

Child Social Exclusion in Fairfield

Allowing children to belong



Valancy Hicking

Principal Researcher
vhicking@uniting.org

Tom McClean

Head of Research and Social Policy
tmclean@uniting.org

We would like to thank Uniting NSW.ACT staff who participated in consultations and made other contributions as part of the preparation of this discussion paper.

PO Box 7137
Silverwater NSW 2128

uniting.org

This paper provides a case study of child social exclusion in Fairfield, a community in Western Sydney. It is intended to be read alongside *Child Social Exclusion Index: Nurturing Inclusion*, a national report produced in partnership between UnitingCare Australia and the University of Canberra. That report provides data on how child social exclusion is evolving over time and distributed across communities at the national level.

Uniting NSW.ACT is the social service and advocacy arm of the Synod of the Uniting Church in NSW and the ACT. We provide services to support disadvantaged people at all stages of life, from early learning and services for vulnerable and at-risk children, young people, and families, through to various kinds of aged care, and support for people with disability.

This paper illustrates how the issues raised by the national report play out on the ground, in a real-world community that experiences persistent and high levels of child social exclusion and child poverty: Fairfield.

We have chosen Fairfield as a case study because it shows how the system itself can contribute to child social exclusion, even in a vibrant, urban community. Understanding these systemic contributors is vital if we as a society are to support local communities and the children living in them. Without this, we risk solving the wrong problem, or worse: blaming communities for problems they have not created.

The main driver of child social exclusion in Fairfield is a persistent misalignment between large service systems, and the specific needs of a local community with a very high migrant population. Access to early learning, education and employment are closely tied to the right to subsidies and income support payments. Many people in the community are not able to access these payments or support because of their visa status, and the local service system is underfunded to meet the resulting need. Barriers are not only financial, but cultural and language based, with many people requiring additional support to be able to engage and navigate with the service system.

Services in Fairfield find ways to support and build on each other's activities. Word of mouth is vital as families come together and share what was useful for them and their children. Opportunities for parents and children from all walks and cultures to come together, get to know each other and learn how they can support their children are vital in building a stronger community.

The experience of Fairfield clearly shows the importance of understanding local community conditions. Without this, policy decisions risk perpetuating exclusion. In particular, government responses are often siloed, and many problems arise from poor coordination between different policy domains.

We share this paper as a supporter of the Child Social Exclusion Index, and as one of the non-government organisations working in Fairfield.

Child Social Exclusion (CSE) is a multi-dimensional measure of child disadvantage.

It extends the concept of child poverty by focusing on more than money, and measuring the extent to which children have or lack the opportunities and resources to participate fully in their communities.

The Child Social Exclusion Index is an area-based indicator of the risk of social exclusion for Australian children. It measures six domains: socio-economic, education, connectedness, housing, health and community, and environment.

Child Social Exclusion in NSW

NSW has a disproportionate share of children living in social exclusion.

