



The Benevolent Society Social Issues Paper 12

Geographic aspects of social and economic inclusion

Where we live matters. Neighbourhoods shape our lives in fundamental ways, including the quality of our education, employment, health and relationships. While most communities are positive places to live, some are characterised by significant and multiple forms of disadvantage: few jobs, inadequate housing and poor access to education, transport and health services. Governments have a responsibility to tackle the structural inequalities which lead to neighbourhood disadvantage. Communities also need to be directly involved in developing solutions to the challenges they face.

Why this is important

Neighbourhoods should be safe and supportive places that promote participation in social, educational and economic life.

Inclusive communities nurture good relationships with others and provide individuals and families of all backgrounds with the same access to services and resources.

While Australia has enjoyed a period of sustained prosperity in recent years, the benefits of economic growth and rising living standards have not been shared equally.

Around two million people – or nearly ten per cent of the population – currently live in poverty¹, with a divide between rich and poor that has been growing in the past two decades as fundamental changes have taken place in the Australian workforce.

Many manufacturing and blue collar jobs have been phased out and the skill level for most jobs has increased. The jobs market has changed with a rapid growth in part-time and casual positions that can trap low-skilled workers in wage and job insecurity. Unemployment and underemployment is set to rise further in the coming years due to the global financial crisis.

The growing disparity in income and employment opportunities is reshaping the face of Australia's communities, creating areas of affluence and privilege while concentrating social and economic disadvantage in specific towns and suburbs².

The chronic shortage of lower-cost housing in Australia's major cities³ is also contributing to the changing character of our neighbourhoods and some country towns.

The rising cost of living close to the city centre can push low income earners into 'satellite towns' on the fringes of cities and regional areas where jobs, services and public transport are less accessible.

The pressures created by living in areas with inadequate or temporary housing, limited work opportunities, poor access to transport, education and health services and isolated from social support networks can compound, creating deep and complex problems for individuals and families.

Research has shown that a disabling social climate can develop when disadvantage becomes concentrated in particular communities. This can increase the likelihood that poor educational outcomes, poverty and disadvantage will be passed on to the next generation⁴.

Recent research by Professor Tony Vinson found that 1.7% of postcodes and communities across Australia accounted for more than seven times their share of the major factors that are associated with inter-generational poverty⁵.

These factors include: low income, early school leaving, physical and mental disabilities, long-term unemployment, prison admissions and limited computer and internet access.

Strong connections with neighbours or community organisations can act as a buffer. However, when these factors coincide with low social cohesion, communities can experience even deeper disadvantage.

Vinson's report found that geographic concentrations of disadvantage occur in all Australian states and territories although, notably, 52% of the 170 most disadvantaged communities are located in rural areas.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, people living in rural and remote regions generally experience higher rates of unemployment and are more likely to have incomes in the bottom quintile of Australians⁶. Socioeconomic disadvantage and social exclusion for Indigenous Australians also rises sharply the more remote they are from regional centres.

When disadvantage and social exclusion become entrenched in communities, it can have multiplying negative effects for the individuals and families who

live there, especially children and young people⁷. Working with the complex affects of cumulative disadvantage places an increasing burden on community services, creating a drain on their resources which can result in worse outcomes for service users⁸.

What should be done?

The Benevolent Society has been working with disadvantaged individuals and communities for almost 200 years.

We know from experience that coordinated and integrated responses are needed to address the underlying issues that contribute to poverty and

social exclusion, especially when disadvantage becomes concentrated in specific communities.

Given the structural nature of disadvantage, government agencies have the primary responsibility for developing policies and providing services that can break this cycle of social and economic exclusion.

The Benevolent Society welcomes the high priority that the Australian Government has placed on finding durable solutions to assist disadvantaged Australians.

It is hoped that the Social Inclusion Unit in the Department

Disadvantage costs people their health

A person's physical and mental health is closely linked to their socio-economic status. The longer people live in disadvantaged circumstances, the more likely they are to suffer from a range of health problems, particularly cardiovascular disease⁹.

Depression is up to twice as common among low income groups, while anxiety, low self-esteem and social isolation are also common¹⁰.

Poverty and social exclusion can increase the risk of disability, illness and addiction, forming a vicious circle that deepens the problems that people face¹¹.

The effects of disadvantage on health accumulate during life. The longer people live in stressful economic and social circumstances, the greater the psychological damage they suffer and the more likely they are to die prematurely.

Putting children and young people at risk

The influence of neighbourhoods is greatest on young children and those in late adolescence¹².

Research shows that growing up in poverty can have negative impacts on the quality of their family relationships and their educational, developmental and health outcomes.

Children in low income families have nearly five times less spent on their education each week than those in high income households¹³.

