

PRESS RELEASE: Child Poverty Action Group (NZ)  
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## **Poor showing in child health figures due to deprivation, say advocates**

Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) today called for the government to address rising inequality after a UNICEF report revealed the dire state of New Zealand children's health. The UNICEF report, released tonight, ranks New Zealand children second to last among developed countries in its health and safety figures.

CPAG health spokesperson Dr Nikki Turner says that there is a very well-established link between high levels of inequality and poor child health, and New Zealand has seen ongoing increases in both. The health consequences of exposure to poverty in childhood include infectious diseases such as meningococcal b, respiratory diseases, serious skin diseases and obesity. A child born into a low-income household also has a much higher risk of dying than a child from a wealthy household.

The UNICEF report says that higher government spending on family and social benefits is clearly associated with lower child poverty rates. It describes the stark contrast between the experiences of the poor and those around them as the "cutting edge" of poverty. CPAG agrees, saying that poverty cuts deep in a rich country like New Zealand.

Dr Turner tells the story of 'Lily', who is 8 months old and has been admitted to hospital with pneumonia. Lily is the second child of a 19-year-old solo mum from an abusive background. Lily's father is violent and she has moved three times since birth. She currently lives with her aunt and fifteen others in a damp, cold house.

Forcing Lily's mother out to work at a local burger joint would not necessarily help her child, argues Dr Turner. "For our poorest families life is complex and precarious. You have to be very careful about what you add into the mix, otherwise everything can collapse around your ears. Yet our social support system is increasingly inflexible when it comes to making sure people have the income stream they need to support their children responsibly. This is only adding to the pressure on everyone – including the physical and mental health of parents and children alike."

Dr Turner says CPAG research shows that current government policy is helping a lot for many low income families. Overall there has been significant improvement on the 1990s, when a lot of policy damage was done, but minimum incomes still need urgent government attention. "It is the children in the very lowest income brackets that we are seeing with the greatest need in terms of both health and education."

"The business sector has a terrible track record when it comes to raising our lowest incomes to keep pace with economic growth. It's time all of us took responsibility, via the tax and benefit system, for making sure we look after children growing up at the bottom of the social scale," Dr Turner urges.

Child Poverty Action Group is looking forward to an extra \$10 Family Support per week coming in for children this April, as the last part of Working for Families, but says it will be nowhere near enough to help those who need it most out of poverty.

[www.cpag.org.nz](http://www.cpag.org.nz)