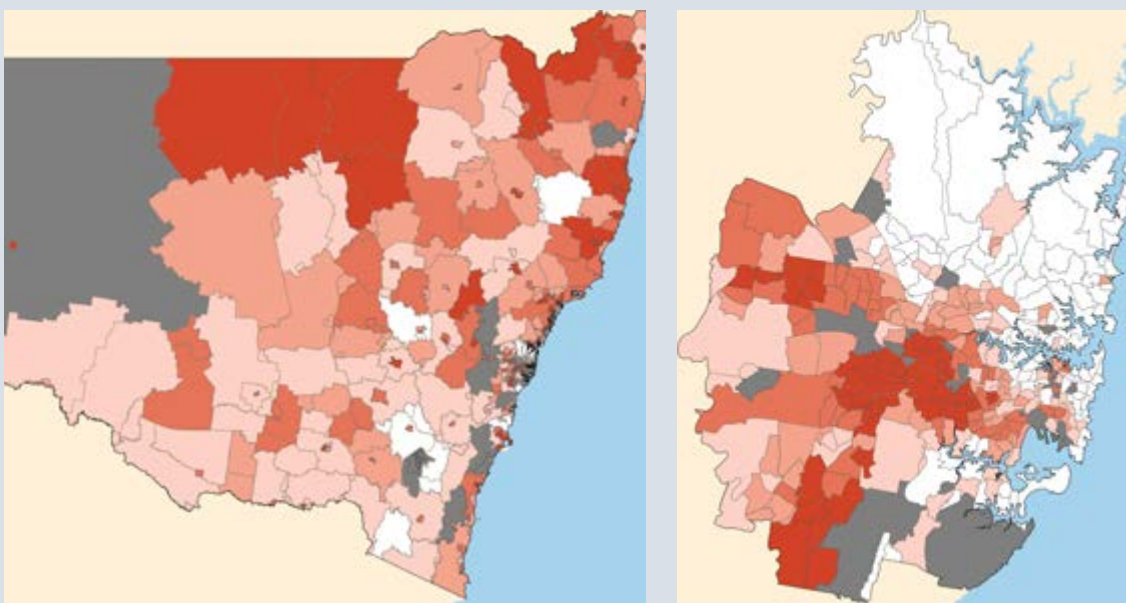
23% of communities ranked at the highest level of exclusion, and a further 21.6% at the second highest level of exclusion. Both should be 20% if NSW had a proportionate share.

This exclusion is concentrated in particular communities.

Of the ten most social excluded areas in NSW, half are in metropolitan Sydney, mostly in a corridor running from Western Sydney down through South Western Sydney, and half are in regional NSW.

The 2024 report, entitled *Nurturing Inclusion*¹, updates the index based on data from the 2021 Census and other sources. It reports results for Australian Bureau of Statistics Statistical Area Level 2 (SA2s). It describes changes over time (2016 and 2021) and examines the spatial distribution of child poverty in 2021. The Index is reported in quintiles: five groups with equal numbers of SA2s, corresponding to very low, low, medium, high and very high levels of relative child social exclusion.

