

Select Committee on Intergenerational Welfare Dependence

Department of the House of Representatives

Submission from

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(This paper represents the views of the authors; it does not necessarily represent the views of the St Vincent de Paul Society (WA) INC., or of Edith Cowan University)

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## Summary

- The Australian experience of intergenerational welfare dependency is complex, multi-dimensional and persistent;
- Adults experience long-term poverty as exhausting, time consuming, excluding and demotivating;
- Children in welfare dependent families can still be hopeful of change, and optimistic for their future;
- Supporting children to break free of welfare dependency is one strategy for breaking the cycle of poverty;
- Education, sports and the arts all offer means through which children may imagine a different future, but few programs support these activities in affordable ways for poor families;
- Programs that support opportunities for children in poor families can also offer targeted support for parents;
- Narrative/storytelling therapy might also offer a targeted intervention for adults in welfare-dependent families.

## Background

We write as researchers on a national competitive research grant awarded by the Australian Research Council in 2014, which was actively progressed between 2015 and 2018. The research partner organisation, St Vincent de Paul Society (WA) INC, also known as Vinnies WA, is an internationally-recognised provider of emergency relief to people in need, and a support agency for those who require acute or chronic welfare support. Based on our observations, to be a welfare dependent family in Australia today is to be poor. Researching poverty is challenging because eligible participants generally have little 'spare' time, they are wary of being judged, and they often feel overwhelmed by a range of

stressors associated with welfare dependency. This means that potential contributors may lack the capacity to take on additional responsibilities, such as participating in research. As a consequence, data collection has only just been completed and we are still in an analysis phase.

The aim of the research was to investigate strategies that might produce outcomes to help free children from inherited poverty, disrupting the communication of welfare dependency through exploring targeted interventions. Vinnies WA also supported the exploration of innovation in service delivery. The hope was that the findings would be of relevance to the general welfare delivery sector. To offer a sense of scale for this project, over the four years of its life the research has been supported by \$187,500 in cash (\$150,000 from the ARC and \$37,500 from Vinnies WA). In-kind contributions from the partner organisation (mainly time invested), and in-kind contribution from ECU, in the time spent by salaried academics and administrative staff (as opposed to the contract staff hired for the project), complemented the cash component. Our hope was to make a modest contribution in response to the observation by Perales et al. (2014), that there is an “an alarming lack” of research in this area, “with only 29 studies devoted to investigating intergenerational welfare dependency in Australia being publicly available since 1980” (2014, 35).

The research effectively involved two elements. Firstly, the offering of photovoice workshops as part of two week-long, residential bush camps for poverty-impacted children (led by Associate Professor Panizza Allmark, ECU), and in-depth interviews with research participants, including some who had taken part in the photovoice workshops, led by the authors. Professor Lelia Green is the project’s lead Chief Investigator, Dr Kylie Stevenson was the lead Research Associate and funded by the grant, while Kelly Jaunzems was a funded Research Assistant who took special responsibility for working with four of the five migrant families. This submission by the three latter-named researchers is primarily based on the interviews, home visits, visits to support centres and research work with families. Publications arising from this research are included in the references listed; but most of the analysis and publication work lies ahead, given the delays in completing data collection.

In all, this submission draws upon separate interviews (typically 45 minutes or so) with:

- 6 professional providers of support services, paid by or associated with Vinnies WA;
- 10 volunteer youth counsellors, Vinnies Youth, trained to support the children’s bush camps;
- 18 volunteers who lead and manage both the donations and distribution of time and goods to Vinnies WA client-base. These local leaders (known as ‘senior Conference members’) were drawn both from the Perth Metro area and regional centres;
- 7 broader community families featuring intergenerational welfare dependency, with each family case study including an interview with a parent and a child (separately), although one parent declined to allow her child to participate;
- 5 families identified as humanitarian migrants (and/or refugees), 4 of these were supported by a dedicated Vinnies Migrant outreach centre, again with the interview focus on both a parent and child (separately), supplemented by interpreters and translation support;

Plus,

- 32 children on Photovoice workshop 1, bush camp 2016; and
- 11 children on Photovoice workshop 2, bush camp 2017.

