

Review of Australia's Implementation of Obligations under the ICESCR Treaty

Submission to the United Nations Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights Committee

13 January 2026

1. About ACOSS

ACOSS is a national body for the community services sector, and a national voice for the needs of people affected by poverty and inequality. Our vision is for a fair, inclusive and sustainable Australia, where all individuals and communities can participate in and benefit from social and economic life.

ACOSS consists of a network of approximately 4000 organisations and individuals across Australia in metro, regional and remote areas.

ACOSS leads and supports initiatives within the community services sector, and acts as an independent non-party political voice.

By drawing on the direct experiences of people affected by poverty and inequality and the expertise of its diverse member base, ACOSS develops and promotes socially and economically responsible public policy and action by government, community and business.

2. About this submission

This submission responds to some of the issues listed for Australia to respond to concerning economic, social and cultural rights.

- 1. Australia does not have an official national defined poverty definition or measure**
2. Australia does not have a defined national poverty measure, despite being a signatory to the UN's Sustainable Development Goals which includes a commitment to halve poverty by 2030 according to national definitions. This puts Australia out of step with 156 other countries that officially measure poverty.
3. We recommend that Australia adopt both a monetary poverty measure and a multidimensional poverty measure to capture the broad experience of poverty, including across healthcare, education and other areas of people's lives. The monetary measure should be established without delay.

4. Recommendation:

The Australian Government legislate official poverty measures, both a monetary measure and a multidimensional measure, which should be publicly reported on each year. The monetary measure should be established immediately.

5. Poverty has increased in Australia

6. ACOSS and the University of NSW continue to track monetary poverty in Australia. In our latest [Poverty and Inequality in Australia Report](#) we find that poverty has increased since 2020, with one in seven people now living in poverty, including one in six children.
7. The number of people living in poverty rose from 12.4% in 2020-2021 to 14.2% 2022-2023.
8. The poverty line is \$584 a week for a single adult and \$1,226 a week for a couple with two children, based on 50% of the median household after-tax income.
9. By contrast, key social security payments like JobSeeker Payment and Youth Allowance fall well below the poverty line, with most people receiving these payments reporting no other earnings.
10. The biggest risk to living in poverty in Australia is to receive a social security payment like unemployment, student or parenting payments because these payments fall below the poverty line and fail to provide a suitable standard of living. People receiving JobSeeker are 14 times more

likely to go without a substantial meal a day and report high rates of anxiety and mental distress. In the ten years to 2021, 6,000 people receiving JobSeeker committed suicide, the highest number of any group receiving social security and about three times the rate of suicide in the broader population.¹

11. Unemployment and student payments are also falling behind other incomes in the community including wages and pensions because they are indexed in line with inflation only. This means that people receiving these payments do not benefit from growth and improvements in community living standards.

12. Recommendation:

The Australian Government immediately increase social security payments for people unemployed, studying, caring, and people with disability to improve adequacy and reduce poverty. We call on the Australian Government to increase JobSeeker Payment, Youth Allowance, Parenting Payment and related supports to at least \$589 per week (single rate) and index these payments to wages as well as prices.

13. Social security reform to support First Nations communities

14. Remote Area Allowance

15. First Nations people residing in remote areas experience extreme rates of poverty, with latest data showing that poverty rates are as high as 57.1% in very remote areas.²

16. The Remote Area Allowance received by approximately 90,000 people has not increased at all since 2000, which has seen its purchasing power drop substantially. Living costs in remote areas are up to 40% higher than in capital cities and Remote Area Allowance fails to reflect these costs.

17. In addition to lifting base rates of social security payments as recommended above, [ACOSS calls on the government to substantially increase the Remote Area Allowance](#), a supplementary social security payment supporting mostly First Nations people in remote areas.

18. Recommendation:

Substantially increase Remote Area Allowance and benchmark the payment to remote community living costs to further improve adequacy.

¹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2025) <https://www.aihw.gov.au/suicide-self-harm-monitoring/population-groups/socioeconomically-disadvantaged/income-support-recipients>

² As at 2021. Dr Francis Markham (2023) 'Submission to the Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs' Inquiry into the extent and nature of poverty in Australia', 31 October, <https://www.aph.gov.au/DocumentStore.ashx?id=9cff3504-f70f-42a7-b379a5fda9f7b2dc&subId=750035>

19. Compulsory income management

20. The Australian Government continues compulsory income management under Part 3AA of the Social Security (Administration) Act 1999.³ This is despite the government abolishing the cashless debit card in 2022 and committing to abolish all forms of income quarantining in the same year.
21. Compulsory income management continues to apply in a blanket fashion in the Northern Territory and a select group of regions, largely affecting people who are long-term unemployed. First Nations people continue to be vastly overrepresented among the 32,500 people subject to compulsory income management, comprising 82% of people affected.
22. In 2024, the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights called for the abolition of compulsory income management, recommending it be made voluntary. We urge the Federal Government to heed this recommendation and put in place measures to support people in the transition.

