hard.”*



20% of families expressed feeling intimidated by the process and/or distrust in government systems, which had made it harder to engage with the process. Although birth registration and certification can be completed online, people without internet access or in need of in-person support may face challenges accessing registration services, especially while caring for a newborn and if they lack reliable transport or live in remote areas.

### Lack of ID

35% of families cited lack of ID as a barrier to registering their child’s birth, including 10% who did not have a birth certificate themselves. Producing ID was especially difficult for families experiencing domestic violence or unstable housing, where documents were sometimes lost or unsafe to access. **These insights show how persistent barriers to birth registration can reinforce intergenerational disadvantage, increasing the likelihood that future generations also miss out on timely registration.**

*“[M]ake it less intimidating for us to go in and get our birth certificates because sometimes it’s hard to go and be a part of the system when you feel so out of the system and it feels like it’s not really provided for us as First Nations people. And it’s actually a bit intimidating as a First Nations person to sometimes be a part of that system that you don’t understand.”*



# Impacts of no birth certificate

Birth registration ensures children are legally recognised from birth, forming the basis for their protection and access to essential services, entitlements and opportunities. The families we consulted identified several impacts of not having a birth certificate, with the strongest relating to education, sport and mental health for children and their families.

## 1 68% of families reported barriers to education

A birth certificate is generally required for enrolment in early childhood education and care (ECEC) centres, primary and high school. More than half the families we consulted experienced delays or hurdles when they could not produce a certificate, despite alternative documents being acceptable under state policies. Families who were able to enrol their children described ongoing stress as schools repeatedly requested a birth certificate.

*"He's been off school for three months."*

*"It's held us back with schooling, she hasn't been able to attend certain schools."*



## 2 60% of families reported their children couldn't participate in sports clubs

The second largest barrier families described was participation in sports clubs, which often request a birth certificate to prove a child is playing in the right age group. A couple of families noted that their children were asked to present a birth certificate to play in the Koori Knockout, which serves as an important gathering for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to celebrate culture, heritage and community pride.

*"[T]he little ones, they go down when the game's being played on the Saturday and they're standing and you want to see their faces... it just broke your heart watching them being excluded."*

*"My daughter was devastated that she couldn't get in the soccer team."*

*"They're at an age now where they were wanting to play sports, so the sports clubs won't take them without certificates (...) It's very important because they're at that growth where they want to do it with their friends and stuff."*

## 3 44% of families reported experiencing stress and anxiety

When discussing the process of accessing a certificate, families described feeling overwhelmed by the number of documents required, feeling intimidated by the process and unsure whether they would be able to provide everything needed. Many also spoke about the stress associated with needing to travel into inner city areas to complete the application at service centres, when they were unable to complete it online.

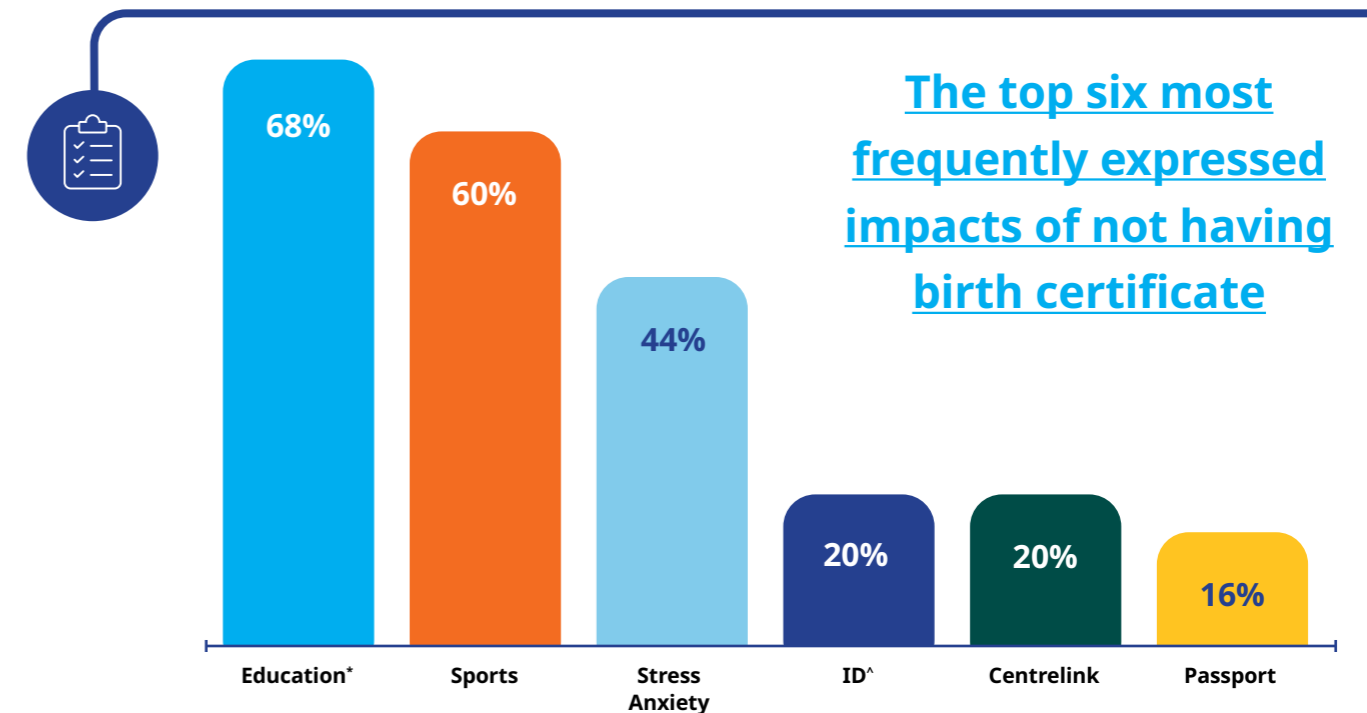
*"Their schools were asking for their birth certificates - they kept harassing me."*

*"[Not having a birth certificate] has been a huge stress for the family. It's affected my mental health."*

*"[Accessing a birth certificate is] such a relief actually. I've been dreading it because I knew it was gonna take so much to have organised (...) It just feels like such a weight's been lifted again..., it's made me feel so much lighter, being able to get it done today."*



*"I was really stressed about how I'd be able to afford the birth certificates in time to enroll him for prep."*



\* Education includes any form of childcare, preschool or school.  
 ^ ID includes people needing ID to prove their child's Aboriginal status and/or proof of age.



