

The Invisible Australians: Conceptions of Poverty in Australia

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Introduction

The future lives of Australian families will take place in a society struggling with new and complex challenges. Many modern societies are experiencing growing economic, cultural and social disparity and similar trends have been noted in Australia. A major factor in this societal difference is the level of poverty which exists and, perhaps more importantly, that which people are prepared to tolerate within their community.

This paper summarises the findings to arise from 22 focus group discussions and 400 telephone interviews with the Australian public. The project developed from work undertaken by the Brotherhood of St Laurence, which identified the impacts of substantial economic and social change occurring over the 1990s on the lives of the most vulnerable. Concerns were raised that these changes might also be contributing to new or narrower views about what poverty is, as well as to changing community attitudes to possible and necessary responses to poverty.

Both the Brotherhood's service experience and wider research data have indicated a hardening of attitudes towards poverty. The discourse around poverty appears to have become increasingly negative with the emergence of descriptors such as 'dole bludgers', 'mutual obligation', 'welfare dependency' or 'cheats' and, even, 'underclass' entering our lexicon. Where in the seventies the rhetoric was about a 'civil society', in the eighties and nineties this was replaced by the discourse of 'economic rationalism' (Taylor, 2000). The problems of the 'poor' became secondary to those of the middle class and the economy, and interest in solving poverty waned (Stewart, 1996).

Poverty is neither new nor the concern only of the poor. This research study was designed to determine what Australians understand by poverty—its characteristics and manifestations—how they feel about it and whether poverty is believed to be affecting our society today.

The paper examines...

- The objectives and methodology employed in the study
- Key findings from both the qualitative and quantitative research phases
- Discussion of the consequences and challenges presented by the research findings.

Research Objectives and Method

Two overriding objectives were set for the study...

1. To increase our understanding of different perspectives within Australian society about the nature and causes of, and responses to poverty
2. Through this increased understanding to stimulate action for a more equitable Australian society and to better engage with decision-makers and the community for effective change.

The Understanding Poverty project is a two stage one. Phase One *'The Listening Phase'* is concerned with the first objective above; Phase Two is *'The Dialogue Phase'* and addresses the second objective.

'The Listening Phase' utilised both qualitative and quantitative research methods. Amongst the general public we conducted...

- 22 focus group discussions with diverse community groups including farmers and farm workers, country women, union members, church congregation members, indigenous people, young sports players, migrants, small business proprietors, low- and high-income earners ('low' meaning in receipt of government benefits, 'high' meaning with a personal income in excess of \$50,000 per annum)—in Sydney, Melbourne and country Victoria, Hobart and country Tasmania
- 400 random telephone interviews with adults aged 18 years or more, spread across metropolitan and rural New South Wales, Victoria and Tasmania.

In addition 25 in-depth interviews with key decision-makers including politicians, academics, business and community leaders, union heads and media analysts were undertaken (Taylor, 2000; Muller, 2000). This paper, however, is concerned only with the general public research findings.

The focus group discussion participants were usually recruited via their membership of an organisation such as Rotary (small business), sporting clubs, churches and so on, or sourced with the assistance of service or community organisations, learning centres, local councils or direct referral. Participants were paid a small fee to cover their expenses. The groups, which comprised eight to ten participants, were usually of 1_ to 1_ hour's duration. They were conducted according to accepted market research principles; a topic guide was used to focus discussions but at all times the moderator allowed for the emergence and exploration of relevant issues raised spontaneously. An interpreter was used for one of the migrant groups. Due to the widely diverse nature of the various groups it was common for differing emphases to occur in discussions. Even within particular sector types diversity was apparent. For example, the three low-income groups differed substantially in terms of their lifecycle and circumstances: in Hobart we spoke to a group of young parents with children; in Melbourne the group consisted mainly of single or divorced unemployed people of varying ages; the group in inner Sydney was comprised of a mixture of 'street' people and hostel residents, also of varying ages. Overall, 170 people participated in the group discussions; demographic data collected at the time of the discussions revealed that a broadly representative cross-section of

age, gender, marital and employment status, household income and ethnicity was obtained. The focus group discussions were conducted between July and November 1999.