(NB There were 37 unique Photovoice children, since 6 of the children in 2017 had previously attended the 2016 camp.)

The majority of children engaging in this research were primary school aged (5-12), and all participants were required to provide personal informed consent as part of the recruitment processes, with adults additionally having to provide consent for their child's participation.

Some Vinnies WA volunteers have worked with the poor for many decades, responding to requests for help, delivering food and other necessities, and listening to recipients' life stories; empathising with their experiences and their immediate challenges. These volunteers are trained by Vinnies WA and practice non-judgemental support at a point of need. They work in pairs when visiting families, although the research visits were conducted by a researcher working by herself. Accordingly, some of the recommendations draw upon the collective wisdom of many decades of service.

At the other end of the spectrum, some of the young people who volunteer as Vinnies Youth and work as camp counsellors for the bush-based residential program have themselves been supported by Vinnies WA and are 'giving back'. This work is one way in which young people can experience the commitment and rewards of making a regular contribution to an organisation, which is in itself a preparation for the workforce and for a journey out of welfare dependency.

On the basis of this four year engagement with the lives of people who are impacted by persistent poverty and, in most cases, intergenerational welfare dependency; and drawing upon the experiences of those who have sought to support and assist these families, we feel able to offer some general observations which may of relevance to the Inquiry.

### **The Australian experience of intergenerational poverty**

There are no quick fixes for the kinds of poverty that are communicated within families, between generations. The kind of poverty observed when dealing with participant families had many differences that were family dependent, but also many points of similarity. The points of similarity will be listed as a preliminary step to suggesting ways in which the communication of poverty in intergenerational contexts might be productively addressed.

Poverty is time consuming. Being a member of the poorest sector of Australian society means fewer choices in all aspects of life. For people without a car, public transport can increase travel time and complexity by a significant multiplier. For people without food, produce in local shops may be out of the question, they may visit churches and other distribution outlets to source supplies. This involves research, travel and time. If they are requesting, and eligible for, a food delivery in their place of residence this entails staying at home within a given time frame to receive the donation. For people without accommodation the search for somewhere to sleep can be a full-time occupation. This is particularly true for a family with children, and especially without ready access to transport.

People who are poor are often impacted by poor health: personally, or within their family circle. As research around the social determinants of health has established, poor people are more likely to experience ill health, and people who have chronic health problems are more likely to be poor. They have fewer resources available to deal with health challenges than is the case with people with average incomes. Ill health includes both mental and physical ailments, and sometimes those challenges are

exacerbated by substance abuse and other counter-productive strategies for coping with the stresses of poverty.

Families who are poor generally have little time or energy to invest in changing their circumstances: they are too busy trying to meet the basic necessities of food, shelter and everyday bills. Issues of poor diet, inadequate housing, and a potential lack of exercise and other energy promoting activities, can all mean that even an opportunity for a family or individual to change their circumstances presents itself as an unmanageable burden.

Poverty is chaotic and precarious. Because resources and coping skills are fully stretched in managing daily life, there is nothing in reserve when the family experiences a setback: illness, accident, dental emergency, hospitalisation, domestic violence, involvement with the police, a large bill, eviction, etc. The circumstances that can propel people into poverty, including migration via refugee status, have the capacity to immerse the child in first generation poverty, as the parent(s) must effectively begin family life again from scratch, with nothing stable on which to base their future. Without adequate supports to establish food and housing security, the newly-impoverished family may remain in poverty for further generations. The contact details and locations of some families impacted by intergenerational welfare dependence are continually changing, as the adults in the family search for an affordable, secure place to live. These changes in themselves disrupt the hope of stability through education, consistent health provision, the development of social connection within a neighbourhood, and links that might lead to employment.