## Potential value generated by a birth certificate

Our consultations with families, community sector and government partners identified three potential benefits families could experience if they had access to a birth certificate:

- Increased access to early education and beyond
- Increased access to sports clubs
- Reduced stress and anxiety for families

For each of these outcomes, a review of existing studies points to several secondary impacts that could continue to drive benefits for children, their families and the government through their lifetime. See Appendix for a full list of sources.

PHOTOGRAPHY: ©UNICEF Australia/2024/Moran.

### Potential benefits for children

**Improved mental health and wellbeing:** Access to school and sport supports stronger wellbeing, with education and physical activity both linked to better mental health.

**Increased lifetime earnings:** Access to education improves academic outcomes, employment prospects and earning potential, with benefits that accumulate across a child's life.

**Improved physical health:** Participation in sport boosts fitness and overall health, and regular physical activity enhances attention and concentration.

### Potential benefits for families

**Increased lifetime earnings:** Improved access to childcare and education increases the ability of primary carers to engage in the workforce. This reduces career breaks and supports higher earnings in both the short and long term, as extended time out of the workforce is known to suppress lifetime income.

**Improved mental health:** Reducing the stress carers experience when they cannot obtain a birth certificate is likely to support better mental health. Enabling children's timely enrolment in ECEC can also improve families' access to support services and increase their free time for social connection and rest. This is particularly significant given the higher likelihood of poor mental health among some of the priority groups.

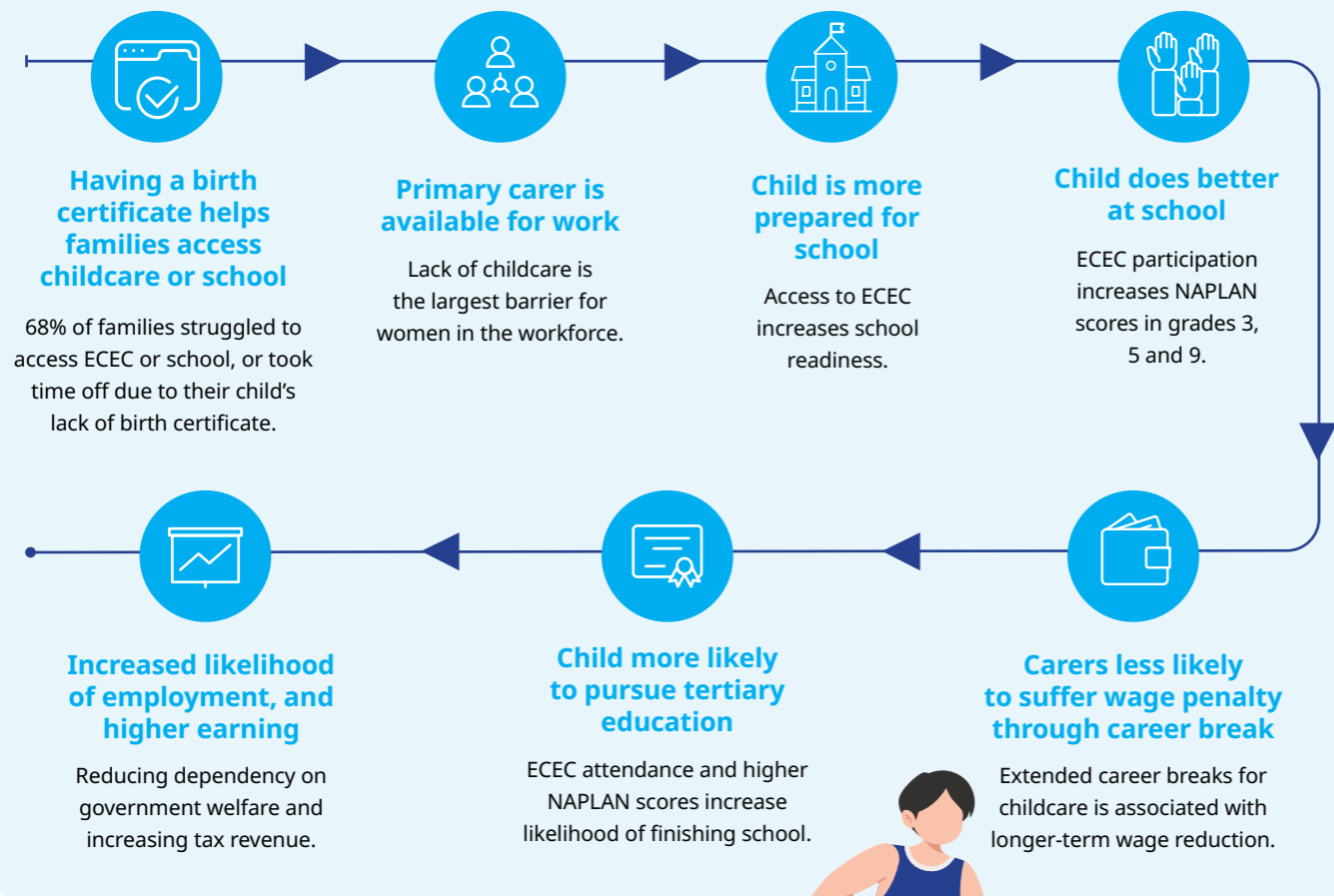
### Potential benefits for government

**Decreased welfare expenditure and increased tax revenue:** Increasing children's future earning potential and the ability for carers to work would likely reduce their reliance on welfare and increase tax contributions over time.