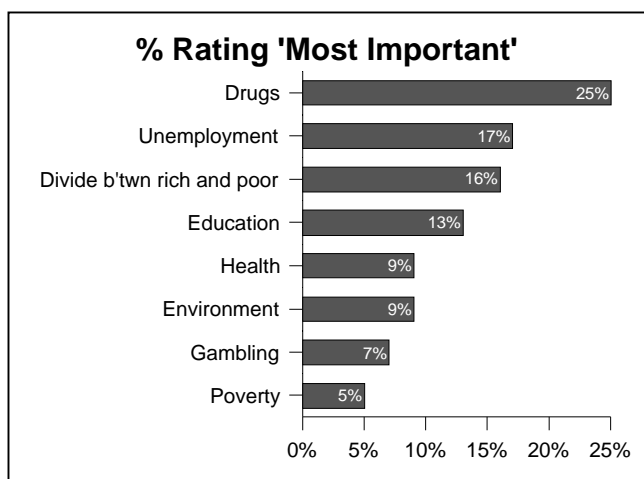
The telephone interviews were, as stated, random but quota-controlled for age and gender. The questionnaire, of approximately 10 minutes' duration, was developed on the basis of the qualitative findings, with two questions being based on those used in two other studies (Taylor, 1997; Australian Community Research, 1998). The interview was administered utilising CATI (computer assisted telephone interviewing) software. The data collection software used was Surveycraft; SPSS was used in the analysis and the data was weighted to ABS Census information. In addition, a segmentation analysis was conducted on one question (relating to attitudes to poverty) utilising a combination of factor analysis and cluster analysis (Wards algorithm followed by a k-means analysis). The quantitative fieldwork was carried out in January 2000. Fieldwork and analysis was provided by Millward Brown Australia, with additional segmentation analysis being undertaken by Bill Callaghan from RMIT University.

Separate detailed reports have been written on the qualitative and quantitative research findings (Johnson, 2000a; Johnson, 2000b). This paper draws together some of the key findings in these studies.

The Key Findings

The 'visibility' of poverty in Australia

The focus group findings revealed that poverty in Australia is set against the backdrop of 'foreign' poverty, that is the media-fuelled images of overseas famine, wars and exploitation of the innocent. Poverty in Australia does not grate in quite the same way. It is not highly visible. Many admit to being blinkered to poverty for a number of reasons—it does not impact on their lives, they are too busy to think about it or to notice it, they are unwilling to confront it, it does not look like poverty. The face of poverty is often masked behind the desires of low-income people to enjoy the same material comforts as other Australians.

