

Making Ends Meet

Any Which Way You Can *Youth Livelihoods, Community Resources and Crime*

by Rob White with Megan Aumir, Anita Harris and Liz McDonnell

In Australia today, difficulties experienced by young people due to changing economic circumstances are often expressed in terms of the proportion of young people in the labour market not in full-time employment.

While official statistics are an important indicator of the impact economic forces have on opportunities for employment, they do not capture the extent to which young people access income outside the formal system in order to make ends meet. Nor is it possible to understand the life experiences and opportunities available to young people living under economic hardship through consideration of unemployment figures alone.

The recent Australian Youth Foundation publication *Any Which Way You Can* is a descriptive report of what young people themselves, and the youth and community workers in direct contact with them, are saying about: how financial pressures influence the ways in which young people access income; the community resources available to them; and how they use their time and space.

The book represents an important initial phase in the reporting of findings from a major research project undertaken by researchers from the University of Melbourne on the problems confronting adolescents and young adults. Four hundred young people under 18 years of age, and a second group of 150 young people between 18 and 25 years of age, comprised the study sample, although the majority of those interviewed were 15 or 16 years old. Interviewees were recruited from six municipalities in the Melbourne metropolitan area, all of which have experienced significant economic and/or demographic changes in recent years. A further 50 workers from targeted non-government agencies across the six local council areas also participated in the interview component of the research.

Despite acknowledged difficulty in accessing certain groups of young people, effort was made to obtain as meaningful and representative a study sample as possible. Analysis of the study population revealed ethnic diversity, an even gender split, and variation across several social characteristics. The participation of young

people who rarely have an opportunity to voice their opinions about circumstances which affect their lives is a unique and important feature of the investigation. The strength of the book lies in their compelling narratives.

The authors use the interview material to explore a number of themes concerning the social and economic circumstances of young people living under economic hardship. By introducing each topic area under analysis with a statement of the rights children should ideally possess, they set up a disturbing contrast between young people's actual circumstances and the life opportunities necessary to secure their long-term wellbeing into adulthood.

The authors provide a picture of young people's different experiences in the workplace, their perceptions of sources of income available to them, and how they utilise their time and space, by reporting responses to the main categories of questions as frequencies. Direct quotes are used to elucidate these findings.

The investigation into income sources available to young people revealed that many of them felt there was little opportunity for paid work in their area. One young person's perception of the availability of work was summarised thus:

"There's not a lot of places that set out to employ young people, there's no-one except for the fast food chains and they only want you 'cos you're a cheap labour. They're just using you – as soon as you're too old they'll get rid of ya, they'll find a problem with ya."

A series of different types of work-related exploitation were also identified in the analysis. The following account is one of many experiences of exploitation in the workplace described in the report:

"I got the job because my god sister was chef there. She left 'cos the kitchen was too small and so the company actually chucked me out and said 'we're making you redundant' and didn't give me any payment or anything and I did sign the form and I did read through it and it said we can't sack you unless you do one of the following things and I never did any of them."



Australian Youth Foundation,
1997, 146 pages

Many young people cited participation in an informal waged system, dependency on family, welfare and education payments and illegal activity (commonly drug dealing) as strategies they employed to get by economically. Many accounts of the ways in which young people raise financial resources were reported, for example:

"Most of the people I know who deal drugs don't actually use them themselves. Like now I know people who do use the drugs but a lot of people who are doing it now are only doing it for the money. Like I know people who do it to pay for their rent and stuff so they just have to."

While the authors acknowledge that the opinions and experiences recounted in the report cannot strictly be interpreted beyond the young people who were interviewed, it is likely that other socially, politically and economically marginalised youth may share the same difficulties as those experienced by the respondents.

Any Which Way You Can is essential reading for anyone interested in discussion and debate on the status of Australian young people, or committed to the stimulation or implementation of research and reform aimed and improving their current prospects.

The descriptions provided in this book illustrate how we, as a society, are failing some of our most vulnerable members, and the ways in which young people act in order to fulfil their needs. It should prompt further, fine-grained analysis of the impact of economic policy and changing economic circumstances on the lives of Australian young people, and should ultimately lead to more enlightened ways of responding to them.

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