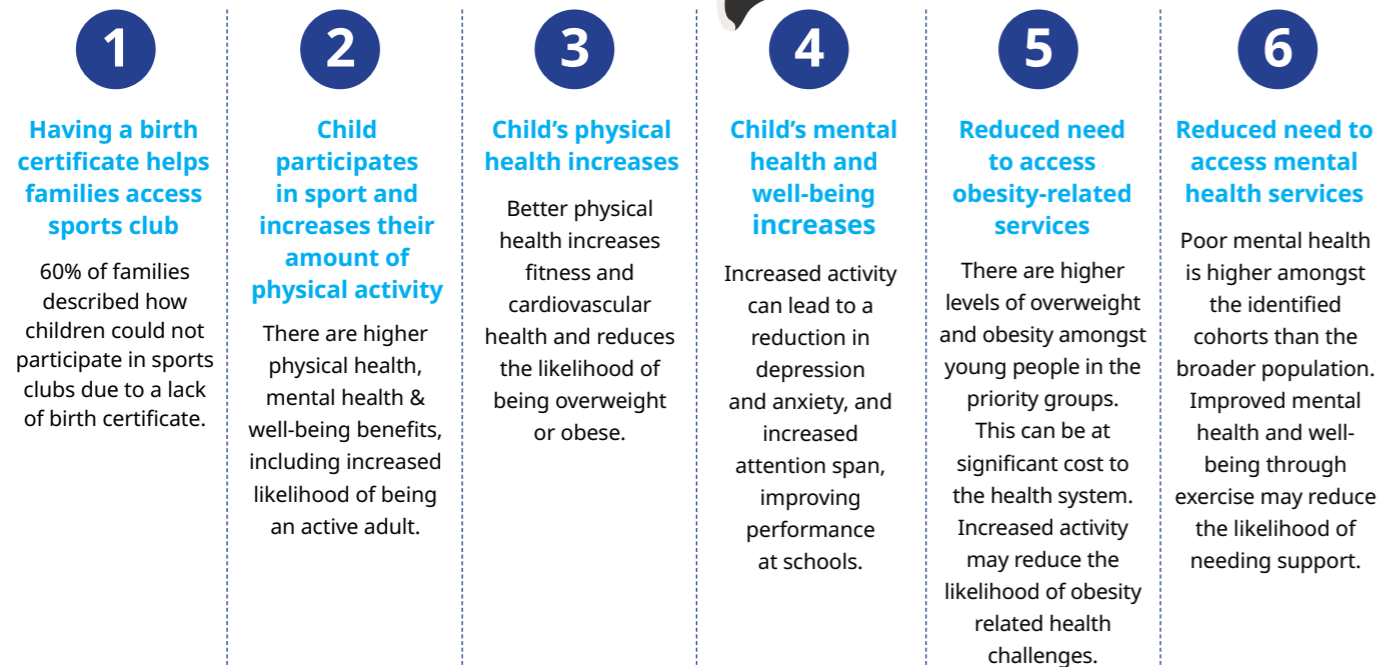
**Decreased mental health expenditure:** Improved mental health among carers and children is likely to lower future demand for government-funded mental health services.

**Reduced physical health expenditure:** Increased participation in sport and improved health outcomes is likely to reduce the need for government-funded health interventions. This is particularly significant for the priority groups, who generally have poorer access to health services and health outcomes.

## Potential ripple effects of a birth certificate in enabling access to ECEC



## Potential ripple effects of a birth certificate in enabling access to sporting clubs



## Meet Tracey\*, mother of five, NSW

Tracey is a young mother of five children, ranging in age from a newborn to six years old, living in NSW. She had her first child at 19 and, like many first time parents, had little guidance on how to navigate birth registration and birth certificates.

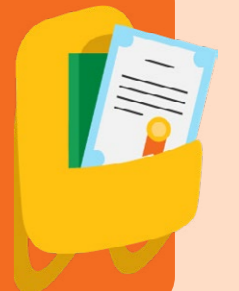
Tracey described the birth registration process as **confusing and heavily reliant on online systems that didn't work for her.**

She faced repeated issues when registering her children online, including system glitches, forms resetting mid-process, and unclear questions. The forms required extensive family information, such as details about parents or grandparents that Tracey felt were not always relevant or easy to provide.

**The delays had real and serious consequences for Tracey and her children.**

### Without accurate birth certificates, Tracey struggled to:

- Enrol her child in preschool and school
- Maintain Centrelink payments, which were threatened during the delay
- Apply for NDIS support for one child with additional needs
- Provide required identification for social housing applications



Tracey explained that her child could not access the NDIS until a correct birth certificate was received. Once the certificate arrived, NDIS supports were approved within a month - highlighting how a simple piece of paper can open the door to essential support.

Tracey said she was only able to resolve these challenges because of in-person support from community organisation, The Hive. The support removed a significant burden during an already overwhelming time. Tracey reflected that without this help, she believes she would still be stuck in the system.

Once the birth certificates were resolved, Tracey's children could access preschool, school, Medicare, Centrelink, NDIS supports, and housing services. The difference was immediate and life changing.

As Tracey put it, if birth certificates are essential to access nearly every government service, **they should not be so hard to obtain.**

*\*To protect privacy we have not used her real name.*



## What is the potential return on investment?

### The proposed investment

The proposed initial investment of \$11 million includes approximately \$7 million to provide a free first birth certificate to the ~90,000 babies born each year, who fall within one or more of four priority groups. This is based on ABS population data and the average cost of a birth certificate across States and Territories, including some additional administrative and postage costs.

It also includes \$4 million to increase targeted outreach to 18,500 babies and their families. This reflects the proportion of births currently unregistered and an estimate of the additional proportion of children who are most likely to benefit from targeted outreach programs. It recognises that to effectively reach the babies at risk of delayed registration (12,600), outreach must target a higher number of babies and their families (18,500).

Outreach challenges vary across States and Territories due to differences in geography, demographics and seasonal accessibility. In absence of more granular data, an average estimated cost of \$205/person for outreach was applied based on costing data from five outreach programs across three jurisdictions. Actual costs will vary depending on location and target population.

The proposed \$4 million investment is additional to existing outreach resources and is intended to close the current gap affecting the 12,600 children at risk of delayed registration.

### The potential social value

The SROI analysis suggests that funding free first birth certificates for families facing the greatest barriers and expanding targeted outreach could generate \$67 million of social value from each year of investment, and an SROI ratio of 6.1:1. This value has been calculated for the estimated 12,600 babies whose births are not registered each year, over the course of their lives.

