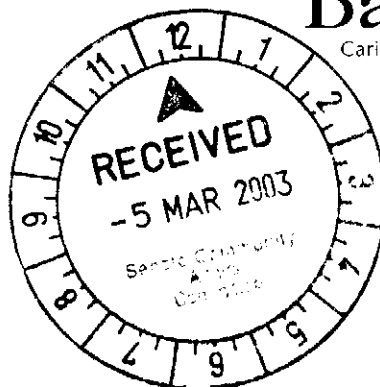




**Barnardos**  
Caring for Australia's Children

Wednesday, 26 February 2003

Senate Committee on Poverty  
PARLIAMENT HOUSE  
CANBERRA 2600



**Head Office**  
60-64 Bay Street  
Ultimo NSW 2007  
Tel: (02) 9281 7933  
**Administration Fax**  
(02) 9281 0441  
**Marketing Fax**  
(02) 9281 0526  
www.barnardos.org.au

GPO Box 9996  
Sydney NSW 2001  
DX 11801 Sydney  
Broadway  
A Company Limited  
by Guarantee  
ABN 18 068 557 906  
Registered Charity No.  
CFN 13840

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Dear Committee members,

Barnardos welcomes the Inquiry into Poverty as we see it as the underlying cause of abuse and neglect of children. Attached is Barnardos Monograph on poverty and social exclusion, which discusses this relationship.

Barnardos wishes to see the Federal Government undertake an ongoing poverty reduction program. We have been impressed by reports particularly of the Irish policy initiatives, however there may be other international models that could be followed. We believe that a poverty reduction program should:

- ⇒ have a children's focus and address, as the first priority, children in severe poverty
- ⇒ take into account the changing costs of children as they age (this is not currently reflected in family assistance payments)
- ⇒ address outstanding anomalies with income support, including problems caused by disruption of income, for example through non-payment of child support and impact of breaches, problems of income estimation
- ⇒ have clear goals, target groups and benchmarks, reporting back to Parliament; that is, be independent of a Minister
- ⇒ develop an agreed poverty measure such as the United Kingdom "Poverty and Social Exclusion Survey"

As part of our response to the Inquiry we have asked people who use our services to discuss the issue. Although a difficult time of year to get responses we have run discussion groups and completed questionnaires on their experience of poverty. Over 50 families were consulted through these processes. We held one discussion group in outer Western Sydney and 40 questionnaires were completed in Canberra, Auburn and Penrith. Many would be willing to discuss their issues directly with you.

Issues arising from consultation was a widespread difficulty in getting medical help without bulk billing; social isolation of those without resources; few breaks or holidays; stress on partnerships and in relation to children, which all lead directly to needing assistance by Barnardos. There were many respondents reporting difficulty in having adequate food, childcare, clothing and transport. We note the phenomena of parents going without in order to provide for their children; a tendency picked up in overseas research.

Yours sincerely,

**LOUISE VOIGT**  
Chief Executive & Director of Welfare

## QUESTIONNAIRE RESULTS:

30 respondents considered that they lived in poverty, 8 of these considered that they were amongst the poorest families in the community. All respondents experienced financial hardship and we believe that the discrepancy is based on respondents not liking to use the word "poverty" (we found the term "economic hardship" to be a better way to engage). 19 were entirely dependent on Centrelink payments, 17 were dependent on Centrelink and child support.

Stress over money caused problems in families in most situations where people were in partnerships. Other respondents who were single reported the isolation of dealing with financial hardship.

Stress in the parent-child relationship was reported in most replies - parents who couldn't buy things for children, and because of strained relationships with children, comments included: *"They get frustrated with me, they get angry, its more of an issue for kids than me."* *"She (mother) gets upset when she can't buy what the children want."* *"..very guilty, depressed because you can't give everything child wants."*

27 of the families reported a disability in either parent or child. Intellectual 'disability' and depression was cited most frequently.