Poverty is often concentrated in certain localities. Poverty is a normal situation within welfare-dependent families, and welfare-dependent families often have no choice but to live where poverty is the norm. These geographical limitations restrict exposure to examples of everyday life in an average-income family, creating a sense of 'us' and 'them'. This dynamic can inhibit change: it is generally easier for a family to make the best of a status quo that feels normal, than to seek to change their circumstances and risk losing that sense of belonging to a particular sector of community without also being confident of acceptance elsewhere. This dynamic can also support an aspiration for larger families. Historically, geographically and in development scholarship, small family size is linked to affluence and education, whereas large family size often reflects structural poverty, as well as exacerbating poverty by stretching resources more thinly across more people. As Orbeta (2005, 3) argues, in relation to the Philippines, "no matter what poverty measure one uses, there is clear indication that poverty worsens as one moves from smaller to bigger family size households". In Australia, households with children are increasingly likely to be impacted by poverty with "a 2 percentage point rise in the number of children living in poverty in the period [2005-2014, and it is] now 17.4% (731 300 children)" (ACOSS 2016, 5).

For children raised in a family impacted by intergenerational poverty, there is nothing fair about their circumstances. This is the situation they were born into: it isn't chosen. Possibly partly because of these factors, children within these families appear to be even more focussed than broader community children on what is and isn't fair. In addition to a \$50 thank you grocery voucher for the parent, the research design included funding (typically \$200-250) to support the interviewed child to have an opportunity that he or she might not otherwise have been able to experience. When the project was developed, the idea was that this might pay for a child to join a basketball team, or an extra-curricular art class, or attend a weekend science workshop. Instead, the interviewed children uniformly wanted to share the 'thank you' experience with their siblings and family. They wanted a family pass to the local swimming pool or leisure centre, or they wanted books that could also be read by siblings (Green &

Stevenson, 2017). The children we met in welfare-impacted families were focused on giving back and supporting the whole family where possible.

These features of poverty make it especially difficult for families to change their circumstances without structured support and assistance. The children in such families however tend to be more resilient and more optimistic than their parents. Further, their engagement in the educational system allows them access to information about alternative experiences of family life. Working to support a child's escape from poverty might involve a 15-year time line, but that investment seems likely to have the best chance of a better outcome, before the birth of the next generation perpetuates the cycle. The focus of our research was families with primary school-aged children, and this is the stage which seems to offer most hope for targeted interventions to support children, parents and extended families.

### **Service delivery**

Given the complexity of the needs of some welfare-dependent families, a single point of contact that delivers a suite of interconnected services to support a whole of family intervention would appear to be the ideal future direction. Homelessness or lack of food might be the precipitating trigger for a family to access help, but financial counselling, mental health support, drug and alcohol strategies, and job readiness skill development might all be required, in an integrated way, to help that family move forward into less precarious territory. While the mission of Centrelink might be to facilitate this service integration, to date it has not been successful in this role and the voluntary welfare support sector is increasingly exploring strategies to facilitate such integrated service delivery. Support for the ARC Linkage grant is one evidence of this.

### **Early observations from preliminary analysis**

For some families impacted by intergenerational welfare dependence it may almost seem like disloyalty, or a betrayal to aspire to chart a different life trajectory. There is a possible unwillingness to aspire to be a 'tall poppy' in the everyday cultural context of the communities in which these welfare-impacted families live. At the same time, welfare-dependent parents are clearly motivated to improve the lives and future prospects of their children. While not necessarily optimistic for themselves, they are hopeful for younger family members.

We had anticipated that the research would afford a small number of welfare-dependent children (12, one per research family) a peak experience that might offer a vision of other possible futures. Thirty-seven children had an 'artistic intervention' in terms of at least one Photovoice workshop (Allmark, Stotzer & Stevenson, 2016), and two of the Photovoice families were included in the 12 interview families, thus engaging with the research in a dual capacity. However, the sheer difficulty in recruiting families to take part in this research, which is demonstrated by the fact that it is some two years behind the target time frame, indicates the reluctance of many welfare-impacted people to engage with 'volunteering for extras'. Those who took part often seemed to have personal motivations for doing so, in addition to any notion of helping with the research. This helped to mitigate what appears to be a general and significant mistrust of surveys and interviews in this community, and a sense that such

activities might be risky. For example, in some cases adult interviewees wanted (and were encouraged) to include an additional friend-observer-independent record keeper as part of agreeing to participate.

