

Left out and missing out: Voices from the margins

Snapshot
2007

In recent years, Australia has enjoyed significant economic growth, with rates above the OECD average (OECD, 2007). Not all Australians however have shared in this increasing prosperity. There is no agreed definition of disadvantage and/or poverty in Australia, however *poverty lines* are used internationally to define and measure disadvantage. Internationally, the poverty line is often set at 50% of the median disposable household income with anyone below this line being deemed as living in poverty. In 2004, 9.9% of Australians, including 365,000 children, lived below this line (Australia Fair, 2007 citing Social Policy Research Centre).

Whilst poverty lines provide important information on the extent of disadvantage in Australia, they do not give a sense of the daily experiences of people living in poverty, nor have they been 'tested' against community standards on what constitutes an acceptable standard of living in Australia in the twenty first century.

This publication reports on findings from some ground breaking research (the *Left out and missing out: Towards new indicators of disadvantage project*), undertaken through a partnership between the Social Policy Research Centre at the University of New South Wales, three community service organisations, namely ANGLICARE (Sydney), Mission Australia and the Brotherhood of St Laurence, as well as the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS), the peak community sector organisation. The research explored the measurement of, and interaction between, three dimensions of disadvantage: *poverty* arising from insufficient income; *deprivation* in relation to goods and services; and *social exclusion* which is the experience of being unable to fully participate in mainstream society.

The research was grounded in the experiences of clients of the three community service organisations who participated in focus groups, and complemented by a survey of both clients and the broader community which aimed to identify what are the 'essentials of life' for Australians today. A range of publications have been produced on the findings of this research, with this publication focusing on the voices and experiences of the clients of the community service organisations, many of whom experience significant disadvantage on a daily basis.

The clients who participated in the research

As part of the research around 670 clients of the three community service organisations completed a survey in 2006, which aimed to examine what they saw as essential for life in Australia today and their experience of poverty and disadvantage. The clients came from every state and from a broad range of services across the community service organisations, including emergency relief, family, youth, employment, aged care and homeless services.

Key characteristics of the clients who completed the survey include:

- **Household type:** 22.3% lived in lone person households; 17.3% lived in sole parent households; and 30.2% lived with their spouse/partner and children.
- **Main source of income:** Three quarters were on some form of government benefit, with the most common being Newstart (unemployment) (30.3% of clients), followed by Parenting Payments (15.5%) and the Disability Support Pension (13.6%). Around 20% of clients were wage or salary earners.
- **Cultural background:** 8.5% were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders and 13.3% identified as being of non-English speaking background.
- **Disability/medical:** 36.1% indicated they had a disability or ongoing medical condition.

A longer version of the survey was also mailed to a random sample of the Australian population and over 2,700 people responded. Both surveys included a list of items with respondents asked:

- Whether or not they thought the item was essential for all Australians.
- Whether or not they had the item.
- If they did not have the item, whether or not this was because they could not afford it.

A joint initiative of the following organisations



What's essential for life in Australia today?

As the subsequent tables show, there was a strong consensus in the community survey about the range of items which are essential for an acceptable standard of living in Australia today. The items include basic items (eg warm clothes if it's cold), items that allow people to participate in community life (eg to be accepted for who you are), access to key services that are needed at a particular point in time (eg medical treatment) and access to facilities (eg a local park or play area for children).

The items on which there was broad community agreement go well beyond things which are solely related to income, thereby providing a more detailed picture than can be offered by poverty lines alone. The 'essential' items have been grouped below under three broad headings: health and wellbeing; housing and access to local services; and community and personal relationships.

The community survey also showed quite strong agreement on the items which were seen as *not* essential, namely items such as a DVD (only 19% saw this as essential), and a dishwasher (8%).

Are clients of community service organisations able to enjoy the 'essentials' of life?

The surveys asked whether respondents had particular items and the tables below indicate the proportion of clients from the community services organisations who did not have the key 'essentials' of life (as identified by the community survey). These tables show the extent to which these clients are going without items seen as essential by the broader community.