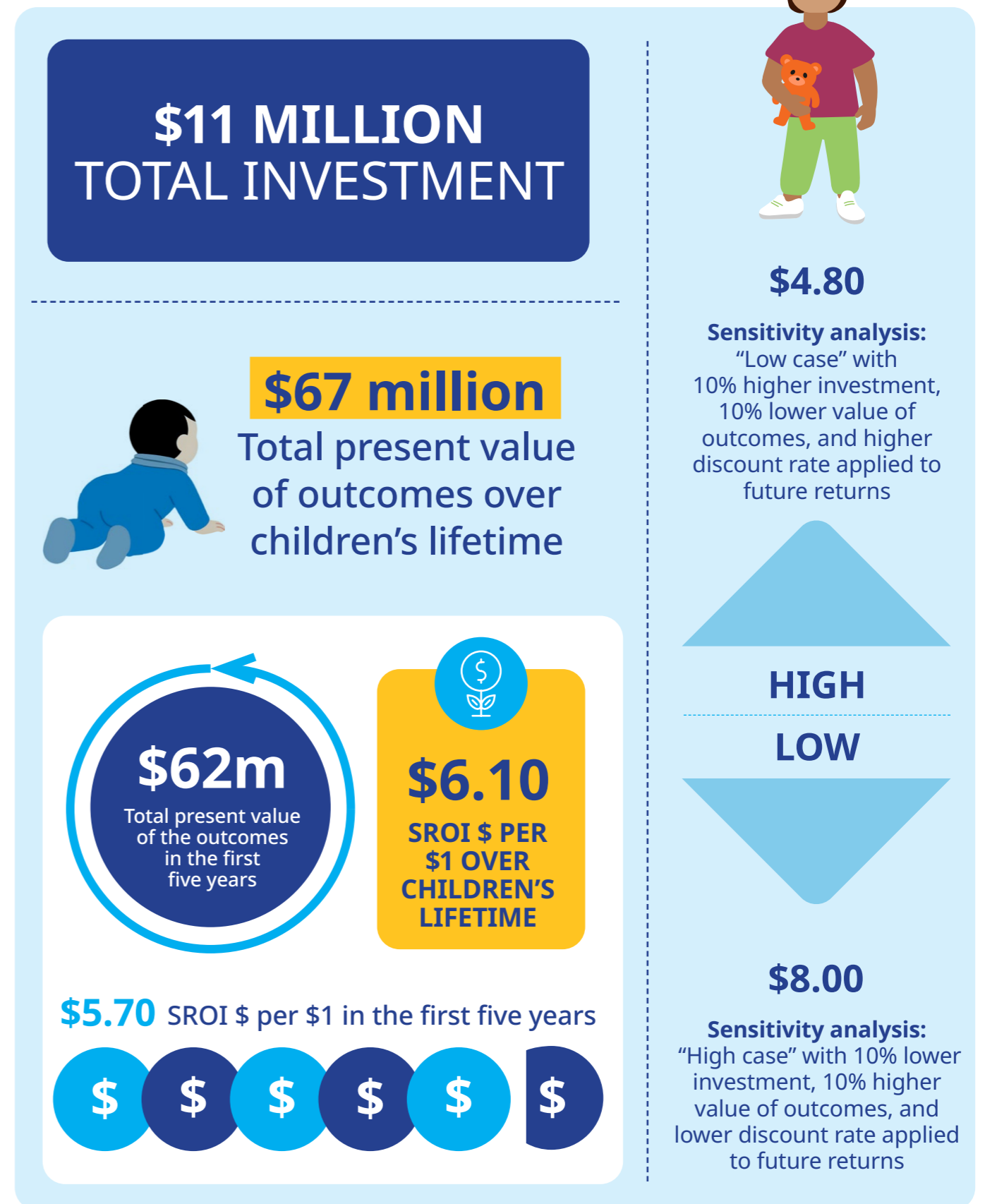
An SROI ratio focusing only on the first five years after investment demonstrates that the intervention could generate substantial early returns, with \$5.70 of social and economic value potentially generated for every \$1 invested. This strong short-term result reflects the immediate benefits to children and families, while the even greater gains tied to education and lifetime earnings continue to build over time.

To avoid overclaiming benefits and as per the SROI methodology, the analysis applied assumptions to account for changes that would have occurred without the intervention, the contribution of other factors, and the duration and decline of benefits over time.

As with any financial modelling, changes in the variables would result in changes to the SROI ratio. A sensitivity analysis was conducted to observe which variable/s have the most significant impact on the ratio. As set out below, for all scenarios tested, the SROI ratio remains significantly above 1:1, indicating that the social value created is greater than the investment.

PHOTOGRAPHY: ©UNICEF Australia/Pathfinders.

The table below summarises the value created:





# DETAILED RECOMMENDATIONS

Universal birth registration in Australia is achievable with the right investments. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has recommended that the Australian Government ensure universal, free and timely birth registration, particularly for children most at risk.<sup>x</sup> The following recommendations set out how the Federal Government can work in partnership with States and Territories to accelerate progress.

PHOTOGRAPHY: ©UNICEF Australia/UA147762/Andres

## RECOMMENDATION 1

### IMPROVE AFFORDABILITY OF BIRTH CERTIFICATES

Introduce free first birth certificates for babies born in remote areas, babies born in areas of socio-economic disadvantage, First Nations babies and babies born to mothers under the age of 25, putting us on a pathway to universal birth registration.

The cost of a birth certificate remains a major deterrent for families experiencing financial hardship and structural barriers – pressures that are only intensifying with the rising cost of living and growing inequality. Removing the certificate fee for priority groups is one of the most effective levers to encourage timely registration and certification, and support efforts to reduce intergenerational disadvantage.

Certificate fees are set through State and Territory regulation under a cost recovery model, where revenue from certificate fees contributes to the cost of registry operations. Guaranteeing free first birth certificates for priority groups would require stable, additional core funding, rather than being absorbed within existing BDM budgets. This approach would enable BDMs to continue recovering costs for other certificates and to reinvest that revenue in outreach and service delivery.

As the impacts of birth registration extend beyond state boundaries, the Commonwealth may be best positioned to support the additional investment needed to ensure national consistency on such a fundamental child rights issue.

