

THE IMPACT OF BREACHING ON INCOME SUPPORT RECIPIENTS¹

BY TONY EARDLEY

Financial penalties for non-compliance with job search requirements have always existed in Australia, but they have become controversial in recent years because of a massive increase in the volume of breaching in the second half of the 1990s. This rise (340 per cent between 1997 and 2001) stemmed from the intensification of requirements placed on unemployed beneficiaries as part of 'mutual obligation'. Centrelink was also required to be more vigilant in operating these rules and Job Network agencies came under contractual pressure to report non-compliance with participation plans.

The total monetary value of penalties for a single adult in June 2002 ranged from \$384, for one administrative breach, to \$3491, where three activity test breaches were incurred within a two-year period. The proportion of all breaches that were imposed under activity test rules also doubled during this period. With so many more people receiving penalties and more of these at high levels, the fairness of such substantial reductions in payments from already low-income recipients began to be seriously questioned.

The welfare sector mounted a successful campaign against breaching during this period,

drawing on case studies of clients suffering harsh impacts, and established an independent review of breaching which recommended substantial structural and procedural changes (Pearce, Disney and Ridout, 2002). In response to the level of public disquiet the Government made a number of changes to policy and practice that brought the numbers of breaches back down again in early 2003 to pre-1997 levels. However, when the study on which this article is based was commissioned (in 2002) there was little systematic evidence either on the effectiveness of breaching as compliance tool or on its other wider impacts. Thus the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services commissioned the research to



Tony Eardley

¹ This article is based on research commissioned by the Australian Government Department of Family and Community Services, but any views expressed are those of the author and not of the Department.

Continued on page 5

CONTENTS

The Impact of Breaching.....1	Conference Report.....10
Staff and Visitor Update2	Children in SAAP12
From the Director3	New Discussion Paper13
Visitors.....9	New Projects14

LEAD ARTICLE:

Tony Eardley discusses the impact of breaching on income support recipients.

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STAFF AND VISITOR UPDATE

ARRIVALS:

PROFESSOR BETTINA CASS has joined the Centre from the University of Sydney.

BOB DAVIDSON has commenced his PhD.

ROXANNE LAWSON has joined the Centre to work as an Assistant Business Manager.

CHRISTIANE PURCAL is working on the Stronger Families Stronger Communities Research Project.

PETER SIMINSKI has resigned his position as Senior Research Officer and has commenced his PhD.

TOM LONGDEN has joined the Centre to work with Peter Saunders on his Australian Professorial Fellowship.

GLEN TOOK has joined the Centre and is working on the Better Futures project.

NICK TURNBULL has taken up a position to work on the Community Strength project.

DEPARTURES:

KAREN FISHER has taken six months leave during which time she will be based at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in China.

EVA FRANZEN has completed her time at the Centre and returned to Sweden.

JOHN HUDSON visited the Centre from April to September.

ALAN MORRIS has returned to the School of Social Science and Policy. He will continue to work on the HASI project.

VISITORS:

DR INGRID WILKENS from the Institute for Economics and Social Sciences, University of Erlangen-Nuremberg, Germany is visiting the Centre.

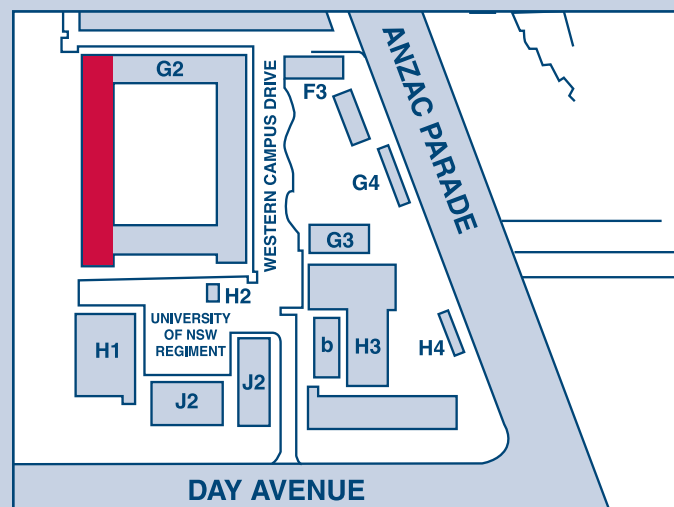
ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR CHRISTIAN ALBREKT LARSEN is visiting the Centre from the Centre for Comparative Welfare Studies, Aalborg University Denmark.

We regret to announce that, after a long illness, Natalie Barnes passed away in August. Nat was a postgraduate scholar at the Centre in the late '90s, before joining The Treasury. She was admired by many at SPRC and will be much missed.

THE SOCIAL POLICY RESEARCH CENTRE

The Social Policy Research Centre is located in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of New South Wales. Under its original name, the Social Welfare Research Centre was established in January 1980, changing its name to the Social Policy Research Centre in 1990. The SPRC conducts research and fosters discussion on all aspects of social policy in Australia, as well as supporting PhD study in these areas. The Centre's research is funded by governments at both Commonwealth and State levels, by academic grant bodies and by non-governmental agencies. Our main topics of inquiry are: economic and social inequality; poverty, social exclusion and income support; employment, unemployment and labour market policies and programs; families, children, people with disabilities and older people; community needs, problems and services; evaluation of health and community service policies and programs; and comparative social policy and welfare state studies.

The views expressed in this Newsletter, as in any of the Centre's publications, do not represent any official position of the Centre. The SPRC Newsletter and all other SPRC publications present the views and research findings of the individual authors, with the aim of promoting the development of ideas and discussion about major concerns in social policy and social welfare.



The Social Policy Research Centre is located at G2 on the Western Side of Anzac Parade, Kensington Campus, entered via Day Avenue.

FROM THE DIRECTOR

BY ILAN KATZ



Since the last SPRC newsletter there have been three significant developments in the life of the SPRC. First we have moved from the Rupert Myers building to the Western Campus of UNSW. Second has been the successful 9th Australian Social Policy Conference and thirdly Professor Bettina Cass has joined the SPRC as a Professorial Fellow.

The move was very smoothly accomplished, and the excellent organisational skills of Bruce Bradbury, Duncan Aldridge and Megan Griffiths ensured that the transition was relatively seamless. We are now more or less completely settled into the bucolic surroundings of the western campus and are getting used to the barrack like dimensions of G2.

