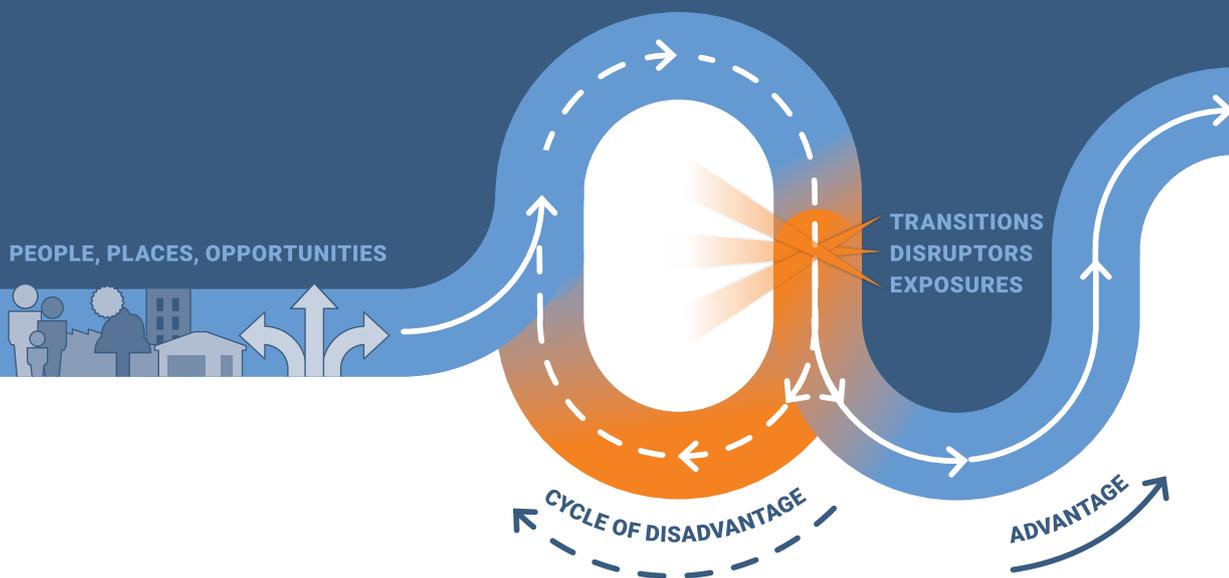


Who are we?

The ARC Centre of Excellence for Children and Families over the Life Course (Life Course Centre) was established in 2014 to tackle deep and persistent disadvantage in Australia. The life course approach entails looking at critical life points such as early childhood, schooling, employment, marriage, parenthood, divorce, or retirement, to identify those points at which life circumstances have the biggest and most lasting impact—positively and negatively. In 2019 we were awarded funding for an expanded Centre for another seven year period, starting in 2021.



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Australian Government
Australian Research Council

What is a Centre of Excellence?

Centres of Excellence are prestigious collaborative research enterprises funded to support outstanding research and develop international standing in research areas of national priority. The schemes objectives are to:

- undertake innovative and transformational research
- link existing research and build critical mass with new capacity
- work on large-scale problems over long periods of time
- build relationships and new networks nationally and internationally
- develop the next generation of research leaders—postgraduate and postdoctoral opportunities
- have impact on the wider community—governments, industry, private and non-profit sectors.

The Life Course Centre's aims and objectives

Up to 3 million Australians live below the poverty line, including nearly 750,000 children. It takes four generations, or more than 100 years, for Australian children who are born into low-income families to reach an average income, based on average parent to child mobility rates, and children born into families with a history of receiving income support are almost twice as likely as their more advantaged peers to need social assistance. Deep disadvantage persists across generations, resists simple solutions, and is experienced by individuals and families in a diversity of ways.

The Life Course Centre drives innovations in research and practice to respond to the multi-faceted and deeply personal transitions, disruptors, and exposures that characterise deep disadvantage as a wicked societal problem. Current solutions to disadvantage, even at the international leading edge, are based on methods of social intervention that average needs and responses across large population cohorts. Research from the Life Course Centre and its collaborators, however, has challenged the imprecision of using conventional population averages to measure and understand intergenerational disadvantage because it masks differential, and sometimes conflicting, trends within specific social groups and strata.

The Life Course Centre aims to deliver transformative research and translation to break the cycle of deep and persistent disadvantage for Australian children and families.