Health and wellbeing

Close to 100% of the community survey respondents agreed that access to a range of medical, dental, aged care and disability supports was essential if required. Table 1 however, shows that significant proportions of the clients of the community service organisations did not have such access. Some 11% did not have access to medical treatment and for 14% there was lack of access to a bulk billing doctor. Almost one third (31%) were not able to buy medicines prescribed by a doctor and close to 40% had no access to mental health services if needed. This lack of access to essential services was compounded for the more than 40% of clients who did not have anyone to care for them at home if they were sick. A significant proportion (15%) did not have perhaps the most 'basic' of essential items – a substantial meal at least once a day.

Concerns about access to dental services were raised in the client focus groups undertaken as part of this research, with one participant stating:

...it causes so many problems having bad teeth... it is treated as a luxury...dentistry in a first world country is not a luxury – it's a necessity...

This concern was reinforced by the client survey with more than half of the respondents not having access to dental treatment if needed (57%).

Table 1: Percentage of community who thought key health and wellbeing items were essential and percentage of clients who did not have them

	% of community who consider it essential	% clients who don't have it
Medical treatment, if needed	99.9	11.1
A substantial meal at least once a day	99.6	15.3
Able to buy prescribed medicines	99.4	31.0
Disability support services, when needed	98.9	60.2
Dental treatment, if needed	98.6	57.0
Aged care for frail older people	98.2	66.5
Access to mental health services if needed	97.4	38.8
Someone to look after you if you are sick and need help around the house	93.7	42.1
Access to a bulk billing doctor	91.9	14.3

Place and space – housing and access to local services

Housing related items featured prominently in the list identified by the community as essential. Table 2 shows however, that one third of the clients surveyed indicated they did not have a decent and secure home. Around one in five had leaking roofs and gutters and about a quarter could not heat at least one room nor had secure locks on their doors and windows. Issues with security in the home were compounded by issues of location with nearly half (48%) of the clients indicating they did not have streets that are safe to walk in at night. Over 70% of the clients did not have home contents insurance indicating a level of vulnerability should they experience a robbery, fire or similar events. A lack of access to basic communication items such as a private (home) or public telephone was also an issue, with around a quarter of clients indicating they did not have access to either one or other of these items.

The survey data confirms comments made in the focus groups regarding the standard of housing a number of clients were living in:

I've got mushrooms growing in the bathroom, that's been happening for 6 months. I have to go in there everyday and make sure they're not growing – the house is falling down around me and people wonder why I don't want them to come to my house (it's) because I'm embarrassed by it.

I'm fed up...getting cold at night 'cause there's like a cold draft coming in from underneath the door, you know a gap that shouldn't be there or part of a wall that moved and you can feel that cold if you've got arthritis or something...

Accessing local services was also an issue for many clients of the community service organisations. Around 31% did not have good public transport in their area, a key issue given more than half (53%) did not own a car. For a small but notable proportion there were issues in relation to accessing a local doctor or hospital (9%) and financial institutions such as a bank or building society (11%).

Table 2: Percentage of community who thought key place and space items were essential and percentage of clients who did not have them

	% of community who consider it essential	% clients who don't have it
Home		
Warm clothes and bedding, if it's cold	99.8	10.0
A decent and secure home	97.3	33.5
A roof and gutters that do not leak	92.3	22.2
Secure locks on doors and windows	91.8	23.7
Furniture in reasonable condition	91.2	19.9
Heating in at least one room of the house	89.0	24.1
A telephone	82.7	23.6
A washing machine	81.8	19.8
Home contents insurance	77.4	70.9
Mobility and local access		
Access to local doctor or hospital	99.3	8.7
Streets that are safe to walk in at night	97.7	48.3
Good public transport in the area	92.2	31.4
Access to a bank or building society	91.1	10.9
A public telephone	88.1	27.7

Community and personal relationships

The community survey identified a range of items relating to community and personal relationships which were seen as essential for life in Australia today. As the focus groups with clients showed, a lack of money can impact on a person's ability to engage with others:

It's very hard to go out and meet new friends, it's close to impossible 'cause you just can't afford to do things.

The survey data in Table 3 shows that many clients did not have some key items related to social and community engagement in their lives. For more than one third, a supportive family was not evident and around a quarter did not feel accepted for who they are (28%) or have regular social contact with other people (24%) or consider that they were treated with respect in their community (24%). The simple act of an annual present for family or friends was not a reality for around 37% of the clients.