When asked what they can't afford to pay for comments included:

*"Credit card debts, car, clothes, furniture, school fees, furniture, house insurance, children's clothing, better quality of life, shoes/clothes/fruit, food/clothing, toilet and stove broken for two years and cannot get fixed, childcare, furniture/ medicine, food/transport, repairs/holiday, private education, clothes/cost of running a car, car, car/paying bills, car/food, car/house, car, baby needs, car private rental, furniture/whitegoods, good furniture/clothes/toys, housing, rent/food/bills, car, furniture and toys, air conditioner/clothes/transport/telephone, outings/clothes, food/bills/rent, food/luxury items/new clothes and shoes, school essential, quality food/new clothes and shoes/treats for children, holidays/hairdresser/take away meals/clothes, childcare/car, clothing and accessories, curtains for windows, basic outings like pool entry, better food, bills, furniture/clothes."*

When asked what they would buy if they had more money comments included:

*A car, children's clothes, furniture, hair cuts/clothes/fruit and vegetables, food/clothes/other necessities, furniture/car, shoes and art lessons for kids, clothes/oven/car, childcare, furniture/clothes/food/house and car, car, car/fridge/dryers/electrical items, house/bigger car, car. TV/new lounge, car/house, furniture/white goods, car, food/dryers/baby mattress/deposit for house, house/car/furniture, clothes for self and children/food, furniture/clothes/toys, housing, shoes for son, good clothes and underwear and clothes for children, car, nice furniture/car, food/outings/computer, shoes and clothes/luxury food/holiday/swing set/ holiday, new clothes and shoes/more food, take children out and for meals/new shoes and clothes, luxury items, clothes for children, send children to music lessons, car, car, typewriter for work and add to children's education, better food and furniture, clothes/electrical stuff, furniture/clothes.*

When asked about holidays few people reported having them, comments include "I haven't had a holiday since I was a child", many reported having never had a holiday, 20 reported

having had one short break in the past ten years for example, one reported 3 days with a friend, one with parents.

#### Group discussion on Cranebrook Housing Estate (far Western Sydney)

Some important points on poverty were:

- Low morale, “You don’t feel like doing anything”, some people mentioned “there is no use in trying to do anything to help [themselves] in their situations as someone always comes along and takes it from you” ie: theft in area, government departments say “no”.
- In the Cranebrook area it was mentioned a few times that there are a lot of drug and alcohol issues in families along with domestic violence. Some clients mentioned that women in the area are unable to work or get out of the house due to their partners not allowing it to happen. Drug and alcohol issues as well make them feel unmotivated.
- The area shows a diverse mix of cultures and varying levels of education. Some clients find it difficult to understand the ways of other residents and vice versa. One resident mentioned that the differing levels of learning/education/values/morals could cause conflict and a lack of knowledge in how to make the best of a bad situation.
- It was also mentioned by a few of the residents that there is no job security or prospects around, some believed it was no use trying, it is harder to get work these days. This continues the poverty cycle.
- Many government departments are hard to deal with and you are treated as a number on a list. This comment was made by most of the residents spoken to.
- Most of the residents’ incomes are spent on food and home/living expenses and there is no extra money for special occasions. Christmas time is very hard on families as there is usually no spare money for presents for the children.
- There is no money left over for entertainment purposes, ie family outings. This is not a known concept.
- Doctors are not attended unless they bulk bill, if a specialist is needed who does not bulk bill, the adults don’t attend for themselves; if it is for the children they will do their best to find the money to pay.
- Holidays do not happen, what was mentioned was that the children go to their non-custodial parent for holidays.

One resident of the area gave their own personal story, which is as follows:

*“For the past 5 years I have been divorced and raising my children myself. I found it extremely hard financially, although I am one of the lucky ones who get maintenance from the children’s father regularly. My children had no understanding of the fact that our financial situation was worse and continued to live the way they were used to, ie. using the phone to ring their friends mobiles, making arrangements to share in buying presents with friends, wanting to go on all the school outings. Although my financial status had changed, the living expenses did not get any cheaper, therefore I found that instead of paying a bill when it came in I was only able to pay part of it. Eventually I found myself in constant debt with telephone, electricity, gas, etc. “*

*“School outings were very hard to pay for as well, although there is support for families in need at schools it is a very demeaning thing to have to ask and I found that I was not treated very kindly when asking for financial help in this area (on one occasion I heard the office staff discussing another family and their financial situation, so the level of confidentiality was extremely low).”*

*I had negative experiences when dealing with the telephone, electricity, gas etc. staff when requesting longer time to pay my accounts, ie. I had been told by one company's employee that it was people like me that gave the country a bad name, when asked what 'people like me' meant I was told “You single mothers who sit at home all day and bludge.” I reported this employee.*