Our objectives support this vision:

Design personalised and community-based solutions, informed by life course theory and enabled through the diverse disciplines brought together in the new Centre.

Demonstrate international leadership in advanced research and social interventions to address disadvantage in ways that are truly responsive to individual need.

Build on the unprecedented systems and data access for the study of disadvantage made available through the inaugural Life Course Centre.

Extend developments in national policy-making through new collaborations that support evidence-informed action on the ground to address disadvantage. Build Australian capacity and capability through training in life course analytics and interventions for early career researchers, supported by leading international scholars and cross-sector external partnerships.

What we know

Disadvantage is not random

Disadvantage is dynamic

Disadvantage is multi-dimensional

Disadvantage is cumulative or correlated

Disadvantage varies across social groups

The playing field is not level for all Australian children and families.

Who is at risk?

People in single-parent families

People who are unemployed

People with disabilities

People with poor mental health

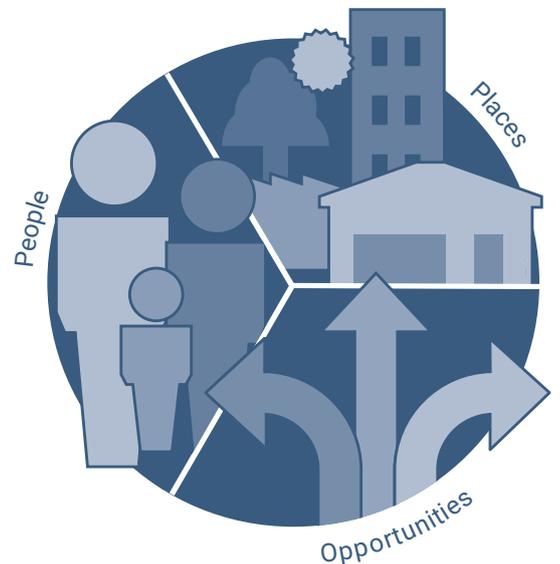
Indigenous Australians

Risks are elevated for children growing up in disadvantaged households.

Conceptual framework

Our decision to organise our new program of research into the three program areas of People, Places, and Opportunities responds to the elements that collectively constitute an individual's lived experience at any point in time. These elements contribute to persistent deep disadvantage and are also the core ingredients for improvement. At key life course transitions (e.g. parenthood, marriage), each are malleable to positive and negative disruptors (e.g. financial insecurity, job changes) and exposure to external elements beyond individual control (e.g. neighbourhoods, industry closures).

Through these interrelated programs of work, the Centre tackles a grand challenge in the study of deep and persistent disadvantage: how do we support children and families to exit disadvantage when their community contexts require highly situational responses and their life chances are subject to unequal opportunity structures?



People

Differences

Experiences

Choices

Places

Context

Environment

Circumstances

Opportunities

Employment

Education

Family

Research program 1

- 1.1 Cognitive Science of Disadvantage:** predicting how the duress of disadvantage affects individual decisions and drives predictable biases.
- 1.2 Financial Choices through the Life Course:** defining financial attitudes and behaviours that are associated with entering and exiting disadvantage.
- 1.3 Social Determinants of Sleep:** interpreting sleep and circadian function as an index of social disadvantage and a driver of inequality in cognitive processing.

People

Policy solutions that account for psychological and physiological functioning are best placed to make a difference for disadvantaged people. From 2021, we will expand our social science approach, studying the cognitive processing of individuals to determine how they apply their human capabilities in context and how their decision-making processes can be leveraged to ameliorate disadvantage. Contemporary neuroscience has identified that patterns of disadvantage affect neurocognitive pathways, producing distinct characteristics in the behaviours, reactions, and responses of people experiencing disadvantage that differ from others. We will exploit this emerging knowledge to investigate the decision-making of people in disadvantaged circumstances.

Research program 2

- 2.1 Community Readiness and Resistance:** determining the requisite place-based conditions to implement effective personalised approaches to disadvantage.
- 2.2 Suburb Support for Child and Family Development:** identifying the optimal environmental conditions to support development outcomes for vulnerable children and families.
- 2.3 Local Service Integration Experiences:** designing community-specific coordination strategies for responsive social support services in disadvantaged communities.