Bettina has similarly fitted in to SPRC life as if she had never left (she was an SPRC staff member during the 80s – see full article on page 16). Indeed she started working on a new expression of interest even before she moved in! We are all looking forward to working with her. Bettina is not only an illustrious scholar, she is also a delightful colleague to have on board and she is sure to add gravitas and authority to our research.

The 2005 ASPC was, by all accounts, the best organised so far, and also provided the usual high quality of plenary presentations, discussion forums and presented paper sessions. The consensus is that the entertainment at the conference dinner was even better than the normal high standards of these events! The biggest complaint (as usual) was that there were too many interesting sessions in parallel, and therefore delegates had to make painful choices as to

which sessions to attend.

One of the important themes of the ASPC was the relationship between social research and policy. This was implicit in all the keynotes and was directly addressed by Peter Saunders in his excellent and thought provoking keynote talk. (available on the conference website at <http://www.sprc.unsw.edu.au/ASPC2005/index.htm>). This relationship has become a hugely important issue recently, with the growth of ‘Evidence Based Policy’ and the need for even the most blue sky research to be ‘policy relevant’. For many the issue is how to bridge the gap between policy makers and researchers, so that policy can be guided by the real evidence and researchers can better understand the needs of policy makers.

However, some recent events have highlighted for me how tenuous this relationship can sometimes be, and how difficult it is for research to always have immediate policy relevance.

It was interesting to me that very few papers at the ASPC dealt with the issue of race and ethnicity or migration, other than in relation to Indigenous Australians. The equivalent conference in the USA, UK or Europe would almost certainly have contained a significant number of papers on issues related to inter-racial relations, ethnic identity, outcomes of social policy interventions for different ethnic groups etc. I was told that a number of years ago there was a lot of concern in social policy circles in Australia about these issues, but that they were no longer considered to be very high on the policy agenda.

We heard about the tragic

bombings in London a couple of weeks before the conference. These attacks, although almost universally expected, resulted in a new wave of soul searching by the media and policy makers, mainly in the UK but also across the developed world. The reason for this is that, counter to all expectations, the perpetrators were ‘home grown’. It turned out that the bombers were in fact well integrated into British society, were well educated and came from comfortable backgrounds. This contradicted all the theories about the motivation and origins of suicide bombers, who were expected to be individuals coming from oppressed and poverty stricken backgrounds and whose acts of terror were explained as the desperate response of people who have no other mechanism for resisting the invasion of their countries.


Subsequent opinion polls in the UK showed that a substantial proportion of the Moslem population were actively supportive of, or at least sympathetic to, the suicide bombers.

In Australia there has been a sudden recognition that the ‘home grown’ Moslem population may also feel disaffected from Australian society and that this society needs to develop a much more in-depth understanding of Australian Moslem communities. John Howard’s recent summit with ‘moderate’ Moslem leaders may have contained a number of agendas, but it was an important official recognition that the Moslem community needs to be engaged as a community and that perhaps some of the pre-existing notions



Ilan Katz

Continued on page 4



which have been held about Moslems in Australia have been misconceived.

Perhaps serendipitously, it was reported in The Australian Higher Education Supplement this month that three new schools of Islamic Studies are being set up in Australian universities. The report highlights the lack of understanding between Moslems and Australians, and views the setting up of the research centres as a step to greater understanding.

I am sure that all three of these centres will produce important contributions to better understanding between Moslems and other Australians. But I would like to ask a slightly different question – why is it that these studies are only beginning now? There have been a substantial number of Moslems in Australia for decades, but until recently they have attracted very little policy or research interest in their own right.

I think that at least part of the answer lies in the increasingly strident calls for research to be ‘policy relevant’ and for policy to be ‘evidence based’. As a policy research institute these are obviously aims with which SPRC would wholeheartedly agree, but they are beginning to be taken rather too literally. Policy relevant does not necessarily require

researchers to address the issues which are bothering policy makers this week, nor does evidence based policy mean that policy makers should (or could) simply implement the recommendations of the latest study to report in their area of concern. The relationship between research and policy is - and should be - rather more complex than that, especially in the field of social policy. Models taken from health research are not always appropriate for social policy, which is not simply a matter of implementing the most ‘effective’ solutions for given social problems, but is about balancing the interests of different sectors of society. Evidence based policy requires of policy makers that they take a step back from their immediate concerns and engage in a process which has different objectives and timescales to their own, but which can give them a much deeper insight into some of the issues which they are tackling (although it won’t always provide the answers).

However, I am here concerned with the responsibilities of researchers. It is our responsibility to ensure that we don’t just respond to the ‘sexy’ issues of the day, but try, as far as possible, to look more broadly at what is happening in society and to conduct research which will

respond to the broader policy agenda. I have been interested in the reaction of academics to the proposal that the ARC board be replaced by a single CEO responsible directly to the Minister for Education. Surely the direct involvement of politicians in deciding what research should be funded is a big step in the direction of ensuring that research and policy are even more closely associated. Yet the furious reaction of academics to this proposal indicates that researchers are not really willing to pay the price for closer relationships between research and policy. This move seems to be designed not so much as a way of promoting evidence based policy, but rather to further develop policy based evidence. The consequences for academic freedom and independence will be considerable. So although a greater understanding between academics and policy makers is a good thing, I still believe that there need to be clear and understood boundaries between the two. Most importantly, research need to be funded to study not only issues that are currently top of the policy agenda, but also ‘blue skies’ research which is more speculative and which will have longer term or less direct implications for public policy.

CORRECTIONS

The prior issue of the SPRC Newsletter (Issue No. 90) contained several errors for which we apologise. The correct details are provided below.

John Lawrence was a member of the SWRC Advisory Committee 1980-89, Chair of the SWRC Research Management Committee 1985-89, and Presiding Member of the SPRC Management Committee 1990-96. John Nevile was a member of the SWRC Advisory Committee 1980-89, a member of the SPRC Management Committee 1990-2002, and its Presiding Member 1997-2000. Adam Graycar was the Centre’s Director from 1980 to 1985.

THE IMPACT OF BREACHING ON INCOME SUPPORT RECIPIENTS

CONTINUED
FROM PAGE 1

address this information gap. The full report (Eardley et al., 2004) can be downloaded from the SPRC website.