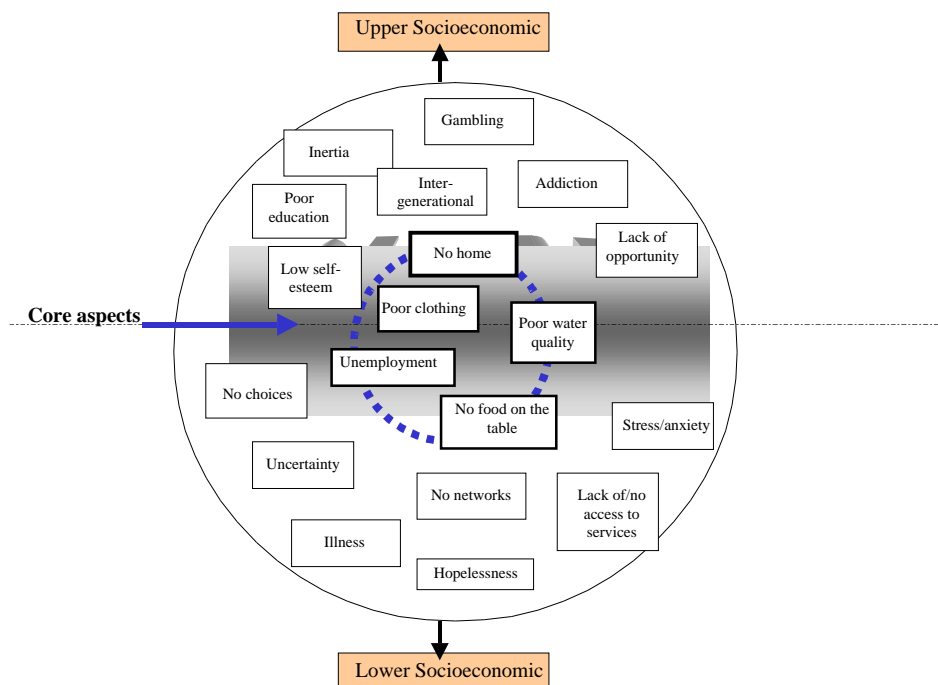


Perhaps illustrating this lack of definition of Australian poverty, our telephone survey found that in the competitive context of eight possible factors affecting Australian society today, poverty is placed last in terms of 'importance'. Drugs, unemployment and the divide between rich and poor—all strong concomitants of poverty identified in the focus groups—are the three 'most important' issues. This relatively low rating of poverty compared to unemployment confirms other studies (for example

Australian Community Research, 1998). Interestingly, young people (18-34s) are less likely than their older counterparts to place drugs at the top of the list; to them, unemployment is the major area of concern.

What is poverty?

The very definition of poverty is difficult. While there is consensus about the core aspects of poverty—lack of food, poor housing, inferior water quality, unemployment—people are uncertain as to what other elements of a 'decent existence' are necessary to lift people out of poverty. Is poverty lack of access to the same opportunities that others enjoy? Is poverty correlated with drug or alcohol addiction, with gambling, with poor health, with low self-esteem? Is it all about having reduced choices? Understandings of what constitutes poverty are wide-ranging and are rooted in factors such as socioeconomic standing, level of social awareness, education and a myriad of other influences. The research findings lead to the following paradigm for defining poverty which illustrates the varying perspectives of the lower and higher socioeconomic groups.

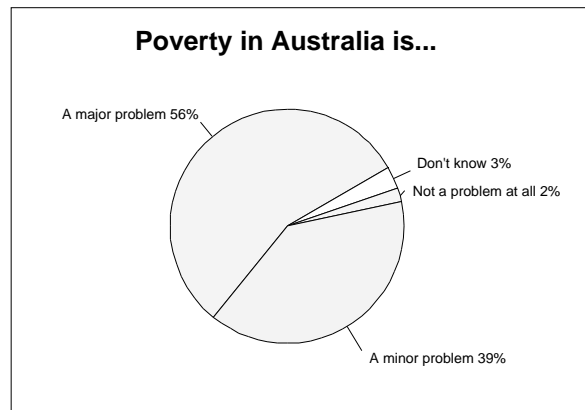


Clearly, higher-income individuals tend to associate some 'blameworthy' aspects with poverty, while many low-income recipients relate negative emotions and lack of choices with poverty. One example is the use of the word 'inertia' (or, at times, of 'laziness'). While those on higher incomes associate a degree of inertia with poverty, people in poverty talk more about uncertainty. Having no job, feeling they may never get a job, or working part-time for low wages, all mean they find it difficult to plan a future. Many cannot see a way out of their situation and, because of this, lack the impetus to try.

Even the usefulness of the term 'poverty' is called into question, although in the context of words like 'hardship' or 'disadvantage' it is seen to describe a situation that is bottom of the rung, seemingly permanent, inescapable.

Notwithstanding people's views about the relativity of poverty in Australia, the majority recognise that it does exist. Indeed, 56% of our survey sample describe poverty in Australia as 'a major problem', and a further 39% as 'a minor problem'.

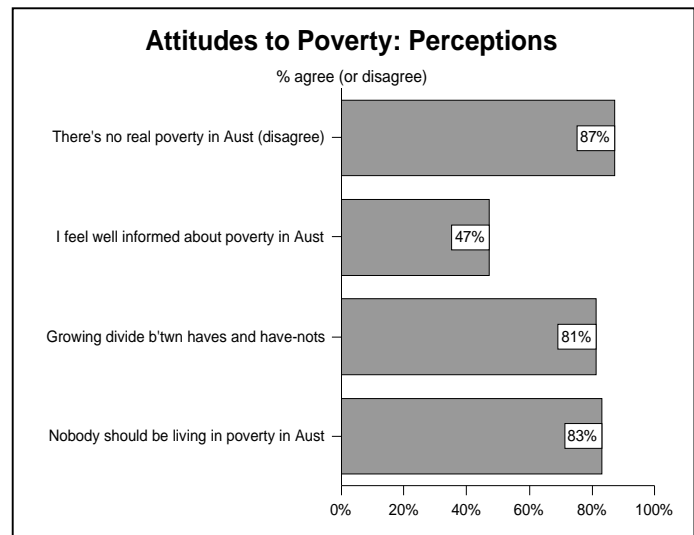
Those most likely to recognise poverty as a major problem are females and residents of Melbourne and Tasmania.