Primary school children are already enrolled in compulsory education, and some of these will break the cycle of welfare dependence through educational achievement (even though this may be bought at the price of social integration within their community of origin). Indeed, there are specific initiatives to support adults to break the cycle of poverty and other forms of social exclusion using educational pathways (Howard et al., 2008). For those unable or unwilling to identify as educational achievers, sports and the arts offer alternative pathways through which to craft a different future. Working with these welfare-dependent children in the Photovoice workshops, and in terms of our observations around the roles of sports expertise in poorer communities, many children are encouraged to dream of a sporting future. Such dreams can be frustrated, however, by simple points of access: team uniform and equipment, membership fees, a commitment to training, transport to sporting facilities and locations etc. Such properly-funded child-focused sports and arts support, however, might help children to see their futures as being different from the model provided by their parents and community. Health Care card holders may currently receive a \$200 voucher per year per child towards sports and physical activity, but this would often not cover registration fees, let alone the other expenses, and there is no support for arts. Purposeful well-supported engagement with the sports and arts sectors are one strategy to respond to intergenerational welfare dependence and could provide additional avenues through which children can escape inherited poverty. Indeed, this was one of the aims for the Photovoice workshops (Allmark, Stevenson & Stotzer, 2017).

We also observed the power of story-telling, plus active listening, in action. One mother, for example, wanted to give her interview in front of her children, using that opportunity to talk about her own childhood, the family's escape from routine domestic violence and about her recent months as someone who had beaten a drug habit and become clean. For the generality of society, this family might appear to be among the least successful of Australians, but the story that this woman told offered her children a sense of how their mother had beaten the legacy and trauma of her own upbringing, and was now living her own dream of offering a safe, stable home for her children (Stevenson & Green, 2017). For some research participants, adults and children, verbalising personal experience and putting it into a broader context seemed to allow them to discern a positive trajectory which might then be a foundation upon which optimistic and future-directed activities could be built (Gardner & Poole, 2009).

As indicated in the participant overlap between the two Photovoice workshops, 2016 and 2017, some families involved in this study have a longitudinal relationship with Vinnies WA. Clearly, there is always stress on limited resources, and the bush camps involve intensive consumption of human capital (typically there is at least one adult volunteer per two children) as well as material resources. Unlike most holiday camps, families are not required to make a financial contribution. In such circumstances, it might be expected that there would be some agonising around whether invitations to these camps should be spread widely, or whether repeat camps should be allowed or (even) encouraged. For children who are struggling to develop and hold onto an alternative sense of their future, the hope and expectation of a regular camp experience, with exposure to young volunteers who serve as appropriate role models, is potentially life changing. Welfare-dependent families are used to sharing meagre resources that are thinly spread across large numbers of people, but it might be that focused resources and a commitment to individual children over a substantial period of time is necessary (if not sufficient) to break through the cycle of welfare dependency.

Further, there are models from overseas (Ascend, 2012; Scott, Popkin & Simington, 2016) where the value of targeted programs to support children in poverty is magnified by using children's temporary absence from home as a result of program attendance as an opportunity to work in a focussed way with parents and other family members. Our experience would indicate that such focus should be chosen by the family, rather than imposed by the welfare agency, but it may be that key services delivered during this time (such as financial counselling or drug and alcohol rehabilitation) might have a greater chance of success. We are unaware of examples of these kinds of initiatives in Australia, but allowing children and parents to engage in parallel choice-affirming activities might have a multiplying effect.

Clearly, with a sample of 12 families, we are not in a position to make evidence-based findings that might be applicable to a general population of welfare-dependent people. Our in-depth engagement with parents, children and welfare providers, however, points to the experience and commitment of the voluntary sector, and the huge value added implied in the hours of time donated to supporting vulnerable people. At the same time, there are opportunities which might fruitfully be explored going forward, and we hope that the Select Committee on Intergenerational Welfare Dependence will embrace some of these smaller interventions which might fuel big differences in building children's non-welfare dependent futures.

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