Figure 1 - Child Social Exclusion in NSW and metropolitan Sydney, 2021

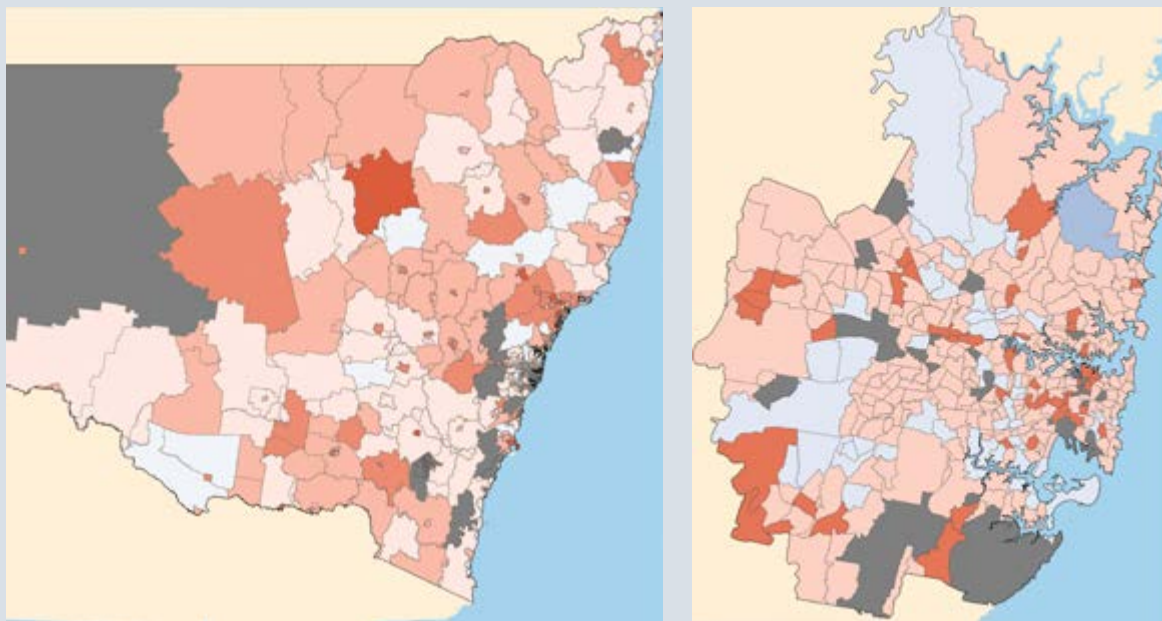


Key: ■ Most child social exclusion ■ Least child social exclusion ■ No data

1 Miranti et al., 2024

In most communities where child social exclusion is very high, child poverty is also high. However, there are some communities where poverty is high even though exclusion is low. These are rare, and in NSW most are in metropolitan Sydney. There are also some communities where child social exclusion is high even though child poverty is low. These are somewhat more common, and are mostly urban centres in regional NSW. There are also a few areas in metropolitan Sydney with very high child social exclusion without poverty.

Figure 2 - Child Social Exclusion v. Child Poverty in NSW and metropolitan Sydney, 2021



Key: ■ Exclusion > poverty ■ Exclusion = poverty ■ Poverty > exclusion ■ No data

Child social exclusion in NSW has not changed much over time.

Just under two thirds of areas remained in the same quintile between 2016 and 2021. Of the few that did change, most only moved up or down by one quintile. Very few changed by two or more quintiles, and of those that did more locations saw a decline than an increase in child social exclusion.

The Fairfield Local Government Area (LGA) is a dynamic multicultural hub in South West Sydney. It displayed high levels of both child social exclusion and child poverty in the 2021 Child Social Exclusion Index.

This was consistent over time: both were also high in the 2016 index. These high and persistent rates of child social exclusion and poverty are linked to high levels of socio-economic disadvantage in the community as a whole.

Systemic factors that contribute to exclusion

Government systems contribute to child social exclusion.

Fairfield is distinctive because child social exclusion arises out of the way government systems shape and respond to the unique needs of its multicultural population.

Many refugees, asylum seekers and migrants are proud to call Fairfield their first Australian home. Most new arrivals go on to lead flourishing lives, but the first few years can often be very challenging and when unsupported, can lead to a life of vulnerability and exclusion. It takes time to settle, to learn how things work, make friends, find jobs and schools, and in many cases to learn English.

Australia's immigration system contributes to these challenges.

Many Fairfield residents are on temporary visas which exclude them from accessing important services.² On average, the asylum-seeking process takes 793 days, and only 34% of cases are processed within a year.³ Many people wait for years on a bridging version of the original visa they arrived on. If this is a tourist or student visa, then they are required to comply with limitations around work and access to basic services, including housing, health, Centrelink, and early learning subsidies. These restrictions remain in place even when children are born into the family as Australian citizens.

The complexity of accessing services also contributes to child social exclusion.

Even without visa restrictions, the systems are fragmented and sometimes align poorly with circumstances on the ground. Making it difficult for families to navigate and do simple things like;

- Find an early learning centre which is right for their child
- Learn what financial supports they are entitled to and how to access them
- Apply for a plan under the NDIS.

Some of the consequences of this can be seen in Table 1 on page 5. Rates of participation in education and work are lower, as are incomes, while rates of housing stress and homelessness are higher.

² Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021

³ Refugee Council of Australia, 2024

Table 1 - Components of Child Social Exclusion, Fairfield and NSW, 2021

	Fairfield LGA	NSW
Demographics		
Population	208,475	
Families	53,132	
First Nations people	0.7%	
Aged 0-14 years	17.7%	
Housing		
Rental housing stress	48.5%	35.5%
Mortgage housing stress	25.4%	17.3%
Per 10,000 people were homeless	75.1	43.4
Homeless people <19 years	32.6%	21.4%
Health		
Out of 100 children have asthma (0-14 years)	5.4	6.6
Out of 100 children have mental health concerns (0-14 years)	0.8	1.9
Out of 100 have severe core limitations (0-14 years)	5.0	..
GPs per 100,000 population	100.5	122.6
Dentists per 100,000 population	61.2	66.1
Connectedness		
Did volunteer work	5.4%	13.0%
Did not have a vehicle	10.4%	9.0%
Speaks a language other than English at home	79.4%	29.5%
Do not speak English well or at all	22.9%	4.5%
Community and environment		
Parks and sports fields	32	..
District or regional parks	6	..
Leisure centres	5	..
Libraries or cultural centres	6	..
Community centres	19	..
Education		
Completed year 12 (>15 years)	53.3%	66.6%
Children are developmentally vulnerable	28.7%	21.2%
4 to 5-year-olds attend preschool	11.4%	13.4%
Schools	25	..
Early learning services	89	..
Socioeconomic status		
Bottom income quintile	32.5%	24.4%
Both parents are in work	18.9%	44.6%
SA2s experience extreme child poverty rates	12/13	..

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021b, 2021a; Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority, 2024; Australian Early Development Census, 2021; *Fairfield City: Community Profile, 2023*; *Fairfield City: Services, 2023*; *Housing and Homelessness Dashboard – Homelessness NSW, 2023*; *Public Health Information Development Unit (PHIDU), 2024*.

Local services work together with scarce resources.

Fairfield has a diverse local service system which has evolved in response to these needs, but it is stretched. A recent NCOSS report *Beyond Roads and Bridges* (2023)⁴ highlights that the whole South West Sydney region lacks critical social infrastructure to meet the needs of current residents and that this gap will increase as the populations grows in the next decade. NCOSS projected that the spending increase required to address unmet needs in 2024 would be \$77 million for the region.



So how does a stretched service system respond when **23% of people self-report that they do not speak English well or at all, 52% of people struggle to enter the labour force, and many are excluded from universal funding or supports?**

The answer, in part, is through community and relationships that are built in culturally responsive ways: the ability of services to provide linking points and walk alongside families to overcome practical and cultural barriers that inhibit their ability to engage in the community.

Cultural appropriateness and sensitivity are central to providing effective support in a community with a highly culturally and linguistically diverse population. Ideally, this would start with developing programs in partnership with the community, or at minimum, selecting and adapting the right programs. This is more difficult than it needs to be, because government commissioning processes favour evidence-based service models. These are usually developed outside the communities where they are used, and because they are designed to be used in many places often have a very generic (or even, frankly, a Western lens). There is limited support available for the work required to adapt to local conditions.

It's also partly a matter of who provides the service. Employees who share a cultural background, language or cultural understanding with groups in the community are often better placed to build rapport, trust and engagement. Employees like this can be hard to find, because there is a workforce shortage across the care sector, and the pool is often even smaller when trying to recruit from recently-arrived migrant communities.

Working together is also critical. Local services recognise this, and at the centre of their response is the Fairfield Child and Family Interagency. This is run through Fairfield City Council, with funding from the NSW Government's Targeted Early Intervention program. It supports collective projects across South West Sydney, promotes sharing of knowledge within the sector, and connection and collaboration between partners. Taking a 'we all have a part to play' approach, the interagency aims to wrap services around the family, by supporting the identification and pooling of resources to respond to needs. This may be through specific requests to meet individual needs or establishing working groups to tackle more complex or ongoing needs. Examples include supporting schools to better understand the service system, raising awareness of early childhood development needs with GPs, improving literacy and reading, and supporting local playgroup initiatives.

As a local service provider, we are proud to play our part in this collaborative, culturally-responsive network. We offer some examples ahead, that we happen to know well because we are involved in them, of the work many contribute to across Fairfield every day.

⁴ Jackson & Ruting, 2023

Playgroups are a great foundation for culturally-responsive, locally-adapted work that engages with and supports community.

Playgroups are informal spaces where families with young children can drop in to play and to socialise. They're a great place for children and parents alike to make friends, build support networks, and find a sense of belonging.



They are easy and non-stigmatising for the community itself to provide access to the services families need.



Community networks are key: having someone who can bring you along and support you through the fear that has stopped you from engaging. This might be a neighbour or a service worker.



Word of mouth is an essential first step to engagement with others, sharing a positive experience of a program with those around them.