23. Recommendation:

The Australian Government abolish compulsory income management and invest savings into community-led programs to support First Nations communities.

24. Supporting people with disability

25. People with disability who are unable to engage in sufficient paid work need improved access to the Disability Support Pension. Eligibility settings for the Disability Support Pension often prevent people with disability from qualifying for the payment. They then end up on the lower-paid unemployment payment, which is set at a rate well below the poverty line.
26. Almost half of people receiving unemployment payments have a disability or chronic illness that prevents them from working full time (42%).⁴
27. We note that reforms to the eligibility criteria for the Disability Support Pension in 2023 appear to be having a positive effect in reducing the number of denied claims for the payment. This is most welcome. The government should build on this work and further reform eligibility criteria to reduce the incidence of people with disability receiving unemployment payments.

³ Social Security (Administration) Act 1999 https://classic.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/cth/consol_act/ssa1999338/

⁴ Department of Social Services (2025) 'DSS Benefit and Payment Recipient Demographics - quarterly data' September 2025

28. Recommendation:

Amend the qualification requirements for the Disability Support Pension to ensure that people with disability gain access to the payment where they are unable to engage in sufficient paid work. For further detailed recommendations, [please see our submission to the inquiry into the Purpose, intent and adequacy of the Disability Support Pension](#).

29. Social Security and Other Legislation Amendment (Technical Changes No. 2) Bill 2025

30. The Australian Government delivered some positive legislative reform at the end of 2025 to improve access to debt waiver for people on low incomes and people experiencing family and domestic violence in the Social Security and Other Legislation Amendment (Technical Changes No. 2) Act 2025. ACOSS welcomed these reforms as important in supporting people on low incomes and helping stop people use the social security system to perpetrate domestic violence.

31. However, when the legislation was still before the parliament, at the 11th hour, the government included a schedule (Schedule 5) that would remove someone's right to social security where there is a warrant out for their arrest for a serious crime (a Benefit Restriction Notice). [ACOSS and many other stakeholders strongly opposed this schedule](#) because it removes the presumption of innocence and seeks to use social security as a policing tool. The bill passed with this new power at the end of November 2025.

32. The legislation was updated to include this schedule *after* the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights had scrutinised the bill. The Joint Committee expressed its concern about this power being passed without its review. It stated that "the work of this committee in scrutinising legislation for compatibility with human rights is undermined when the legislation passes before the committee has completed its scrutiny, as is the case in relation to this bill."⁵ In its report yet to be responded to by government, the committee raised concerns about Schedule 5 limiting the right to social security without remedy. It also flagged that cancelling someone's social security payment could be considered criminal punishment, and if so, 'criminal process rights should be afforded'.⁶

33. Recommendation:

We call on the government to reverse the decision to implement Benefit Restriction Notices. This is to ensure that social security is not used as a

⁵ PJCHR (2025) Minor comment Report 8 of 2025

https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/Human_Rights/Bill_assessments/assessments/r7370

⁶ Ibid.

policing tool and that people are afforded the presumption of innocence before being convicted of a crime.

34. Inequality persists

35. [Our latest report with UNSW Sydney on inequality in Australia](#) shows that in 2019, the highest 10% of households ranked by income had an average after-tax income of over two-and-a-half times the income of the middle 20% and seven times that of the lowest 20%.
36. In terms of wealth inequality, the highest 10% of households possess 44% of all wealth in Australia, averaging \$5.2m AUD per household.
37. In recent years, lower unemployment has reduced income inequality, which is welcome. The gender wage gap also fell from 30% in May 2021 to 27.5% in May 2023 (average weekly cash earnings), the fastest rate of decline in a two-year period over the last decade.
38. However, wealth inequality rose in the 20 years to 2022. The share of wealth accruing to the highest 10% grew from 42% to 44% while that of the lowest 60% declined from 20% to 18%.
39. Measures to reduce inequality are recommended elsewhere in this submission, including reducing tax concessions for wealthy investors, lifting rates of social security as well as committing to full employment targets.