Places

Situational decision-making overrides the deliberative processes of individuals in many contexts, meaning that the community dynamics of disadvantage need to be deeply understood in order to advance the enabling conditions for social solutions to be effective. The spatial concentration of disadvantage has increased in Australia over the past two decades, with nine localities in three states classified as among the most disadvantaged areas in Australia since 1999. Government and non government agencies increasingly emphasise place-based approaches to address this concentrated inequality, yet find the entrenched and inherited nature of disadvantage in these complex communities resists solutions proven elsewhere.

We will focus on generating transformational knowledge about communities experiencing disadvantage, including defining when place-based approaches should be used to disrupt disadvantage, how they can best be applied, and what conditions are required to enable spatially targeted approaches to flourish. Effective place-based approaches have the potential to shift whole communities out of long-term disadvantage and change the institutional and community conditions that make place-based disadvantage so intractable.

Research program 3

- 3.1 Longitudinal Study of Life Opportunities:** the long-term outcomes and broad-based effects of innovative social interventions that are being funded by the Commonwealth Government, working in collaboration with the Life Course Centre's foundation partner, the Australian Government Department of Social Services.
- 3.2 Education Investments:** customised community-driven and personalised approaches to increase access to educational opportunities, targeting children and young people experiencing disadvantage.
- 3.3 Enduring Family Factors:** analyses of linked administrative data to uncover what works to improve life outcomes for women, men, and children in fragile families.

Opportunities

Public policy often focuses on individual risks and capabilities that are thought to produce poorer outcomes for families and children without interrogating the opportunity structures in which they develop and act. Conversely, wellbeing can be diminished and deep disadvantage is exacerbated if structural or behavioural barriers impede people's access to opportunities. Access to opportunity refers to the ability to exploit factors such as education and employment that provide pathways out of disadvantage; it also considers how personal, family, and community capabilities may be mismatched to the available opportunities or supports.

We will advance an analysis of structural access to opportunities, identifying and enhancing measures of structural access and examining changes in the opportunity structures in Australia that impact disadvantage in both adverse and positive ways. Our research will pinpoint the hurdles in existing opportunity structures, using longitudinal analysis and machine learning to identify structures and their features, to understand obstacles that hinder families and children from accessing seemingly available opportunities, and to inform solutions to address these bottlenecks.

Who can be a part of Life Course Centre?

At the Life Course Centre we are always looking to build capacity and strengthen our networks through our relationships with a diverse range of people and organisations. We welcome expressions of interest to become involved in the following ways:

Centre Members

Centre members are the named investigators, paid and in-kind Research Fellows, and eligible students at the four participating organisations.

- Chief Investigators at the University of Queensland, University of Melbourne, University of Sydney and the University of Western Australia
- Partner Investigators at overseas universities.
- Associate Investigators at overseas and Australian universities.

If your salary is paid fully or partially from Centre funds, or if you are part of a project receiving support from the Centre, then you are a Centre member. You get access to Centre support services in a wide range of areas, you can apply for Centre grants, and you have access to Centre professional development opportunities. You are also required to acknowledge the ARC in your publications deriving from Centre research, and your publications and the data sets you own must be open-access within 12 months of publication (subject to any reasonable conditions on access).

Centre Partners

We have partnership agreements with a broad range of government, non-government and industry organisations. We can add new Centre partners with the agreement of the participating organisations and the ARC. The partnership agreements are broad—they last for the duration of the Centre and can cover a range of projects.

Each project is covered by a separate Project Specification under the partnership agreement, so it is possible to have specific arrangements for specific purposes.

It is also possible for us to form a partnership for a specific project under a Third Party Agreement. This will be for a set period of time, for a set purpose, with the contributions of each partner set out, and with agreed milestones and deliverables. This is suitable for projects we have co-designed with you – a collaborative endeavour.

If you have a project you want delivered, and you have already established the purpose and scope of the project and the deliverables you want, this is most suitable for contract research. In the Life Course Centre, there are a number of institutes, centres and schools that are experienced in delivering contract research. We will be happy to facilitate introductions for you.

Affiliates

Both organisations and individuals can be Life Course Centre Affiliates, and the benefits include:

- Mutual promotion of achievements and opportunities. We are always happy to promote the activities of Life Course affiliates.
- Undertake joint initiatives, including workshops, presentations and publications.
- Receiving newsletters and Centre communications.
- Invitations to Centre events, including discounted conference registration.

Get in touch
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Learn more
www.lifecoursecentre.org.au