*“I found these experiences to be extremely detrimental to my self esteem and I felt less than worthy in society, it was also the impetus for me to decide that I would do things for myself and not rely too much on help.”*

*“I do not wish to sound negative in the telling of my experiences as during these times I have learnt a lot, however, I found other people's stories to be much worse than my own and have seen the negative effects of poverty. Poverty is not something that is dealt with on its own, there are usually major issues and circumstances that have led a person to be in this situation and these issues need to be dealt with as well, this puts a terrible burden on a human being, especially when trying to raise a family.”*

# Child Poverty and Social Exclusion, and its impact on the welfare of Children and Young People in Australia

By Barnardos Staff Version 1 1994, updated February 2003

*Abstract: This paper argues that Australia must address the problem of child poverty, which remains at between 8.7 and 14.9% of the population. Federal and State Governments need to address the eradication and amelioration of poverty in the community. A starting point would be a definition of poverty which Australians accept as a measure of deprivation.*

*Poverty is highly correlated with child abuse and neglect, and homelessness amongst young people. Poverty affects social isolation, parent/child interactions, parent skills and expectations, attitudes towards child rearing and patience and hope. Problems of "social exclusion" amongst poor families today will have an impact on the quality of child rearing into the future. Adolescent homelessness is also linked with poverty.*

**Key Words:** child abuse and neglect, poverty, social isolation, parenting skills, education, homelessness

## INTRODUCTION

Child poverty persists in Australia at a level which causes social exclusion leading to long term disadvantage and contributes to social problems including abuse, neglect and homelessness. Social policy should focus on eradicating poverty and ameliorating its impact on children.

Australia needs to develop an accepted definition of deprivation and poverty, which will allow us to set goals for eradication. Specific groups should be targeted for attention, with emphasis going initially to children and young people living in chronic poverty. Government policies and programs, including employment, housing and community services, need to be assessed in relation to poverty.

## POVERTY, ECONOMIC HARDSHIP AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION AMONGST AUSTRALIAN CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

It is not easy to determine the level of child poverty in Australia because of lack of consensus of definition.

Absolute poverty (sometimes called a deprivation measure) is defined as not having the ability to feed, house and clothe one's family. EPAC<sup>4</sup> for example defines poverty as ...*"low income people, especially families with children, who have to survive on insufficient nutrition, are unable to heat their homes in winter, are often unable to afford medication, and are denied most forms of recreation..."*

Whilst in international terms Australian children may not suffer the direst poverty, there are still many for whom deprivation exists. The need for food hampers, emergency financial assistance (particularly for electricity and heating) and clothing are a reality in the work of most Australian charities. (Australian Council of Social Services 2003) Recent studies on the income of homeless people show that 21,000 "support periods" in SAAP programs were because of financial difficulty. (AIHW 2002)

Generally poverty is measured in relation to other income levels in the community that is; "relative poverty" is measured. A third measure "subjective poverty" whereby poor families define what income is adequate for need, is also useful. (ABS 1998)

Australia has used the benchmark of the Henderson Poverty Line since the early sixties (this measure was originally tied to the basic wage and analysis of household budgets) to measure local poverty. This measure was the basis for the Commission of Inquiry into Poverty (1975).

In the 1990's the Smith Family and NATSEM defined "relative" poverty as half the average income level. **Using this measure they determined that 14.9% of Australian children live in poverty.** In 2000 this meant that 743,000 children lived below a line set at \$416 per week after tax for two parents and two children (larger families need a higher income to fall below the poverty line). Children were seen as at higher risk of poverty than the general population.

Alternate studies which have defined poverty in relation to median income (ie the most common income, a measure used in Europe) <sup>1</sup> **show a level of child poverty of 8.7%.** (Centre for Independent Studies in Sydney Morning Herald 16/1/02) This remains a figure of considerable concern.

Poverty was identified as having decreased during the early 1990s and then increased in 2000 (Smith Family 2002). In 1990 (Sydney Morning Herald, 13 March) the Prime Minister acknowledged that over 400,000 children lived in poverty, however ACOSS had put the figure at 750,000.