The Federal Government has already demonstrated leadership in driving reforms and investments to improve accessibility and child safety in early learning settings. Investing in universal birth registration is a logical next step to strengthen the Government's commitment to the early years and ensure every child has the best start in life.

Although fee waivers exist, they are known to be complex to navigate and poorly understood. Most fee waiver applications require an official letter from a community organisation or service provider.

Extensive behavioural and public policy research shows that fee waivers don't guarantee uptake and that even small "hassle costs" significantly reduce utilisation.<sup>xi</sup> A large study of the Texas tuition and fee waiver program for young people with foster care experience found that 40% of eligible students did not use the waiver, despite full entitlement.<sup>xii</sup> Administrative burdens, eligibility complexity, and psychological barriers suppressed uptake.

For a free-certificate scheme to be effective, eligibility across the four priority groups should be simple and low-burden. Areas of socio-economic disadvantage are defined using the Australian Bureau of Statistics' Socio Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA), which draw on Census data such as income, education, employment and housing to describe the relative socio-economic characteristics of an area.<sup>xiii</sup>

A free certificate scheme could target babies born in these areas, similar to the way the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) targets students from low socio-economic backgrounds based on their residence in SEIFA ranked disadvantaged areas.<sup>xiv</sup> Alternatively, a model similar to the Child Care Subsidy could be adopted to target families based on their individual circumstances, drawing on income and benefit data already held by Services Australia.

Finally, removing penalties for late registrations from BDM legislation and public materials would eliminate an additional deterrent. As an alternative, a free birth certificate could be conditional upon timely registration. Other countries demonstrate that more accessible, low burden models are both feasible and effective (refer to page 28).

## RECOMMENDATION 2

### EXPAND COMMUNITY OUTREACH & SUPPORT

Increase investment in Registries of Births, Deaths and Marriages and community-based organisations to provide further targeted, culturally safe support for families who face the greatest barriers.

Even if cost barriers are removed, many families still need culturally safe and sensitive support to navigate the registration and certification process – particularly those facing language and literacy challenges, limited digital access, low trust in government systems, or difficulties obtaining identity documents. BDMs and community organisations, including Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and local family services, already play an important role in supporting families through these processes. With additional resources, this work could be expanded and strengthened.

Raising awareness of birth registration as a fundamental human right – and of the benefits a birth certificate unlocks – should be part of this strategy. However, BDM registrars currently lack a clear statutory mandate to undertake public education, and ongoing outreach is generally not one of their core functions.

To address this, it may be necessary for States and Territories to amend their BDM legislation to explicitly

empower registries to conduct community education, partner with local organisations, and deliver ongoing outreach as part of their core functions.

This should be supported by clear policy direction and dedicated funding for regular, culturally safe, place-based outreach. Channelling resources to organisations already delivering community outreach would be more efficient, as they have established trust, local knowledge and experience navigating cultural sensitivities.

Feedback from community partners suggests that partnerships between BDMs and trusted organisations to provide fee-free birth certificates with reduced identification requirements can improve access. Increasing awareness among community services, schools and ECEC providers of these types of partnership models could further extend reach. The success of existing outreach programs in improving access to birth certificates highlights their value and what could be achieved with greater investment.



#### The power of community outreach

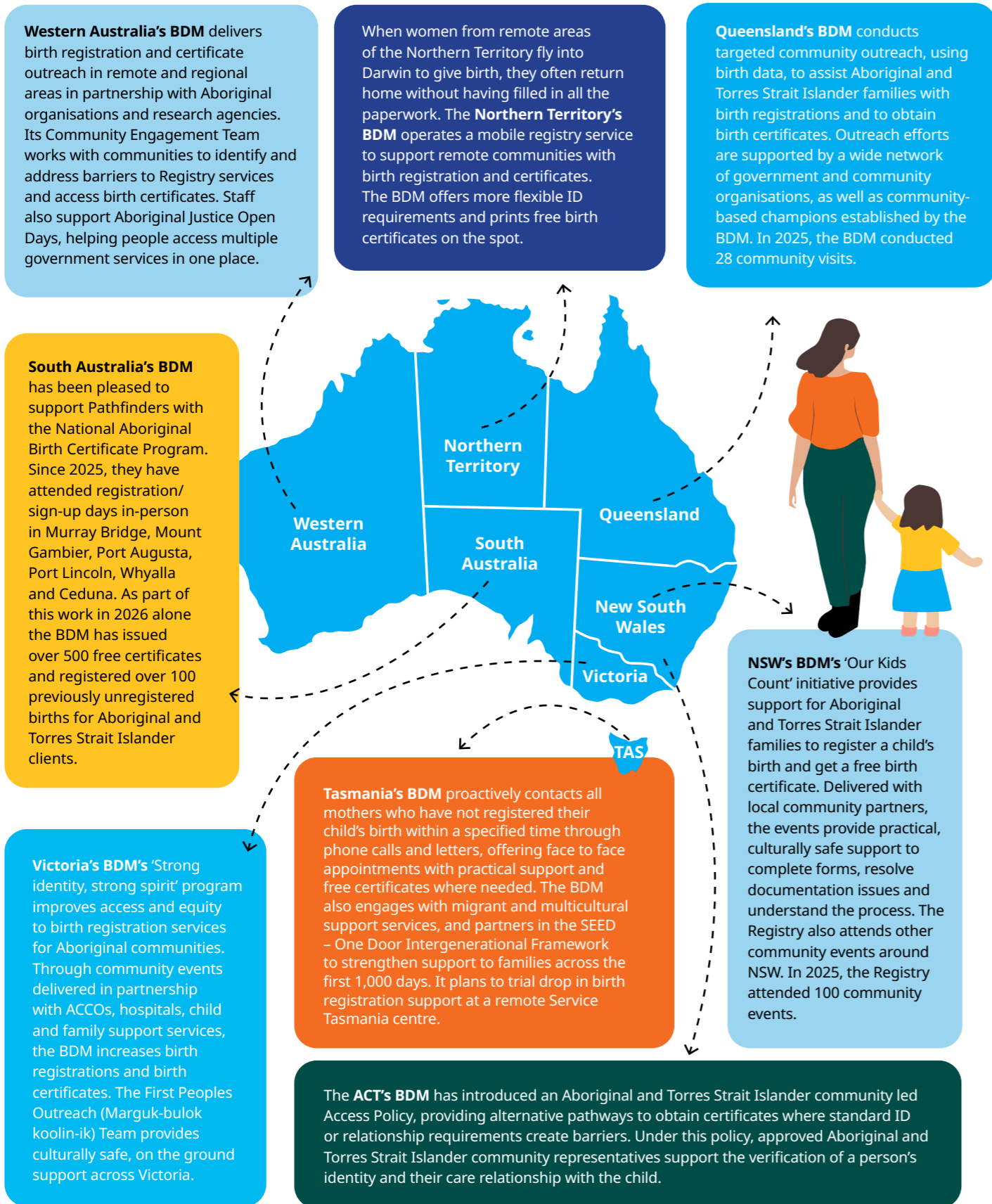
Community outreach programs play a critical role in supporting families who are most at risk of missing out on birth registration or a birth certificate. These programs directly address known barriers including complex application processes, missing identification, cost, and limited access to registry services by meeting families in their communities and providing hands-on, practical support to simplify the process. Pathfinders' National Aboriginal Birth Certificate Program, for example, delivers culturally safe, face-to-face outreach for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families through community-based birth registration sign-up days.<sup>xv</sup> These sign-up days are led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander team in partnership with local communities and provide on-the-spot assistance and access to free birth certificates. To date, the program has supported more than 24,900 people to apply for a birth certificate across New South Wales, South Australia, Queensland, the ACT and the Northern Territory. This model complements formal civil registration systems by strengthening connections between communities and government processes. It sits alongside important community outreach activities delivered by BDMs, Services Australia, and other agencies and organisations.<sup>xvi</sup>