Following negotiations between the Government and the Senate over the Australians Working Together package, legislation was eventually passed in March 2003 with amendments that reduced the scope and severity of breaching penalties. The Government also agreed to establish a Breaching Review Taskforce, which reported to Ministers in December 2004. The findings of our study were amongst the range of evidence provided to the Taskforce. Subsequently the 2005 Budget foreshadowed a revised system of penalties based on a partial suspension of payments until compliance is re-established. The details of the new system are still emerging, but welfare sector groups remain unconvinced that it addresses all the problems identified with previous arrangements (Welfare Rights Centre, 2005).

AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

The research focused on examining which groups of recipients were disproportionately affected by breaching; to what extent initial breaches resulted in actual financial penalties; whether breaching increased compliance; and the overall impacts of being breached.

The study included: a review of existing data and research on breaching; a national telephone survey of breached customers undertaken at the end of 2002, with an achieved sample of 1005; a national postal survey of welfare agencies, representing a broad cross-section of community services dealing with breached clients, with usable responses from 99 agencies; and in-depth interviews with 20 people who had recently experienced breaches, including

recipients in a range of disadvantaged groups. The details of the survey methodology can be found in the main report. The customer survey sample was reasonably representative of breached beneficiaries as a whole, but probably underestimated to some extent the level of disadvantage because of reliance on telephone contact. In particular it would inevitably have understated the level of insecure housing amongst breached beneficiaries.

THE INCIDENCE OF BREACHING

One of the main research questions was whether breaching disproportionately affects the most vulnerable recipients, as welfare sector agencies have argued. The evidence was mixed on this. One limitation of the study was that we were not able within the resources available to construct a direct comparison group of non-breached customers. It was clear, however, that breaching was particularly concentrated amongst younger beneficiaries. Men were also somewhat more likely to be breached, but the sex difference was less significant than that of age. Previous research has shown that Indigenous beneficiaries were also disproportionately likely to be breached, but more recent data suggested that the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous recipients may have been narrowing.

People who were breached experienced many types of disadvantage, including English-language difficulties, physical and mental health problems, substance abuse, unstable housing and difficult living situations. Just over one-quarter reported having a health problem or disability which limited their work or job search capacity, and two-thirds of these had received medical treatment for the condition in the previous year. Eight per cent reported a

psychological or mental health problem, ranging from serious conditions such as schizophrenia and bi-polar disorder to various levels of depression and anxiety. These were recipients of unemployment payments, not the Disability Support Pension, and we should assume some under-reporting of such conditions in a survey of this kind. On the other hand, other research has suggested that mental health problems are surprisingly common amongst unemployed income support recipients as a whole, affecting up to 30 per cent (Butterworth, 2003).

Around 44 per cent of respondents lived with their families (even more for the youngest groups), and both the survey and the in-depth interviews found that support from families was crucial in whether they were likely to experience significant hardship as a result of a penalty. There was somewhat more housing stability than we might have expected, with only a third having moved more than once in the previous year. However, the survey is likely to have under-sampled people with the most unstable housing or transient lives. Thus it should be viewed as providing lower-bound estimates of the difficulties experienced.

Where there was more direct evidence of comparative disadvantage amongst breached customers was in their experiences of a range of household financial stresses. A comparison using ABS financial stress measures suggested that breached customers' households were considerably more likely than other unemployed income support recipients to have experienced multiple cash flow and other hardship problems in the previous year.

Even just comparing breached Newstart recipients with all those mainly reliant on benefits showed that the former were nearly twice as likely to report multiple cash flow problems (65 per cent compared

with 33 per cent). Youth Allowance recipients were also more than one and a half times as likely to report multiple cash flow problems, but they were also more likely to report no cash flow problems (21 per cent compared with four per cent), possibly because they were more often living with their families. Breached Newstart customers were also well over twice as likely to report multiple financial hardship (42 per cent compared with 18 per cent).

Of course, an association between breaching and financial stress over a given period does not tell us the direction of any causality. Being breached may cause financial hardship, but pre-existing financial hardship could also lead people to attempt to maximise income, such as by not reporting all earnings, and consequently to receive a penalty.

DOES BREACHING INCREASE COMPLIANCE?

Previous evidence on whether breaching improves compliance with income support requirements has been mixed. Evaluation of similar sanctions in the UK and the US suggest that they tend to fall on the more disadvantaged recipients but that these are the group for whom sanctions have the least impact on compliance (Burke and Falk; 2001; Britton, 2002). However, in some States in the US at least, they appear to be more effective where a return to compliance immediately reduces the penalty (Schnurer and Kolker, 2002).

Table 1: Financial stress

	Cash flow			Hardship		
	None	Some	Multiple	None	Some	Multiple
<i>Breached customers (2002)</i>						
Newstart	16.0	19.1	64.9	35.7	22.6	41.7
Youth Allowance	21.4	26.1	52.5	45.0	23.4	31.7
<i>Households with 50% + income from benefits (1998-99)</i>						
Newstart	14.2	52.4	33.4	47.3	35.0	17.7
Youth Allowance	3.7	63.4	32.9	68.8	23.2	8.0

Sources: SPRC survey of breached customers; Bray (2001), Table 15, based on analysis of ABS Household Expenditure Survey.

Our study also provides a mixed picture. It was not possible to follow up respondents to see what they actually did after being breached (and determining any causal link between breaching and subsequent behaviour is methodologically difficult in any case). Our results were based simply on what people told us they did or did not do as a result to a breach. In response to an open-ended question about the impact of the most recent breach, less than seven per cent reported increasing their participation in job search or work, and compliance did not rate highly in their assessment of the most important impact of breaching. Nearly as many (six per cent) reported some negative effect on participation, such as reduced job search or curtailing a course of study. The welfare organisations surveyed also generally saw compliance as one of the lesser effects of breaching for most of their clients.

On the other hand, in response to a subsequent, *prompted* list of possible impacts (over a longer time

period), nearly 90 per cent of breached customers reported increased participation in a range of compliance. More than two-fifths said they found some kind of work or increased existing hours of work, while almost one-third said that they started reporting all of their earnings. However, breaching also apparently resulted in negative participation effects for more than one-third of respondents, including reduced job search and more unreported 'cash-in-hand' work.