The divide

Furthermore, 87% of those surveyed disagree with the contention 'there's no real poverty in Australia'. While poverty in Australia may be subject to definition and notwithstanding that only around half the population feels well informed about poverty in Australia (47% agree, 46% disagree), there are widespread concerns about the division of wealth.

Poverty is particularly exemplified by a growing gap between rich and poor: 81% of those surveyed agree 'there seems to be a growing divide between the haves and the have-nots in Australia'.



The perception is that the structure of Australian society is changing as the middle class is both pulled upwards and pushed downwards. An alternate view, put largely by higher income individuals, is that the size of the middle class is growing and, at the same time, becoming more distanced from the poor.

The divide is most often talked about in economic terms—strong economic growth and coexisting high levels of poverty indicate to most that income and wealth distribution is unequal. Not all view this as a failing; to some it is no more than a reflection of today's reality and, as such, must be incorporated into our economic agenda. In confirmation of the dominant view in the focus group discussions, however, most of those interviewed in the telephone survey believe it is unacceptable that people continue to live in poverty in our country (83% agree 'nobody should be living in poverty in a country like Australia'.)

Beyond the fall-out from economic changes, many Australians view the divide as being manifest in increased community fragmentation or, even, community meltdown. Lack of community 'connectedness' perhaps affects those in poverty most severely but is recognised across the income spectrum as an expression of increased social inequity. The divide is also

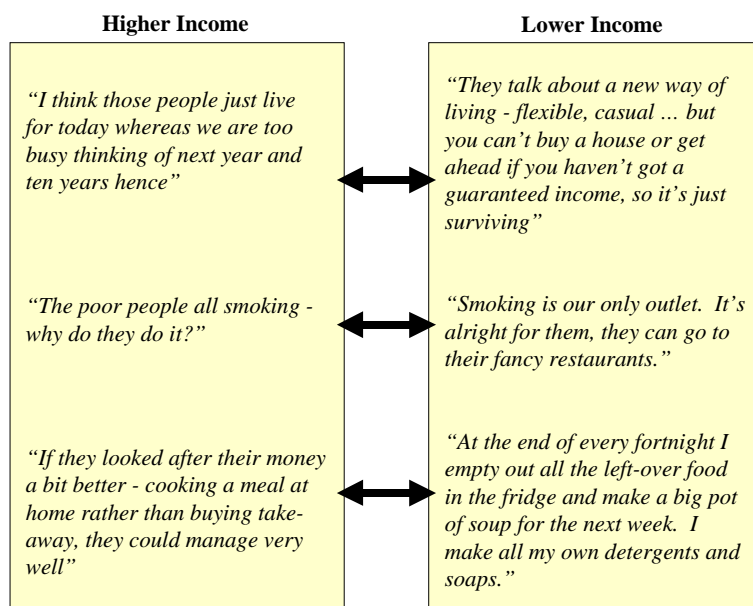
sharply highlighted when it comes to people's working lives. The lifestyles of workers, many of whom are required to work longer hours than has been the case in the recent history of Australia, and non-workers or casual workers, who often have little activity to fill their days, are seemingly worlds apart. Moreover, increasing competition for jobs has led to a sector of the community accusing others of 'job snobbery'. The call for the unemployed to be prepared to take any job, regardless of their qualifications or wishes, is met by anger and resentment at the other end ... *"not only are they saying those jobs down there are nothing, but if you don't want that job and you want one of my jobs, how dare you!"*.

Expectations and aspirations

Discussions about poverty frequently turn to the expectations held by low-income people. Some higher-income people put forward the view that poverty has not increased but that people's expectations have risen. They add that in a materialistic society it is perhaps not unreasonable for those on low-incomes to aspire to the same things that other Australians do but this raises questions about where we draw the line on poverty. For example, what constitutes a 'decent existence' and how 'decent' an existence can people in poverty expect to have. Others believe that it is their very exclusion from this 'wealth' or consumerism that marginalises people and reinforces their poverty.