The impact of poverty is felt most keenly by children in relation to their social relationships. They describe the difficulties of 'keeping up' appearances, not being able to invite friends over, being excluded by peers, feelings of shame and occasionally being bullied¹⁴.

of Prime Minister and Cabinet and the Social Inclusion Board, comprised of independent experts, will help ensure that policy and funding decisions properly take into account the needs of marginalised individuals, families and communities.

Further to these initiatives, we also need fresh approaches to tackle the complex problems facing particular communities where social and economic disadvantage has become entrenched.

In the past, government attempts to address 'place-based' disadvantage have often failed due to top-down, restrictive and fragmented approaches or because government agencies worked in isolation from one another.

Coordinated partnerships between the three tiers of government, the not-for-profit sector and local communities are critical in developing policies and interventions that provide disadvantaged communities with the essential services, support and infrastructure they need.

These include local job generation; employment training and support services; accessible transport services; affordable child care services; and secure, affordable housing in safe and healthy neighbourhoods.

Because the negative effects of disadvantaged neighbourhoods are strongest during childhood and adolescence, it is important that community-based services – such as post-natal outreach, parenting support and child and adolescent health programs – are available and accessible to all, especially to those living in rural and remote areas.

We also need to ensure that community-based services are integrated and linked to specialist support. This allows individuals and families to receive the help they need, when they need it, without having to attend multiple destinations and undergo multiple assessments. It also reduces the chance of some 'falling through the cracks'.

Improving educational outcomes is another critical factor in breaking the cycle of disadvantage. It is crucial that children in disadvantaged communities have a positive experience of school. Schools can play an instrumental role in supporting children and their families, and act as a hub for the whole community.

While government leadership is necessary to address the structural issues underlying poverty and social exclusion, it is essential that communities are actively engaged in developing solutions to the specific problems facing them.

We understand that lasting change occurs when community members are encouraged to come together, identify existing skills and resources and then work together to plan and lead initiatives that promote social cohesion and improve social and economic opportunities.

The Benevolent Society will bring this 'asset-based' approach to a new project that aims to address poverty and social exclusion in two communities: Greenacre, in Sydney's south-west, and Toukley, on the NSW Central Coast.

The 'Bridging the Gap' project will work in partnership with these communities over a ten year period to develop and implement a range of grass roots initiatives that address their specific needs and aspirations.

We will also work closely with key government and non-government organisations in both communities to improve coordination of the service system.

The Benevolent Society also recognises the need to build broad community awareness, understanding and support for tackling the underlying issues that create disadvantage and, in the process, help reduce the stigma that some communities experience.

If we are to continue to build a strong, prosperous and inclusive nation, it is vital to ensure all Australians, no matter where they live, have the support, services and opportunities they need to be active and productive members of the community.

The PLACE Principles

The Benevolent Society has identified a number of criteria that lie at the heart of successful projects to build social inclusion and reduce disadvantage in communities.

Prevention – the best results occur when you intervene early in the lives of people and early in the problems facing communities

Long-term – interventions and community relationships need to be sustained over a number of years

Approach – projects need the participation of the whole community; men and women, people of all ages and those from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds

Community – solutions to problems need to be community-directed and community-led

Evaluation – projects need to be regularly assessed against a robust research framework.

Endnotes

1. Australian Council of Social Services, *A fair go for all Australians: International Comparisons, 2007, 10 Essentials, 2007*; p12
2. Vinson, T., *Dropping off the Edge: The Distribution of Disadvantage in Australia* (Catholic Social Services Australia and Jesuit Social Services), 2007
3. National Shelter, *Housing Australia Factsheet: A quick guide to housing facts and figures for workers in the media* (2007)
4. Vinson (2007)
5. Ibid
6. Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Measures of Australia's Progress* (1370.0), 2004
7. Vinson (2007)
8. Ibid
9. World Health Organisation, *Social Determinants of Health: The Solid Facts* (2nd Edition), 2003; p16
10. VicHealth, *Access to Economic Resources as a Determinant of Mental Health and Wellbeing* (Research Summary 4), January 2005; p3
11. World Health Organisation (2003); p16
12. Vinson (2007)
13. VicHealth (2005); p2
14. Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth Collaborative team (Professor Catherine McDonald, RMIT; NSW Commission for Children and Young People; and The Benevolent Society), *Pulling the threads together: Consultations, conversations and contemplations on child poverty in Australia*, 2008; p11

Other sources of information

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Randolph, B., *Socially Inclusive Urban Renewal in Low Value Suburbs: A Synopsis of Issues and an Agenda for Action*, July 2008

Social Issues Papers

The Benevolent Society works with vulnerable individuals, families and communities who face a wide range of difficult issues which affect their wellbeing and their social and economic participation. Our Social Issues Agenda identifies 12 broad issues that are related to social and economic inclusion, and our series of issues papers explores these challenges and some potential solutions. To read the full series of social issues papers go to www.bensoc.org.au

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