Similar results came from responses to a series of attitudinal statements, with nearly two-thirds agreeing that having their payments cut made them more determined to find work, but three-fifths saying that being breached made it harder for them to look for it.

In-depth interviews provided further detail. For a small number of participants, the breach led to greater effort to comply, while for others it led to more devious strategies, as they felt they were already doing everything reasonable and possible to meet

Continued on page 7

SPRC WELCOMES PROFESSOR BETTINA CASS

The Social Policy Research Centre is delighted to announce that Professor Bettina Cass, formerly Professor of Sociology and Social Policy at the University of Sydney, has joined the SPRC in August. Professor Cass has a long

association with the Centre and we are delighted to see her return. Professor Cass is one of the pre-eminent sociologists in Australia and her research has focused on the gendered dimensions of work, family, civil society and public

policies in Australia and comparable countries. We will disseminate details of Professor Cass' research in subsequent issues of the Newsletter.

their obligations. A common reported problem was of conflict between Centrelink requirements and short-notice opportunities for casual work: respondents often felt that the work opportunity needed to take precedence over a formal requirement to attend an interview/course.

WIDER IMPACTS

Just as the incidence of breaching appeared to fall across a wide spectrum of customer characteristics, the impacts also varied widely. Around one-quarter of breached customers seemed to experience only minor effects, partly because they found or already had some income from work, or because the income loss was absorbed by their families. Nevertheless, breaching did appear to impact substantially on the lives of the majority of those penalised, with the most common group of impacts being problems with daily living expenses. Where people were able to manage on reduced benefits, this was often mainly due to the support of friends and family. The safety net role played by friends and family in alleviating the more serious impacts of breaching was clearly crucial. Without such support some customers faced serious difficulties living on reduced incomes and acquired further debt, with a small number experiencing disruptive life events such as disconnection of utilities or even homelessness.

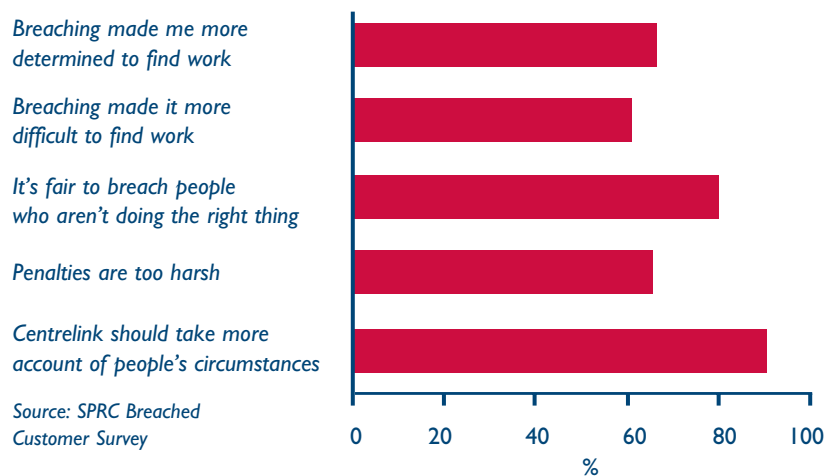
Where family support was lacking, loss of benefit could bring significant and longer-term effects, making some young people vulnerable to abuse and hindering educational opportunities. There was a significant minority of between 10 and 20 per cent for whom breaching resulted in losing their accommodation or having to move to cheaper housing. These outcomes may undermine efforts in other policy areas to encourage further education and training, and to prevent youth homelessness.

Some of the more extreme impacts, such as criminal or risk-taking behaviour, seemed restricted to a small number of recipients. Still, about one in six reported jumping trains or avoiding paying fares as a result of breaching. Health-related, psychological and social impacts arising from breaching were also not uncommon: just over one-third of survey respondents said breaching put their relationships under stress. Seventeen per cent reported having to cut down on medication they needed, while a significant minority reported

of the more serious impacts – again the extent or direction of any causality could not be determined.

The results echoed many of those in the studies carried out by welfare organisations, suggesting that these do not simply represent the views of advocacy groups opposed to breaching in principle. However, given that our survey suggested that only a minority of people breached were especially disadvantaged and that not all experienced serious negative impacts, welfare agencies would appear to deal mainly with those

Figure 1: Attitudes to breaching




increasing potentially harmful behaviours, such as drinking or drug use (13 per cent) or gambling (four per cent).

Multivariate regression analysis indicated that the factors most commonly associated with experiencing a wide range of negative impacts were greater experience of breaching in the past; unsupported living arrangements; unstable housing; poorer health; and greater detachment from recent work experience. Problems with meeting housing costs seem to be particularly associated with other indicators of disadvantage, while people with children experienced health-related impacts more than others. There was also an association between third activity test breaches (leading to full cancellation of payment) and some

who have the most difficulties. This is not surprising since most people would only approach an agency if their problems were serious (in response to a prompted question less than one-fifth of our respondents said they had done so).

Both the individuals interviewed and the welfare agencies surveyed had views on how the breaching system needed to be improved. Agencies recognised improvements that had already taken place through recent reform of breaching procedures, but there was a strong sense of unfairness in treatment, arising a perceived failure to properly check clients' circumstances.

The final set of questions we asked were attitudinal. Figure 1 above highlights a few of the main questions and illustrates how



breached customers, like most of us, often hold contradictory views. A large majority even of those breached were in favour of penalties, where recipients are not 'doing the right thing'. However, there was also a strong sense that many of respondents' own breaches were unfair, because Centrelink did not take people's circumstances properly into account. More than two-thirds thought that the penalties were 'too harsh'.

CONCLUSIONS

The main issue with breaching, apart from whether the monetary level of penalties is unfairly high, seemed not so much that it falls disproportionately on the most vulnerable customers, but that it is the more disadvantaged beneficiaries who face the most difficulties when breached. Many unemployed recipients lead lives that are constrained, stressful and easily disrupted by sudden reduction or loss of income. For some the impacts can be severe and may be long lasting, especially if they lack networks of support. Our conclusion was that there were clear opportunities to reduce further the extent of breaching by more effort to contact customers and review their circumstances before imposing penalties, particularly given that the evidence on whether they increase compliance is ambiguous.