Tied in with all of this is a fairly widespread view that those in poverty are to blame for their situation to some degree because of their perceived inability to budget or manage their limited income responsibly. Much discussion centres on the easy availability of credit, the 'buy now-pay later' mentality and the fact that we have become almost a cashless society, the proliferation of ATMs, credit cards, pay-by-phone and so on rendering money somehow less 'real'. In this context, the escalation in gambling is also raised by both high- and low-income people. Many indict the poor for 'wasting money' on tobacco, on alcohol and even, sometimes, on pets.

While few would dispute that some poverty is associated with these habits, the reality for many of those living in poverty is that of a never-ending daily grind to survive. This research unearthed a wide range of coping behaviours on the part of the poor. The following comments illustrate the differing perspectives of high- and low-income earners and how out of touch the former are with the realities of poverty.



Causes

Poverty is not linear. Cause and effect are closely intertwined and it is difficult to pinpoint the chain of events that leads to poverty. Therefore, it is unclear to most whether social factors such as drug addiction, gambling, family breakdown and so on are implicated in the causation of poverty or, indeed, are consequential to it.

A recurring theme in discussions about poverty is recognition of the emergence of an economic rationalist agenda, tied in with downturns in manufacturing and other traditional blue-collar industries. These sweeping changes in the country's economy and ways of working present real challenges to those who are concerned about poverty. Many believe that jobs are not being shared around equally as companies downsize in order to maximise profits. Corporate greed and profit-taking at the expense of jobs is, to some, a reality that we need to deal with and yet to others signposts structural acceptance of a level of poverty that is undesirable.

Governments, too, are implicated in the creation of poverty. Abdication of responsibility, poor targeting of welfare spending (and, some say, all spending), an escalating cost of living, insufficient activity in terms of jobs creation or growth, increased reliance on gambling income to support spending, are all features of perceived government involvement in poverty. Added to this, the government is often felt to be compliant in masking poverty by manipulating unemployment statistics and in handing over many of its traditional welfare responsibilities to the not-for-profit sector.

There is, however, a section of the (mostly higher-income) population who regard the influence of systemic factors in the creation of poverty as secondary to the individual, 'blameworthy' factors discussed previously.

Solutions and Responsibilities

Clearly, in the context of these various attitudes towards the creation or maintenance of poverty, suggested solutions will also vary. And, just as clearly from this research, is the fact that most people feel overwhelmed when it comes to suggesting ways of addressing poverty. All recognise that employment is the key to eliminating poverty. While there are those who are sceptical that this can be achieved, most call for a greater investment in training, skills development and jobs creation, particularly that grounded in major public works programs but also in greater efforts to support manufacturing and other industries. There is also some considerable view that the education system is not doing enough—or is taking the wrong tack with its focus on 'certificates' rather than, they say, practical skills—in preparing young people for the workforce. Thus, for most people, an obvious response to poverty is to focus on education, training and employment.

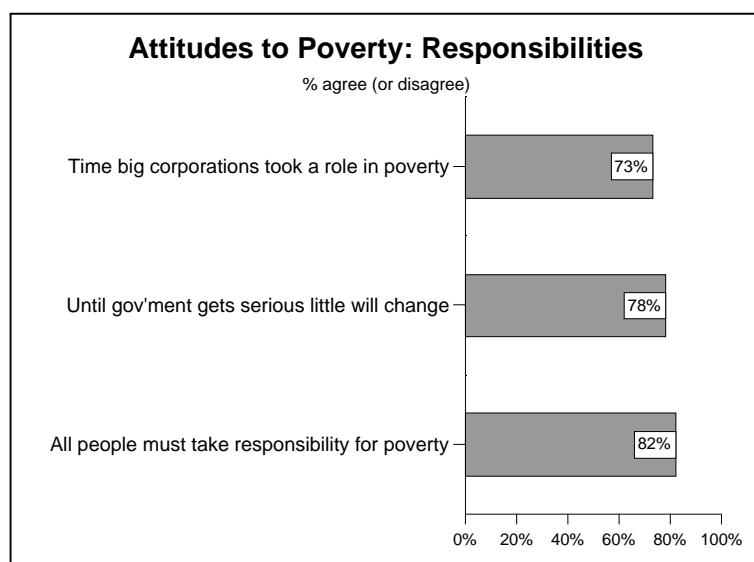
Discussions about employment inevitably move to the issue of wages and sometimes the notion of reduced minimum wages is raised. Opposition to reducing minimum wages is quite widespread with references being made to the adverse impact of labour market deregulation in the United States. With a perceived lack of success in stemming poverty in the U.S., the low-waged, low-education path is not viewed as a desirable route for Australia to take. However,