...a quarter of the clients surveyed could not heat at least one room of their home... and a similar proportion did not have regular social contact with other people.

Table 3: Percentage of community who thought key community and personal relationship items were essential and percentage of clients who did not have them

	% of community who consider it essential	% clients who don't have it
To be treated with respect by other people	98.4	23.5
To be accepted by others for who you are	98.0	27.6
Supportive family relationships	94.9	34.8
Regular social contact with other people	92.3	24.2
Someone to give you advice about an important decision in your life	85.0	28.7
Presents for family or friends at least once a year	73.1	36.6

The experiences of children

Living in a disadvantaged household can impact significantly on children. In the client survey, 268 respondents or 40.4% of all respondents were identified as living in households with children aged between 0 and 17 years. Although these children were not surveyed directly, much can be gleaned from the responses of their parents to questions regarding items relating to children, as shown in Table 4.

Health and wellbeing

Some 16% of clients from households with children indicated that they did not have a substantial meal once a day. Although it is not known whether the children of these clients are going hungry, since adults may be going without to keep their children fed, the statistics indicate a substantial proportion of client households with children are experiencing severe levels of food insecurity. In addition, over half (55%) of the client group reported that their children did not have an annual dental check.

Place and space

The community survey indicated a safe outdoor space for children to play in was essential. However as Table 4 shows, lack of access to such areas was an issue for clients with close to one in five (19%) not having a safe outdoor space or access to a local park or play area for their children (18%). A similar proportion (18%) did not have a separate bed per child.

Educational issues

There was also broad agreement in the community survey on the importance for children of having things such as up to date school books or participating in school activities, hobbies and leisure activities. More than one third of clients with children (36%) however were not able to provide their children with school books and new school clothes. In addition around a quarter (27%) reported that their children did not participate in school activities or outings and 37% indicated that their children did not have a hobby or participate in leisure activities.

Table 4: Percentage of community who thought key child related items were essential and percentage of clients with children who did not have them

	% of community who consider it essential	% clients with children under 18 years who don't have it
A substantial meal at least once a day	99.6	16.2
Safe outdoor space for children to play at or near home	96.4	18.9
Children can participate in school activities and outings	94.8	27.0*
Yearly dental check up for children	94.7	55.0
A local park or play area for children	92.9	17.7
A hobby or leisure activity for children	92.5	37.4
Up to date school books and new school clothes	89.0	35.9*
Childcare for working parents	86.0	60.0
A separate bed per child	84.7	18.1

* Clients with school-aged children only

The data in Table 4 suggests that for children living in the households of the clients of community service organisations, there is a risk of hunger and problems with dental health, as well as a lack of access to local safe play areas. Many are unable to access up to date school books, nor able to participate in school activities and outings, or hobby and leisure activities – things seen by the general community as being essential for all Australians.

Conclusion

The research included in this publication is grounded in the experiences and voices of Australians experiencing disadvantage and highlights that despite prolonged national economic growth, there are Australians who are going without in many areas of their lives. The community survey also indicates there is a strong consensus on what the

‘essentials’ of life are in Australia today. These ‘essentials’ are diverse – some are basic items like food, others relate to participation in community life or personal relationships, others again involve access to services. Many of the clients of community service organisations like the Brotherhood of St Laurence, Mission Australia and ANGLICARE (Sydney) are ‘missing out’ on these essentials on a daily basis, and many of these clients have children living with them. The research provides important new insights in which to consider disadvantage in the Australian context.

Having established a high level of community consensus about what are some of the “essentials for life” in Australia today and demonstrated that not all Australians are enjoying many of them, a cooperative, bi-partisan and multi-sectoral approach is urgently needed in order to address this situation. A significant proportion of OECD nations have developed and implemented national anti-poverty or social inclusion strategies with identified targets and timeframes for addressing disadvantage. Some of these strategies, such as that of the United Kingdom, have a particular focus on reducing child poverty. This research involving Australians experiencing significant disadvantage provides compelling evidence for the need for Australia to develop a coordinated response to disadvantage through a national anti-poverty strategy.

...we barely survive week to week...

Client, focus group

References

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- Saunders, P., Naidoo, Y. and Giffiths, M. (2007) *Towards new indicators of disadvantage, deprivation and social exclusion in Australia*, Sydney, SPRC.

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