So what light does this research give on the proposed new system? While the focus appears to be on attempting to boost the compliance effect of penalties and reducing the financial impact once compliance is restored, there seem to be two potential drawbacks. First, payment is only restored for those who can convince Centrelink that their reason for non-compliance was acceptable. Others face total loss of payments for the period between suspension and when they contact Centrelink. This seems likely to be a continuing problem, especially for young people without settled homes and with disorganised lives. Secondly, the new system removes the previous distinction between administrative and activity test breaches. Relatively minor infringements, such as not answering letters or missing an appointment, could now bring much more severe penalties than before. Retaining such heavy loss of payments for minor offences seems likely to continue causing considerable hardship to some recipients and our study suggests that they may often be the ones already most disadvantaged.

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Three new SPRC Reports are available for download from <http://www.sprc.unsw.edu.au/reports/index.htm>
Disability Support Pension New Customers Focus Groups
The Impact of Breaching on Income Support Customers
Housing and Accommodation Support Initiative Summary Report

VIBRANT AND DIVERSE VISITOR PROGRAM

BY PETER SAUNDERS

One of the enduring pleasures of working at SPRC is being able to meet and work with international research visitors. Earlier this year, we were able to benefit from collaborations with two researchers from China and one from Sweden. As the following article shows, they varied greatly in terms of their background and interests, but all three made an important contribution to the SPRC's research mission.

Sun Lujun is a Senior Researcher at the China Research Centre on Ageing (CRCA), where he analyses data from the national surveys on ageing designed and conducted by CRCA. The data collected in the 1992 and 2000 surveys form the basis of an Australian Research Council project that is examining the economic and social circumstances of people aged 60 and over in 2000 and how they have changed since 1992 as the Chinese economy underwent a radical transformation. During his visit, Sun worked with Peter Saunders and Xiaoyuan Shang (the two SPRC investigators on the project) primarily on the development of new indicators of deprivation and exclusion among the urban aged in 2000. A series of papers were produced (building on work that had commenced in 2004 when Sun Lujun and CRCA colleagues Zaiti Zhang, Guo Ping and Chen Gang visited SPRC) and are currently being refined and revised prior to publication.

Eva Franzén works in Centre for Epidemiology (EPC) in Stockholm, a department of the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare. Her research is mainly on poverty in Sweden, with a focus on the Swedish immigrant population. In her PhD thesis *Waiting for Welfare* she showed that the social conditions among social assistance recipients are worse in several dimensions compared to those who



SPRC Visitors Yanli Xu, Eva Franzen and Sun Lujun

have other transfer payments or earnings. These facts could not be understood in terms of difficulties being introduced in the new country, and were thus seen as the result of social exclusion of immigrants in Sweden.

She spent her time at SPRC adding to her theoretical and methodological knowledge on poverty and social exclusion, and the ways in which poverty and inequality can be mapped in a period when the welfare state is being questioned and transformed. She notes that it is important to find relevant indicators for comparing poverty in different times and to identify risk factors and as well as processes and consequences. The Australian debate on this issue is relevant to Swedish conditions, since poverty in Australia is also to a great extent associated with factors like ethnicity, lone parenthood and unemployment. Eva was happy to be invited to the SPRC and found it very stimulating to be in a milieu with excellent researchers who have great knowledge and experience in this field of research.

Yanli Xu is an Associate Professor in Vocational Education College at the Tianjin University in China. Her background is in demography, and she has a PhD in economics from Nankai University.

Her research interests include women and gender studies, feminist theory and household economics. Her recent research project has focused on a gendered analysis of Chinese student poverty in higher education. Student poverty in the higher education sector is a relatively unexplored phenomenon in China, and gendered poverty experiences have been largely neglected in defining the problem. Her project is examining how gender influences male and female students in accessing public and private financial resources to support their studies. Quantitative and qualitative methods will be used to investigate the issues, including the impact of poverty on educational progress and career choice. The project is trying to describe the realities of poverty from the student's perspective, using their own words. The results will have implications for social policy development in Chinese higher education and shed light on addressing the process equity based on entry equity in China higher education. The project is expected to be completed in about two years, and Yanli has spent her time at SPRC conducting a literature review and developing the methodology and instruments for the project.

THE AUSTRALIA SOCIAL POLICY CONFERENCE, 2005

BY BRUCE BRADBURY AND TONY EARDLEY

In July, the SPRC hosted the 9th Australian Social Policy Conference. The conference is now established as a key event on the social policy calendar, providing a regular forum for academia, government and non-governmental social policy agencies to discuss research findings relevant to both policy makers and practitioners. This year's theme *Looking Back, Looking Forward: a Quarter century of Social Change* reflected that fact that the conference coincided with the SPRC 25th anniversary.

KEYNOTE SPEAKERS AND FORUMS

The keynote speakers for the conference this year focused on several of the ongoing 'big picture' issues of social policy. Professor Peter Saunders of the SPRC opened the conference with a look at the role of social policy researchers and their relationships to other academic disciplines, funding bodies and policy makers. What features make research effective and what barriers prevent it from exerting an impact? What can be done to facilitate a high quality evidence base in social policy? Saunders argued that while the cross-disciplinary nature of social policy was a positive feature,

it also contributed to a level of academic invisibility compared with other social sciences. This was linked with the failure in Australia to establish a national social policy association, despite earlier efforts to do so.

In spite of some of the weaknesses of social policy research, Saunders suggested that there was much to be positive about, including the strong links between research and practitioners, and funding by state and federal government departments of research that is broader than just that relevant to immediate policy concerns.

In 1999 Tony Blair, the UK Prime Minister, promised to end child poverty within a generation. Professor Holly Sutherland (pictured above) from the University of Essex examined the UK experience and asked: What does this mean? Can it be achieved? What progress has been made so far?



Holly Sutherland

What can countries like the UK (and Australia) learn from other European countries that have managed to attain very low rates of child poverty? She concluded that yes, it is possible for governments to

reduce child poverty given sufficient fiscal commitment. However, the UK experience raises a number of problems. Targeting on children can leave equally needy adults disadvantaged. Increasing reliance upon means-tested payments raises problems of incentives, particularly for primary carers. Finally, the use of the tax system to provide benefits can lead to large unanticipated income swings in some families (an issue that has some resonance in Australia with Family Tax Benefit overpayment controversies).