Pathfinders' National Aboriginal Birth Certificate Program delivers culturally safe, face-to-face outreach for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families through community-based birth registration and certificate sign-up days.



PHOTOGRAPHY: ©UNICEF Australia/2024/Moran.

Across Australia, BDM registries work with communities to address barriers to birth registration through culturally safe, face-to-face support, demonstrating the importance of community outreach.



## RECOMMENDATION 3

### SIMPLIFY PROCESSES AND STRENGTHEN SYSTEMS INTEGRATION

Reduce the administrative burden of birth registration and certification by streamlining procedures and embedding registration processes fully within health and education systems.

Streamlining processes and enhancing systems integration would reduce administrative hurdles for families and enable BDMs and other service providers to identify unregistered births earlier. This begins with simplifying forms, reducing identification requirements where appropriate, and ensuring guidance is available in clear, multilingual and culturally responsive formats.

Hospitals remain a critical entry point for reaching families. Providing additional resourcing to embed birth registration and birth certificate application within hospital processes could encourage completion before discharge and reduce reliance on post-birth follow up.

Embedding routine birth registration checks within other existing touch points – such as maternal and child health services and community nursing programs – provides timely prompts and assistance. Strengthening data sharing arrangements between early learning centres, schools and BDMs, with robust privacy safeguards, would allow these services to notify BDMs when a child lacks a certificate, enabling the BDM to provide tailored follow-up and support.

Closer alignment between Medicare enrolment and birth registration, whether through prompts during Medicare enrolment or by combining processes, would reduce duplication and confusion for families. Emerging initiatives demonstrate what could be possible. The Newborn Enrolment Trial (also known as the Birth of a Child Pilot Project), delivered by Services Australia and the ACT Government, shows how a "tell us once" model can streamline birth registration, certificate applications, Medicare enrolment and Centrelink processes through secure data sharing between hospitals, the BDM and government services.<sup>xvii</sup>

Victoria's digital birth certificate trial is intended to remove practical hurdles to kindergarten and service enrolment by making it easier to store and retrieve a birth certificate.<sup>xviii</sup> Importantly, digital access also reduces the risk of certificates being lost or damaged during periods of housing instability, including family violence, disaster displacement, or frequent moves. These emerging models demonstrate the potential for streamlined, family-centred national approaches. Greater attention is needed to support safe storage and retention of birth certificates, particularly for families without reliable access to digital devices or with low digital literacy.



## RECOMMENDATION 4

### ELEVATE UNIVERSAL BIRTH REGISTRATION AS A NATIONAL PRIORITY

Position universal birth registration and certification as a core commitment within the Outcomes Framework and next action plan of the Early Years Strategy 2024–2034.



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#### Accelerating universal birth registration by 2030

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development sets the target of a legal identity for all, including birth registration, by 2030.<sup>xix</sup> Many countries have accelerated progress by investing in timely and accessible birth registration systems. Hong Kong, the Republic of Korea and Japan, for example, have achieved high birth registration coverage.<sup>xx</sup> Global progress has largely been driven by countries leveraging health, social protection and education systems, expanding services to more locations, digitalising processes, and eliminating fees. Several European countries, such as France, and countries with fewer public resources than Australia, including Cambodia and Brazil, offer free first birth certificates. These examples demonstrate what is possible with the right investments and that reducing financial barriers can catalyse change.

Achieving universal birth registration requires sustained policy leadership and coordinated national action. The Early Years Strategy 2024–2034 (the Strategy) is intended to improve coordination, inclusion and early childhood outcomes and track national progress.<sup>xxi</sup> Embedding universal birth registration into the Outcomes Framework and next action plan of the Strategy would accelerate national progress and strengthen accountability.

The Strategy and Outcomes Framework recognise the importance of children having strong identities

and connections to culture. Birth registration is the foundation of a child's legal identity and their ability to be counted and included in national planning and policy.

Formalising the Government's commitment to universal birth registration in the next action plan with specific outcomes and indicators would encourage greater consistency across jurisdictions. It would also complement broader national reforms in digital identity, Closing the Gap, child safety and early childhood development.

# APPENDIX - METHODOLOGY & LIMITATIONS



## SROI methodology

The SROI methodology was used to identify, measure, and value the impact of increasing the accessibility of birth certificates. It is an internationally recognised, principles-based approach, that asks:

- Who changes as a result of our activities?
- How do they change?
- How do we prove it has changed?
- Which changes are (most) valued?
- Is it all down to us?