many repeated their call for the unemployed to be prepared to take whatever job is on offer—at or above minimum wages—rather than holding out for something better.

Also in this context, the changing pattern of work to more contract, part-time and casual work is indicted by some in the creation of poverty. Many see the need for employers, particularly larger ones, to be more responsible in terms of providing permanent, full-time jobs.

Another large hurdle in the poverty war is the extent of misinformation and cynicism that abounds. As long as poverty in Australia remains inaccurately characterised and poorly understood there is little hope of change, according to many of our study participants. While shocked at the proliferation in numbers of homeless and people begging in our streets, many are nevertheless sceptical and even fearful of them. Often the desire to help is stifled by these other emotions. This research highlighted a strong call for more leadership in relation to poverty as well as greater community understanding before any real resolution can take place.

In both the focus groups and the telephone survey, three major players were identified as having responsibility to address poverty—the government, corporations and the people.



The research highlighted people's desire for government leadership in the fight against poverty and in enhancing corporate and community citizenship. People recognise that they need information in order to fully understand the nature of poverty in Australia and to dispel the cynicism and misinformation that abounds. The view is that little will change in the absence of greater public understanding as well as government commitment to alleviating poverty.

In terms of specific suggestions to solve poverty, while the public are able to point out possible reasons for the problem it is often far more difficult for them to devise solutions. Those that were forthcoming centred on the following...

- the need to work towards full employment as a more concrete goal
- the desirability of addressing work skills preparation at secondary and even primary school level

- a re-examination of barriers and incentives operating within traditional unskilled or semiskilled employment industries
- schemes to kick-start small business (both rural and metropolitan)
- better and more transparent structuring of welfare payments (with particular attention to work disincentives at the low income end)
- both preventative and support programs for high-risk groups such as youth, families, single parents, the elderly and so on vis-à-vis poverty
- better policing of corporate policy and behaviour, particularly in relation to employment
- moves to increase the number of full-time permanent jobs rather than part-time casual ones

Consequences and Challenges

This research has shown us that attitudes to poverty are paradoxical. Despite great concern about poverty in this country there is incomplete understanding of the nature, causes and extent of such poverty. A consequence of limited understanding is that it becomes easy to ignore poverty, to be cynical of it and to attach blame to the poor themselves. In seeking to understand poverty many start from a point of 'innocence'—the 'innocent' poor of the past or of our imagining are in many ways today being transformed into the blameworthy. This attitude is to a large extent informed by the rhetoric of policy-makers and the media which concentrates on the negatives which have come to be associated with poverty—gambling, alcohol, drugs, laziness, cheating and so on.

The challenge now facing people who are concerned about poverty is to present the reality of modern Australian poverty. The story of poverty is not particularly compelling to today's society and many seek to utilise emotional triggers to evoke reactions. What this does, however, is to further mythologise a state which has little to do with fantasy and much to do with the hard realities of children missing out on an optimal education, families breaking down under the pressure, youth who are marginalised often to the point of drug-taking and even suicide and, sometimes, to violence and crime. According to the research, few Australians want to live in a fractured society where a proportion of the population is living in poverty. The message that failing to address poverty will result in a further degraded society is a compelling one but, again, is probably too negative to engender a response.

We must continue to seek ways to invigorate the debate around poverty and, especially, to inform 'ordinary people' that there are other 'ordinary people' living not too far from them who are suffering immensely. A reinvestment in Australia's social capital is timely and, this research would appear to indicate, would be welcomed by most.

The future of Australia's families—both lower-income and higher-income—will be enhanced and enriched in social and economic terms if we address the causes of poverty. To not do so is to risk a degradation of the kind of family life of which Australians are so proud.

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