The third keynote speaker of the conference was Linda Burney MP, Member of the NSW Legislative Assembly for Canterbury and member of the Wiradjuri Nation. From 1991 to 2000 a process of Reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians was seen as fundamental to alleviating Indigenous disadvantage. However, conversations about reconciliation are little heard today. Linda Burney argued that "reconciliation isn't lost, but we need the collective will to find it again - as a nation we have no choice". She spoke movingly about the intolerable living conditions still experienced



Linda Burney

by many Indigenous communities – and was highly critical of the Federal Government’s negative reactions to the reconciliation agenda - but noted that there were many examples of progress being made at the State and local level.

The final keynote speaker was Professor Nancy Folbre from the University of Massachusetts. Family policy in most wealthy countries (including the US and Australia) is a mess of contradictions. Though policy makers often use economic analysis to understand this area, the conventional tools of economic analysis are far too narrow to help us understand this vital area. Professor Folbre argued that we need to situate family policy in a broader framework that includes market exchange but also natural assets, social capital, and non-market services that are not easily denominated in dollar terms. Even though aspects of the capitalist economic system act to increase women’s rights, the market economy still depends upon the (largely unpaid) caring labour provided by women. This contradiction runs to the heart of all aspects of family policy. Researchers and policy makers need to explicitly address the question of what percentage of total investments in children should be ‘private’ and what percentage ‘public’.



Sue Leppert and Paul Smyth

The issue of investment in children was continued in one of the conference forums *Distributing the costs of raising children*, where Nancy Folbre was one of the discussion leaders (along with Pru Goward and Jenny Earle).



Nancy Folbre

Other forums included *Disability and Work: inclusion or coercion?*, where the controversial new income support policies for disabled people were debated, with the Government’s position being put by the Minister for Workforce Participation, Peter Dutton MP; *A place in the sun? Social policy and the environment in Australian cities*; *The roots of riots: understanding the causes of youth crime and community disturbances*; and *God and the state: the role of faith-based organisations in social welfare*. All these forums provoked lively debate, though perhaps the most well-attended session in the forums slot was a more traditional collection of papers from the new book *Rethinking Wellbeing*, edited by Lenore Manderson.

CONTRIBUTED PAPER PRIZE

In addition to the plenary and forum sessions, over 140 contributed papers were presented. This year we asked conference participants to vote for what they identified as the best papers from this collection. We are pleased to announce the winner of this competition as Peter Whiteford, from the OECD, who presented a paper *The welfare expenditure debate: economic myths of the left and right revisited*. Peter has received a \$200 book voucher prize. The slides from this presentation are available on the conference website.

The runner-up was Janet McCalman of the School of Population Health, University of Melbourne with her presentation *The past that haunts us: the historical basis of Australian children’s wellbeing*. This paper will be included in a forthcoming book *No Time to Lose* to be published later this year by Melbourne University Publishing

The papers and/or the presentation slides of the keynote speakers and many of the contributed papers are available on the conference website, www.sprc.unsw.edu.au/ASPC2005. A small selection of papers from the conference will be published in a special edition of the Economics and Labour Relations Review early in 2006.



CHILDREN IN THE SUPPORTED ACCOMMODATION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (SAAP)

BY TONY EARDLEY

There has been growing policy concern about homelessness amongst children and young people in Australia, but until recently there was little specific information available about children using homelessness services provided through SAAP. The SAAP National Coordination and Development Committee (CAD), through the Department of Family and Community Services, commissioned a study by the SPRC of children using homelessness services, as part of a program of wider research on homelessness and SAAP policy and practice. The study involved a review of literature on children and homelessness, together with a review and re-analysis of SAAP client data with a focus on children both as clients in their own right and as dependants of adult clients.

Recognition of children as people with service needs of their own, distinct from those of their parents/guardians, has been happening increasingly in SAAP over recent years, but there are areas where further development is needed. SAAP stands in a different legal position in relation to children who present with their parents than it does in relation to unaccompanied children, even when they are the same age. The situation is further complicated by widely varying age-based definitions of what constitutes a 'child' in SAAP. However, while the circumstances of accompanying and unaccompanied children are clearly different, unaccompanied children are often subject to the same pressures and problems that have led to families with accompanying children becoming homeless. The fact that the proximate cause of homelessness is family breakdown should not obscure the fact that the underlying causes may be related to other more structural issues.

Partly because the specific attention to children in SAAP data recording is relatively new, information on service needs and requests for accompanying children is incomplete. However, it appears while overall most recorded service needs are met, unaccompanied children are considerably less likely to have all their service needs met, particularly when it comes to employment-related needs or other specialist services such as mental health or drug and alcohol problems.

One key finding which has clear policy implications is that a large proportion of both accompanying and unaccompanied children are recorded as approaching SAAP at the point of 'imminent risk' of homelessness, rather than when they had already been homeless for some time. This suggests an important role for SAAP in intervention to prevent actual homelessness. The early intervention and prevention programs relating to homelessness have been controversial, but much of this policy does not in any case deal with prevention at the point of imminent homelessness. This needs liaison and negotiation with public housing authorities, community housing agencies, legal centres, Centrelink, private landlords and families.

The literature identifies a range of service improvements needed for children and some studies also note that substantial progress has been made. The data analysis suggests that while the majority of children in SAAP present to services that target them and thus are likely to be attuned to their circumstances, a significant minority of children attend other kinds of service which may have more difficulty identifying and meeting their needs.

One group of children for whom homelessness remains a particular

problem is those leaving State care. Research has found that SAAP provides important services for this group and they can also be effectively integrated into support through federal programs like Reconnect. Nevertheless, it is difficult to determine from the limited outcome data available how effective SAAP is in providing longer-term housing options for former wards. One problem has been that the boundaries of legislative and financial responsibility for wards between States and the Commonwealth have often been unclear. Recently, however, there have been concerted attempts by State and Territory governments to clarify these responsibilities through amendments to legislation.

The aims of the data analysis element of this study included reviewing the opportunities and options for further research. Four areas deserve further attention: extending the analysis of children in SAAP to include multi-variate modelling; investigating whether children who request services are different from those who do not; developing better outcome measures (for SAAP and for children); and determining whether the population of children in SAAP is stable over time. The ability to carry out such studies is likely to be enhanced in the future through the implementation from July 2005 of a new Core Data Set.