40. Australia is a relatively low taxing country and public revenue is undermined by tax concessions

41. Australia is the ninth lowest taxing country among 40 OECD nations.
42. Public revenue could be increased by reducing tax concessions that overwhelmingly benefit people on higher incomes and who have high wealth. These tax concessions benefit property investors and people with substantial retirement savings in Australia's superannuation system.
43. ACOSS welcomes the government's policy of reducing tax concessions for superannuation accounts of \$3 million or more.
44. However, we urge the government to go further to reduce these tax concessions, as well as curb those for property.

45. Property tax concessions including the Capital Gains Tax discount and negative gearing exacerbate housing insecurity and volatility in Australia, increasing house prices.
46. To reduce inequality and improve public revenue, ACOSS calls for the curbing of these tax concessions in superannuation, the Capital Gains Tax Discount and negative gearing, which currently cost the government \$81 billion a year in foregone revenue (as at 2022/23).

47. Recommendation:

To reduce inequality and improve public revenue, ACOSS calls for curbing of tax concessions, the detail of which is outlined in our [Unfair, costly tax breaks need reform briefing note](#).

48. Supporting people into employment

49. Australia's employment services system needs reform. The Australian Government is yet to fully implement the reforms recommended by the Hill inquiry that seek to improve employment services. Consequently, people who are unemployed continue to be subjected to an employment services system that is more focused on compliance than supporting positive outcomes for people in the labour market.
50. The Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, which is responsible for employment services, currently fails to meet its targets for moving people into employment.
51. Our Faces of Unemployment Report reveals there are 550,000 people are stuck on unemployment payments for over a year. Unsurprisingly, people who are disadvantaged in the labour market are overrepresented among people who are long-term unemployed, including:
 - a. People with a disability (50%);
 - b. People aged 55 years or older (33%);
 - c. First Nations people (15%).⁷
52. To better support people who are long-term unemployed gain secure and suitable paid work, the Australian Government must invest in quality employment services.
53. The Federal Government must also commit to full employment targets.
54. ACOSS also urges the Australian Government to abolish its system of mutual obligation. The 'Targeted Compliance Framework' which penalises people for failing to meet conditions tied to receipt of unemployment

⁷ Stainsby, J & Davidson, P (2024), Faces of Unemployment 2024, ACOSS, Sydney. Available: <https://bit.ly/4ipzvjo>.

payments, suspends people's payments at extraordinary rates, causing extensive harm and distress. It has also been repeatedly unlawfully administered, resulting in thousands of people losing their social security payments when they should not have.⁸

55. **Recommendation:**

Reform and invest in employment services ([for detail on reforms, please see this briefing note](#) on Workforce Australia Reforms), set a full-employment target and abolish mutual obligations.

56. **Affordable and climate resilient homes**

57. Housing is a fundamental right and necessity for all; however, it is currently out of reach for many in Australia. In our [Homes for Living, Not Wealth Creation Report](#), we show that home prices increased by 25% from September 2020 to February 2022 and in the four years to June 2024, rents rose by 39%.⁹
58. Rising house prices and lack of public investment in social housing has contributed to Australia's current 'housing crisis' and high levels of homelessness.¹⁰ From 1991 to 2023, social housing lettings declined from 52,000 to 32,000 and the share of social housing fell from 5.8% of all homes to 3.8%.¹¹
59. The Australian Government must substantially increase investment in social housing to support people on the lowest incomes to afford a roof over their head. This requires setting targets to boost social housing supply and boosting funding to meet these targets.

60. **Recommendation:**

Set and fund national social housing targets to increase social housing to at least 6% of homes over a decade and 10% of homes over two decades, calibrated to alleviate housing stress and homelessness.

⁸ AC OSS (2025) 'Legal issues in the Targeted Compliance Framework' Briefing Note <https://www.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/Briefing-Note-Legal-Issues-in-the-Targeted-Compliance-Framework.pdf>

⁹ AC OSS [acoss-housing-tax-policy-paper25-1.pdf](#) page 5.

¹⁰ Ibid., page 7.

¹¹ Ibid. p.30

61. Boost energy efficient homes

62. The Federal and state governments have made a good start investing in energy-efficiency, electric and solar upgrades of 25% of social housing dwellings.
63. This investment must be scaled up across all low-income housing to meet emissions reductions targets, build climate resilience and reduce disadvantage. First Nations housing must be prioritised.

64. **Recommendation:**

For the full suite of recommendations to upgrade low-income homes, see our 2026 Federal Budget submission.

Contact

Charmaine Crowe
Program Director, Social Security
charmaine@acoss.org.au | 02 9310 6208