Services that celebrate the roles of parents and provide opportunities for both parents and children to build connection and belong are important and offer a space where families and cultures can be celebrated.

Fairfield/Liverpool Playgroup Forum

Local services recognise how valuable they can be. The Fairfield Liverpool Playgroup Forum is run by the Fairfield and Liverpool interagency and a number of NGOs to provide professional development opportunities for playgroup facilitators across the region, with the goal of upskilling all local community members and professionals that run playgroups. The forums seek to equip participants with the knowledge of how important the early years are, as well as develop their skills set to provide educational activities.

HIPPY

Home Interaction Program for the Parents of Youngsters (HIPPY) is an example of how a local service has adapted to better support the needs of families and children who have varying language needs.

HIPPY is an evidence-based program providing in-home tutoring to improve parents' capacity to interact and support the learning and development of their preschool-aged children. The trained HIPPY tutors are past participants who receive ongoing professional development and who bring their lived experience to the role.

Fairfield HIPPY also brings multicultural parents and families together outside of their homes, helping them to forge connections in their communities and practise their English - through playgroups, language classes, and local events.

Participants also become part of a parent support group for others in the same stage of the program, leading to friendships and strong social ties.

HIPPY

Home
Interaction
Program for the
Parents of
Youngsters

Men and Their Book Worms

Uniting, in partnership with Fairfield City Library, runs a story time for dads, grandfathers and other male caregivers who have children under five. Designed to be a culturally safe space, the library provides a trusted community environment. The project seeks to build connections, relationships, and literacy skills of male carers. Enabling a space to connect and make friends with other caregivers provides a chance to engage with others in the community beyond immediate social groups while learning and supporting literacy development in children. It has proven to be a stepping stone to enable male carers to become aware of other services and supports that are available for them and their families in the community.

Raymond believes that from attending the library story time his four-year-old daughter has had a smoother transition into a local preschool.

*Name has been changed

Raymond's story

Raymond* is a local father, who we know through our work in the community. We tell his story here, with permission, because it illustrates how all these things work together to support families and help them to thrive.

Raymond and two of his children regularly attend the Men and Their Book Worms story time. Raymond migrated to Australia in his early twenties from Eastern Europe. He met his wife here, and together they live locally with their three children and Raymond's mother. He heard about Men and Their Book Worms story time while chatting with other families at a local park last year. Raymond, who is also studying at TAFE, uses reading English children's books as a way of connecting with his children while also improving his own English-speaking skills. The opportunity to attend the story time appealed to him as something he could do with his children.

Both Raymond and the children enjoy coming to Men and their Book Worms story time. Raymond reflects that he has seen his children seek to play and read more, in response to this. He believes reading is an important life skill and is an essential practice for all aspects of life. Since coming to Men and Their Book Worms, Raymond has participated in other activities for fathers. He also attends 'Dad and Me' - a supported playgroup for fathers caring for children under five. He states that he enjoys seeing the children socialise and he gets a break from having to entertain them. Raymond believes that from attending the library story time his four-year-old daughter has had a smoother transition into a local preschool. She has been more confident in the early learning environment because she has had opportunities to play, learn and grow with her peers.

Raymond grew up in a rural area in his country of origin and, at times, felt isolated from his peers. Due to this experience, he has made a conscious effort for his own children to become part of community activities and play experiences. This has developed a sense of belonging and created meaningful relationships. He reflects that Fairfield has many wonderful opportunities for children and parents to connect, build friendships, and enhance a healthy lifestyle.

Raymond is hopeful for the future and is committed to continuing to engage and seek activities that support his children's development as well as his own. Raymond's aspirations for his family are to be healthy and happy, and he believes parents in the area have access to many opportunities and activities which support this outcome. Raymond mentioned that parks, pools, the library, and playgroups are some of the many ways children and families can engage in the community. When Raymond reflects on his current life in Australia, it's evident that he loves his children and family, and holds great hopes for their future here.

How might we, as local services working with the community, create lasting change for the children of Fairfield? How might we build on our strengths as a coalition of services and community groups who already work together, to address the structural conditions that hold the problem of child social exclusion in place?