The report *Children in the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program*, by Kate Norris, Denise Thompson, Tony Eardley and Sonia Hoffman, is published by the SAAP National Coordination and Development Committee and is available for download from the following website:

[http://www.facs.gov.au/internet/facsinternet.nsf/vIA/saap2/\\$File/children_in_saap.pdf](http://www.facs.gov.au/internet/facsinternet.nsf/vIA/saap2/$File/children_in_saap.pdf)

NEW DISCUSSION PAPERS

INCOME POVERTY, DEPRIVATION AND EXCLUSION: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF AUSTRALIA AND BRITAIN

Peter Saunders and Laura Adelman

SPRC Discussion Paper 141,
August 2005

Poverty research has a long history in both Australia and Britain, but its influence on policy remains hostage to political priorities and ideology. This can partly be explained by the acknowledged limitations of defining poverty as low-income and measuring it using an income poverty line. This paper examines two new data sets that allow the income poverty profile to be compared with, and enriched by, the incidence of deprivation and social exclusion, measured using data that directly reflect experience. Although a degree of care must be applied when interpreting these new measures across countries, a validated poverty measure is developed that reflects both low-income and the experience of deprivation and exclusion. When results for the two countries are compared, they reveal stark differences between the alternative indicators. Britain has the higher income poverty rate, yet the incidence of both deprivation and exclusion are higher in Australia, while validated poverty is higher in Britain. The distributional profiles of deprivation and exclusion are shown to be very different in the two countries. These differences are explained by the very low incomes of low income households in Britain, relative to other British households and relative to their Australian counterparts. In overall terms, the results suggest that the three groups facing the greatest risk in both countries are lone parents,

single non-aged people and large (couple) families. This suggests that policies designed to improve low incomes would be targeted very differently from those aimed at alleviating deprivation or combating exclusion.

THE ROLE OF THE STATE AND FAMILY IN THE LIVING CONDITIONS OF THE AGED IN CHINA: CHANGING ATTITUDES AND OUTCOMES

Peter Saunders

SPRC Discussion Paper 142,
August 2005

Pension reform is at the centre of the policy agenda in China, as it undergoes rapid economic and social change, and attention is focused on ensuring that the pension system is financially sustainable in the face of the projected rapid ageing of the population. But addressing the needs of current generations of the aged presents additional challenges for policy makers, and what is feasible is constrained by inherited attitudes, arrangements and expectations. After reviewing the main features of recent pension reforms, this paper utilises data from two national surveys of the aged population in China (conducted in 1992 and 2000) to examine the role and impact of state provision, market transactions and family exchanges on the living conditions and of the aged. It also examines the perceptions and attitudes of the aged and argues that inadequate attention has been paid to the role and impact of informal (family-based) support mechanisms. Particular attention focuses on changes in the relative

roles of formal and informal support for the aged in urban and rural areas, and on changes in conventional (resource-based) measures as well as subjective indicators of well-being. The analysis reveals that inequalities based on gender and location are persisting and while there is clear evidence of improvements in material prosperity, some of the subjective indicators indicate that these do not translate into improved levels of economic security. On many of the indicators examined, the gap between the fortunes of urban and rural aged shows little sign of narrowing.

THE EFFECT OF CHILDREN ON ADULTS' TIME-USE: AN ANALYSIS OF THE INCREMENTAL TIME COSTS OF CHILDREN IN AUSTRALIA

Lyn Craig and Michael Bittman

SPRC Discussion Paper 143,
August 2005

Raising children takes both time and money. For almost 150 years, scholars have attempted to find convincing ways to capture the costs of raising children. However, even when these estimates include indirect costs, such as mothers' foregone earnings, little research has been done on estimating the true time costs of raising children. This paper shows how the presence of children changes parents' use of time. It uses data from the most recent Australian Bureau of Statistics' (ABS) *Time Use Survey* to study how the allocation of time differs in households with varying numbers and ages of children and how households with children differ from those with no children. It also examines the intra-household division of time-

resources, showing how childcare (and related unpaid work) and parental leisure are distributed between mothers and fathers. Since humans are capable of engaging in more than one activity at a time, the ABS time diaries allow people

to report simultaneous activities. A high proportion of time with children is recorded as a 'secondary', or accompanying, activity. This paper shows the effect of including secondary activity in the analysis of total

parental time commitments, and gives a more accurate picture of the time cost of children than has previously been possible on the basis of analysing 'primary' activities alone.

NEW PROJECTS

THE OUTCOMES OF CHILDREN OF YOUNG PARENTS

Bruce Bradbury

Department of Family and Community Services

This study will investigate the causal relationship between child outcomes and parental demographic characteristics - particularly parental age at birth. In particular, there has been much concern about the impact of teenage pregnancy on child health and functioning outcomes. However, it is not clear that the poorer outcomes observed in these families are causally related to the parent's age at birth or due to other factors (such as health and socio-economic status of the parents) which influence both the likelihood of a teenage pregnancy and the outcomes for the child.

FOSTERING AND KINSHIP CARE IN AUSTRALIA

Tony Eardley and Ciara Smyth

Department of Family and Community Services

In the context of the current National Plan for Foster Children, Young People and their Carers, there is a need for a better understanding of trends in fostering and kinship care, the outcomes being achieved in different types of

care and the models and structures of support required to meet future needs in out-of-home care placements for children.

This project is a desk-based study involving the following elements: literature search and review for Australia and overseas, with particular emphasis on English-speaking countries (UK, US and bi-lingual Canada); review of policy documents relating to fostering and kinship care in the States and Territories of Australia; and informal contact and discussions with key policy informants in Australia and overseas, both academics and practitioners/policy makers, identified in the initial literature search.

AN ANALYSIS OF EXPENDITURE INFORMATION IN THE HILDA SURVEY

Gary Barrett and Bruce Bradbury

Department of Family and Community Services

There is a large body of research that shows that family expenditure provides a more accurate guide to a family's economic wellbeing than does current income. If individuals and families have access to (formal or informal) saving and credit facilities, they have the capacity to smooth transitory fluctuate in income. Therefore weekly or annual income during an atypically good (bad) period produces an over (under) estimate of family

wellbeing. Recent international research on economic inequality and welfare has thus turned to the use of expenditure data.