Social value is the value that people place on the changes that they experience in their lives. The Social Value Principles are set out on page 31.

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## SOCIAL VALUE PRINCIPLES

- 1

**Involve stakeholders**

Stakeholders should inform what gets measured and how this is measured and valued.
- 2

**Understand what changes**

Articulate how change is created and evaluate this through evidence gathered, recognising positive and negative changes as well as those that are intended and unintended.
- 3

**Value things that matter**

Use financial proxies so the value of the outcomes can be recognised.
- 4

**Only include what is material**

Determine what information and evidence must be included in the accounts to give a true and fair picture, such that stakeholders can draw reasonable conclusions about impact.
- 5

**Do not overclaim**

Organisations should only claim the value that they are responsible for creating.
- 6

**Be transparent**

Demonstrate the basis on which the analysis may be considered accurate and honest and show that it will be reported to and discussed with stakeholders.
- 7

**Verify the results**

Ensure appropriate independent verification of the analysis.
- 8

**Be responsive**

Pursue optimum Social Value based on decision making that is timely and supported by appropriate accounting and reporting.

## Calculating the investment

The total estimated investment of \$11 million includes two areas of cost:

1 The cost of providing free birth certificates: ~\$7million

2 The cost of increasing targeted outreach: ~\$4 million

### 1. Cost of birth certificates

- **Average certificate cost:** A national average of \$75 per certificate was used, including additional administrative and postage costs.
- **Relevant population:** The average cost of the birth certificate was calculated for ~90,000, which reflects an estimate of the number born each year who fall within one or more of the four priority groups according to ABS data, with adjustments made for overlap.<sup>xvii</sup>

### 2. Cost of program outreach

- **Outreach cost per person:** An average cost of \$205 per person for outreach was estimated based on costing data from five outreach programs across three jurisdictions, which includes staff, travel, and delivery costs. Actual costs will vary depending on location and target population.
- **Target population:** The average cost of outreach was applied to 18,500 babies, reflecting the proportion of births currently unregistered and the estimated number of birth certificates currently provided through outreach programs. This coverage recognises that a broader population will need to be targeted to effectively reach the 12,600 children at risk of delayed registration.

## Valuing outcomes

Financial proxies were used to value social outcomes, and where possible, publicly available data on government expenditure was used to estimate benefits to government. Where there is no market value, one of two methods were adopted:

- **Revealed preference:** financial proxy is inferred from the value of a related market price; and
- **A measure of the statistical value of a life:** applying the appropriate equivalent rate for the relevant health implication.

The social value has been calculated for the estimated 12,600 babies whose births are not registered each year, equivalent to approximately 12,400 families after adjusting for multiple births.

To avoid overclaiming the impact of increased birth registration, the following adjustment filters were applied in line with the SROI methodology:

- **Deadweight:** the extent to which the factors would have happened anyway;
- **Attribution:** the contribution of other actors; and
- **Duration and drop off:** how long the change lasts and whether its influence reduces over time.

In line with best practice requirements, an annual real discount rate of 7% has been applied to the total social return on investment. This results in a total net present value of \$67 million.

## Limitations

In absence of more robust, publicly available data, the averages used to inform the estimated investment analysis draw on assumed population overlap and data from a small number of outreach programs. The actual cost of birth registration outreach programs will differ depending on the location and target group.

The analysis also assumes stable priority populations and outreach needs, which may not reflect year-to-year changes. A conservative approach has been used throughout to minimise the risk of overstating benefits or understating costs.

## An example of how the SROI filters are applied is set out below:

- 1 **Involve stakeholders**
- 2 **Understand what changes**

Stakeholders for this example are the families who have increased access to birth certificates

Example outcome: improved mental health through accessible birth registration

- 3 **Value the things that matter**
- 4 **Include what is material**
- 5 **Do not overclaim**

**Quantity**  
How many people experienced a change?

44% of families consulted experienced stress or anxiety due to not having a birth certificate. Of these 29% would likely be experiencing poor mental health. This is a conservative estimate based on national data.

**Dead-weight**  
How much of that change would have happened anyway?

Anxiety was caused directly because of not having a birth certificate

**Duration and drop-off**  
How long did the impact of

Assumed change would last for one year only due to accessing a certificate

$$1,582 \text{ of the } 12,400 \text{ families} \times \$4,425 \times 0\% \text{ of families would have experienced the outcome anyway} \times 100\% \text{ of the outcome due to accessible birth registration} \times \text{Duration } 1 \text{ year (no drop-off)} = \$7\text{m}$$

**Financial Proxy**  
What is the value of this outcome to the stakeholder?

The proxy applies a revealed preference approach, using the average out-of-pocket cost of psychology sessions (after the Medicare rebate) as an alternative means of improving mental health, averaged with published estimates of the wellbeing cost of mild anxiety.

**Attribution**  
How much of this change was a result of Birth Registration?

100% of the outcome was due to not having a birth certificate and therefore would be avoided through increased access to birth registration.

**Adjusted Value**  
What's the value of the outcome?

The net value of the outcome after adjusting for quantity, financial proxy, dead-weight, attribution, duration and drop-off.

## Approach to estimating the value of outcomes

OUTCOME	RATIONALE	SOURCES
1. Improved mental health and wellbeing for children	<p>The outcome has been valued using the average of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the statistical value of a life, assuming the outcome is equivalent to overcoming mild anxiety; and</li> <li>the out-of-pocket cost of 10 counselling sessions.</li> </ul> <p>This value is scaled based on the relative increase in wellbeing achieved through increased participation in early learning and physical activity.</p>	<p>Office of Impact Analysis, Value of statistical life, November 2024</p> <p>Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), Australian Burden of Disease Study: Methods and supplementary material 2018, last updated 24 November 2021</p> <p>Australian Psychological Society (APS), APS National Schedule of Suggested Fees 2025-26, 2025</p> <p>Department of Health, Disability and Ageing, Medicare Benefits Schedule – Item 80010, accessed November 2026</p> <p>AIHW, Australia’s Children, last updated 25 February 2022</p> <p>University of New South Wales (UNSW), Fit kids have better mental and physical health, 4 November 2024</p>
2. Increased lifetime earnings for children	<p>The outcome has been valued based on the indicative increase in earnings as a result of increased rates of school completion, considering the increased likelihood of completing high school as a result of attending pre-school.</p>	<p>Impact Economics and Policy, Potential Unrealised Activity Test Undermining Benefits of Universal Pre-School, December 2023</p> <p>Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), Education and Work, Australia, 19 November 2025</p> <p>ABS, Employee earnings, Australia: May 2025, last updated 23 January 2026</p> <p>Department of Education, Income, last updated 11 February 2024</p>
3. Improved physical health	<p>The outcome has been calculated using the estimated average annual cost of participating in sport.</p>	<p>The Clearinghouse for Sport, Factors influencing sports participation: Cost (direct financial and time), last updated 8 July 2025</p>