Based on our experience in doing this kind work across many communities, including Fairfield we offer the following possibilities for discussion.

How might we link families in the margins with services? The system is complex and fragmented. Many parents do not know what is available. Many also struggle to navigate complex systems and find entitlements. Long wait times and complex bureaucracy, and a range of personal fears, need to be overcome. We have found that linkers and navigators can help. How might they work in Fairfield?

How might we support even better coordination between services? The service system in Fairfield is large and complex, and currently relies on local workers to coordinate. How might we do this more efficiently and reliably?

How might services link with community? For the service system to respond adequately to the needs of individual families, it must be supported by a strong community. Natural social networks, and spaces where people gather voluntarily, are vital for health and wellbeing and can also be important opportunities to identify needs and make referrals.

How might we shift discourse to quality early learning because it benefits children? Current policy is geared around supporting parents to re-enter work rather than investing in the value that it has in child development in the first 5 years of life. As a result, support payments and eligibility criteria are poorly aligned with the needs and experiences of the most vulnerable families. In addition, some children do not attend childcare because their parents, understandably, do not see the need. Unfortunately, this means those children start school behind their peers.

How might we remove policy barriers to accessing essential services? Families need early learning, education, and healthcare - regardless of visa status. When they are not able to access these supports it increases the risk that any developmental issues or wellbeing concerns they may have become serious problems requiring acute interventions. It is both unjust and a false economy for us as a society to deny access to universal supports and early intervention services in this way.

This Page Is Intentionally Left Blank

References

- Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2021a). *2021 New South Wales, Census All persons QuickStats*. <https://www.abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/quickstats/2021/1>
- Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2021b). *Fairfield 2021 Census All person QuickStats*. Australian Bureau of Statistics. <https://www.abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/quickstats/2021/LGA12850>
- Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority. (2024). *Early Childhood Education & Care*. <https://www.startingblocks.gov.au/>
- Australian Early Development Census. (2021). *AEDC Data Explorer*. Australian Early Development Census, Department of Education. <https://www.aedc.gov.au/data-explorer/>
- Fairfield City: Community profile*. (2023). [2023]. <https://profile.id.com.au/fairfield/>
- Fairfield City: Services*. (2023). <https://www.fairfieldcity.nsw.gov.au/Services>
- Housing and Homelessness Dashboard – Homelessness NSW*. (2023). <https://homelessnessnsw.org.au/data/housing-and-homelessness-dashboard/>
- Jackson, A., & Ruting, B. (2023). *Beyond roads and bridges: Critical social infrastructure for South West Sydney*. NSW Council of Social Services.
- Public Health Information Development Unit (PHIDU). (2024). *Social Health Atlas of Australia: Local Government Areas (online)*. Public Health Information Development Unit (PHIDU), Torrens University Australia. <https://phidu.torrens.edu.au/social-health-atlases/maps>
- Refugee Council of Australia. (2024). *Statistics on people seeking asylum in the country*. Refugee Council of Australia. <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/asylum-community/5/>