This project proposes an empirical analysis of the expenditure information in Wave 1 and 3 of the HILDA. The analysis will include:

- an investigation of the relationship between income and expenditure;
- an examination of the relationship between the family expenditure items in Waves 1 and 3, and between these items and family wealth (wave 2); and
- an analysis of expenditure and income inequality (and welfare)

MEASURING CHANGES IN COMMUNITY STRENGTH AND COMMUNITY DISADVANTAGE

Ilan Katz and Nick Turnbull

Department of Family and Community Services

The overall aim of the research is to identify communities which have changed in their level of social disadvantage (or economic disadvantage) over time and then to investigate more closely the factors which appear to have led to those changes, focusing on the extent to which there have been changes in community strength (or social capital).

The research will contribute to the development of a methodology which will allow the measurement of the strength of communities, the change in strength over time, and the contribution of Government and other initiatives to changes in social capital in communities.

LEFT OUT AND MISSING OUT: TOWARDS NEW INDICATORS OF SOCIAL EXCLUSION AND MATERIAL DEPRIVATION

Peter Saunders and Kelly Sutherland

Australian Research Council Linkage Grant with Mission Australia, Anglicare (Sydney), Australian Council of Social Services and the Brotherhood of St Laurence

This ground breaking project will utilise academic knowledge and practical agency experience built up over decades to produce a new framework for identifying and measuring exclusion and deprivation in contemporary Australian society. It will generate new findings on public attitudes to the 'necessary requirements' needed to participate at all levels in society and the economy. It will examine the population profile of the individuals and groups who are denied these opportunities, using both quantitative (survey) and qualitative (focus group) data, and its findings will complement existing data collections.

WORK AND FAMILY BALANCE: TRANSITIONS TO HIGH SCHOOL

Lyn Craig and Bruce Bradbury

Department of Family and Community Services

The promotion of measures to help families balance work and family responsibilities is a critical

challenge for social policy (OECD, 2002). Both the needs of children and the extent of non-parental care services available change at the time children move from primary school to high school. Therefore the early teen years raise particular issues for parents, but despite this they have rarely been discretely investigated in relation to their impact on the work-family balance. The objective of this project is to establish how the transition to high school impacts on the way Australian parents organise their commitments to work and family and whether this has any flow-on effects on family wellbeing. The first stage of the project will be a review of the literature on work-family balance and the particular needs of adolescents, and a review of non-parental care services available to and used by 11 to 14 year olds. The second stage of the project will be analysis of data from HILDA (Waves I, II and III) and the ABS Time Use Survey (TUS) 1997.

THE FAMILY ENVIRONMENT

Bruce Bradbury

Department of Family and Community Services

The project seeks to identify the impact of various characteristics of the family environment on child outcomes, and the potential for parenting practices to offset any disadvantages associated with these. The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) will provide important evidence to assist in the examination of this question in Australia. These data will be particularly useful after the survey has been running for some time, when it will be possible to compare the childhood environment with outcomes in later childhood. The study will describe the associations between family circumstances and the various child outcomes indices being developed by the LSAC team.

BETTER FUTURES OUTCOMES FRAMEWORK

Ilan Katz, Karen Fisher, Cathy Thomson, Natasha Cortis, Denise Thompson and Glen Took

Department of Community Services, NSW

The Better Futures Regional Strategy intends to improve the health, education and safety outcomes of young people by improving how communities and services support young people and respond to their needs. To achieve these outcomes, the strategy employs an early intervention and prevention approach designed to increase community capacity to identify problems early and provide support and assistance. The research project is to undertake a literature review and develop an outcomes framework from secondary data.

LSAC OUTCOMES AND EVALUATION OF THE PARTNERSHIPS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD PROJECT

Cathy Thomson and kylie valentine

Benevolent Society

The Partnerships in Early Childhood (PIEC) project links families to support services and programs by using the child care centres as a "bridge" for families to other services and programs. It places child care centres at the centre of the community, building on existing strengths and resources, and harnessing the skills and resources of major child care providers. PIEC is funded under the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services, Stronger Families and Communities Strategy, Invest to Grow program. SPRC will conduct the evaluation component of the project.

LESSONS FROM THE UK SURE START PROGRAMME

Ilan Katz and kylie valentine

Department of Family and Community Services

This project will focus on the policy developments that led to the establishment of Sure Start in the UK and the move from Sure Start Local Programs to Sure Start Children's Centres. A particular

focus will be whether and how the National Evaluation of Sure Start has influenced policy and practice developments relating to the initiative as a whole.

Specific issues to be covered will include: analysis of the current policy developments and the move from SSLPs to Children's Centres; the broader context of UK policy in relation to early intervention, and its relevance to the Australian context; the strengths and challenges of area based initiatives; 'mainstreaming' and sustainability;

evaluation methods; impact and implementation; cost effectiveness; relationship between local and national evaluations

A second strand of this research will focus on the Australian experience of similar initiatives. This strand will investigate the influence of Sure Start and other international programmes on early years intervention in Australia, and will ascertain the extent to which the lessons from Sure Start are relevant and have been taken on board.

PUBLICATIONS AND MAILING LIST

SPRC DISCUSSION PAPERS (FREE)

The Discussion Papers below have been posted to the SPRC Website:

Peter Siminski, Jenny Chalmers and Marilyn McHugh, *Foster Carers in New South Wales: profile and projections based on ABS Census data, Revised August 2005*, <http://www.sprc.unsw.edu.au/dp/DPI139.pdf>

Peter Saunders and Laura Adelman, *Income Poverty, Deprivation and Exclusion: A Comparative Study of Australia and Britain, August 2005*, <http://www.sprc.unsw.edu.au/dp/DPI141.pdf>

Peter Saunders, *The Role of the State and Family in the Living Conditions of the Aged in China: Changing Attitudes and Outcomes, August 2005*, <http://www.sprc.unsw.edu.au/dp/DPI142.pdf>

Lyn Craig and Michael Bittman, *The Effect of Children on Adults' Time-use: An Analysis of the Incremental Time Costs of Children in Australia, August 2005*, <http://www.sprc.unsw.edu.au/dp/DPI143.pdf>

Peter Saunders and Peter Saunders, *Home Ownership and Inequality: Imputed Rent and Income Distribution in Australia, October 2005*, <http://www.sprc.unsw.edu.au/dp/DPI144.pdf>

MAILING LISTS (FREE)

- SPRC Email Notices *You will receive email updates about events at SPRC*
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