OUTCOME	RATIONALE	SOURCES
4a. Increased earnings for parents (short-term)	<p>This has been calculated based on the estimated earnings of the primary carer in a family with young children under age 4. On average, this will be a female working part-time. Weekly earnings have been calculated between the lowest and median quartiles for conservatism, based on the priority groups identified.</p>	<p>Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research, The Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia Survey: Selected Findings from Waves 1 to 22, 2024</p> <p>ABS, Employee earnings: August 2025, last updated 12 December 2025</p> <p>ABS, Barriers and Incentives to Labour Force Participation, Australia: September 2025, last updated 4 February 2026</p> <p>Australian Institute of Family Studies, Employment patterns and trends for families with children, 18 May 2023</p>
4b. Increased lifetime earnings	<p>This has been calculated using the estimated lifetime wage penalty experienced by women who return to the workforce after a career break, applied against the average annual earnings for females.</p>	<p>Deloitte Access Economics for Victorian Department of Treasury and Finance, Summary report: Economic impacts of the Best Start, Best Life extension, December 2022</p> <p>ABS, Employee earnings: August 2025, last updated 12 December 2025</p> <p>ABS, Barriers and Incentives to Labour Force Participation, Australia: September 2025, last updated 4 February 2026</p>
5. Improved mental health	<p>The outcome has been valued using the average of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the statistical value of a life, assuming the outcome is equivalent to overcoming mild anxiety; and</li> <li>the out-of-pocket cost of 10 counselling sessions.</li> </ul> <p>This value is scaled based on the estimated rate of poor mental health amongst the identified priority groups.</p>	<p>Office of Impact Analysis, Value of statistical life, November 2024</p> <p>AIHW, Australian Burden of Disease Study: Methods and supplementary material 2018, last updated 24 November 2021</p> <p>APS, APS National Schedule of Suggested Fees 2025-26, 2025</p> <p>Department of Health, Disability and Ageing, Medicare Benefits Schedule – Item 80010, accessed November 2026</p> <p>Monash University, For richer, but not for poorer: How Australia’s mental health system fails those most in need, 2 December 2024</p>

OUTCOME	RATIONALE	SOURCES
6a. Decreased welfare expenditure over the children's lifetime	<p>This has been calculated using the annual jobseeker rate, considering:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the estimated increased likelihood of employment for those who complete school; and</li> <li>the proportion of primary carers who typically leave the workforce following a career break.</li> </ul>	<p>Services Australia, Jobseeker Payment, accessed November 2025</p> <p>ABS, Education and Work, Australia: May 2025, last updated 19 November 2025</p> <p>ABS, Barriers and Incentives to Labour Force Participation, Australia: September 2025, last updated 4 February 2026</p>
6b. Decreased welfare expenditure over the adult's lifetime		
7a. Increased tax revenue throughout the children's lifetime	<p>Tax rate applied to earnings in outcome 2, 4 and 4b.</p>	<p>Australian Taxation Office, Tax rates – Australian resident, last updated 18 June 2025</p>
7.b. Increased tax revenue through parents' immediate availability to work		
7c. Increased tax revenue for parents over their lifetime		
8a. Decreased mental health expenditure for children	<p>Average annual cost to government of providing mental health support services to a person experiencing poor mental health, considering:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the proportion of children who sought support for emotional or behavioural problems; and</li> <li>the proportion of women who sought mental health support from services (N.B. a more conservative estimate than the proportion who experienced poor mental health in the previous 12 months and sought help).</li> </ul>	<p>AIHW, Expenditure on mental health services, 24 February 2026</p> <p>AIHW, Prevalence and impact of mental illness, 20 May 2025</p> <p>ABS, National Study of Mental Health and Wellbeing 2020-2022, 5 October 2023</p> <p>The Kids Research Institute, Young minds matter: Service use, accessed November 2025</p>
8b. Decreased mental health expenditure for parents		
9. Decreased physical health expenditure for children	<p>Average annual cost to government of a young person accessing health services, in consideration of the estimated rate of overweight and obesity in the identified priority groups.</p>	<p>Centre for International Economics for NSW Office of Sport, Economic evaluation of the Active Kids program, 5 July 2022</p> <p>UNSW, Fit kids have better mental and physical health, 4 November 2024</p> <p>AIHW, Overweight and obesity among Australian children and adolescents, 13 August 2020</p>



PHOTOGRAPHY: ©UNICEF Australia/2024/Moran.

# END NOTES

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- <sup>ii</sup> UNICEF Australia, [Certify Hope: Achieving Rights from the Start](#), 2024. For the definition of areas of socio-economic disadvantage, see: Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), [Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas](#), last updated 27 July 2023.
- <sup>iii</sup> Northern Territory Government, [Births, Deaths and Marriages Office fees](#), accessed 9 March 2026; ACT Government, [Births, relationships and deaths – related forms and fees](#), accessed 9 March 2026.
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- <sup>v</sup> See e.g. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, [Rural and remote health](#), last updated 20 Nov 2025; SNAICC, [AEDC data shows nearly half of Australian children are not meeting key developmental milestones](#), 2025; UNICEF Australia and ARACY, [State of Australia's Children 2025 Report](#), November 2025.
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- <sup>xi</sup> See e.g. Daigneault P M, 'Administrative burden revisited: Advancing research and practice', *Canadian Public Administration* 68(1), March 2025, pp.159-172; Bearson DF and Sustein CR, 'Take Up,' *Behavioural Public Policy* 9(4), 4 October 2023, pp.849-864.
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