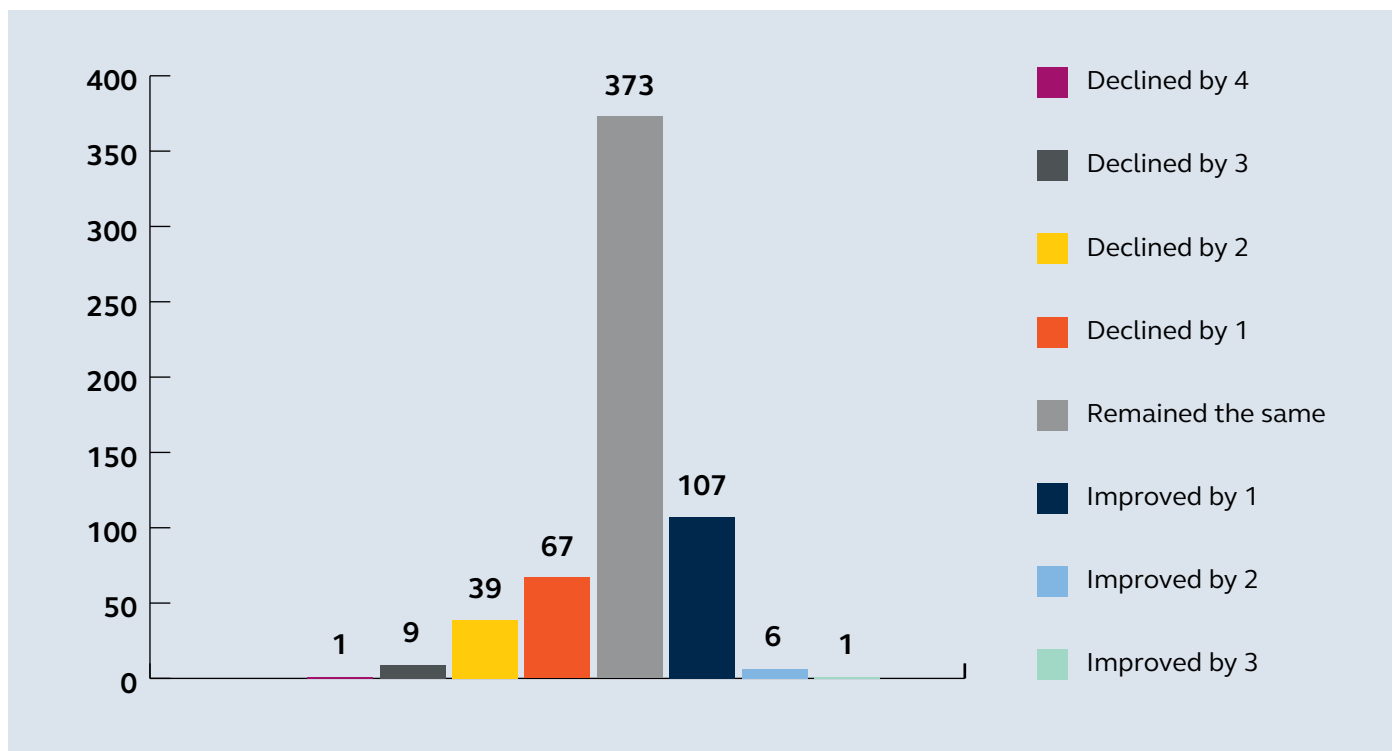
Table 3: Comparison of Child Poverty and Child Social Exclusion (CSE) in NSW

CSE Column, Child Poverty Row	Least excluded 20%	Quintile 2	Quintile 3	Quintile 4	Most excluded 20%
Least excluded 20%	17.4%	8.6%	3.0%	1.5%	0.2%
Quintile 2	2.8%	7.5%	5.1%	5.1%	1.2%
Quintile 3	0.2%	2.3%	6.6%	7.0%	3.7%
Quintile 4	-	0.2%	3.0%	7.5%	6.0%
Most excluded 20%	-	-	-	1.5%	9.6%

Table 4: Child Social Exclusion scores between 2016 and 2021

Row CSE 2016, Column CSE 2021	Least excluded 20%	Quintile 2	Quintile 3	Quintile 4	Most excluded 20%
Least excluded 20%	15%	2%	1%	0.5%	0.2%
Quintile 2	4%	9%	4%	4%	1%
Quintile 3	0.2%	6%	9%	3%	1%
Quintile 4	0.2%	1%	5%	13%	2%
Most excluded 20%	-	-	-	3%	16%

Figure 3: Differences in SA2 quintile scores between 2016 and 2021 in NSW (number of SA2)



About Uniting

Uniting NSW.ACT contributes to the work of the Uniting Church in NSW and the ACT, through social justice advocacy, community services and spiritual care.

We provide services for people through all ages and stages of life, and drive solutions to systemic issues so people experiencing disadvantage can live their best lives.

Our purpose is to inspire people, enliven communities and confront injustice.

We value diversity and always welcome everyone exactly as they are.

Uniting