Other Western countries have child poverty rates which are also high (Bradbury, 1999). Ireland's Poverty Campaign shows a "consistent poverty measure" (60% of average earnings where people do not have basic food, clothing and heating) which has moved from 24% of children (1994) to 8% in 2002. And a relative income poverty rate of 16% for the whole population (down from 22% in 1994)? In the United Kingdom one in five children lived in poverty in 1991 (Gauthier 1999). About 20% of US children were shown to live in Poverty by Children's Defence Fund in 1996. Children living in extreme poverty grew from 8.5% in 1995 to 9% in 1996.

Despite lack of academic consensus over the definition of poverty, there is no doubt that there are numbers of Australian children who live below acceptable community standards and this has impact on their development.

The Federal Department of Family and Community Services in 2003 estimated severe economic hardship as affecting 5.7% of children. Severe hardship was defined as having multiple incidents of missing a meal, no heating, pawning articles and seeking assistance from a charity. (Paper presented at AIFS conference 2003)

In 2003 Barnardos Australia consulted 50 families using its services, about their financial situation. All reported financial hardship and problems including difficulty in having adequate food, clothing, and transport. Holidays were virtually unknown and all were dependent on doctors "bulk billing". Social isolation, stress on partnerships and between parents and children over money were widespread.

According to Belinda Probert,

*"It is important to appreciate the sheer size of the new underclass. We can quibble about who is in it or isn't but its outlines are clearly visible for anyone who wishes to see. Almost one fifth of working age people in Australia are now in sufficient strife to receive some form of social security payment.....now over 2.5 million people.....and the (precariously employed group adds another two million. About 850,00 Australian children live in families where neither parent has a job".* (School of Social Science RMIT University SMH 16/1/02)

Irish researchers have attempted to compare deprivation and relative poverty measures but this work has not been undertaken in Australia. (Nolan, undated) In the United Kingdom the "Poverty and Social Exclusion Survey of Britain (PSE) (Adelman 2003) The British Household Panel Survey examined the relationship between income and deprivation in 1999 which showed that *"..although income is a major determinant of deprivation, the two concepts do not overlap entirely. For example, more than 40% of the most deprived children are not found in the poorest income category."* (Gauthier 1999).

Australia clearly needs greater work to understand the relationship between outcomes (ie deprivation) and income based relative poverty measures, as a basis for policy action.

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<sup>1</sup> See Beware the Median Social Policy Research Centre November 2002

## WHO ARE THE CHILDREN OF GREATEST CONCERN?

There are some families and children in our community who are disproportionately affected by poverty.

Bradbury Jenkins and Micklewright are most concerned about children who remain in poverty over a long period. That is they point out that poverty at one point in time is not as significant as “movements of children in and out of poverty”. In their study they compare children who stay in low income households from one year to the next. Although they have not applied their analysis to Australia, studies of seven other Western nations show that at **least six out of every ten children found in the poorest fifth in one year are still there one year later. Between five and nine percent of all children are in the poorest fifth for each of five consecutive years.**<sup>1</sup> The chances of children moving out of the bottom fifth of income levels varies between countries. They show for example that half the children in the United Kingdom who have lived in poverty over the past five years, live in deep and long term poverty.

Another factor to be taken into account when considering the impact of poverty is the depth of poverty, that is how many dollars below the poverty line a family has to live on.

The Smith Family points to the issue of housing as being critical in determining which children and families are living in the worst poverty. This is because those who own housing, live in less expensive areas or are in Government housing have a substantial and essential part of expenditure. Young people under 25, make up approximately 37% of the homeless in the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP).

Poverty is a major issue amongst indigenous people, as it is widespread in the community. 20% of indigenous households have an income less than \$16,000. A further 40% between \$16,000 and \$40,000s. 38% of indigenous households were living in unaffordable or overcrowded households (compared with 17% in the wider community). Unemployment persists at a much higher rates amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders than the whole of the Australian community. The unemployment rate is highest for indigenous people 15-19 year, 50%, and 46% for 20-24 year olds. (SNAICC 2000)

According to the Smith Family in 2002 *“Sole parents remain the group at greatest risk<sup>2</sup> of being in poverty,” although there has been a pronounced fall in their risk of being in poverty since the beginning of the decade. Single people, particularly young singles, have fared worst in the last decade with almost one in every five single people now living in poverty”.*

In considering these factors of particular concern to Barnardos are children: and young people:

- reliant on private rental accommodation (although FACS study of severe hardship shows that those in public housing suffer severest hardship perhaps because of the time in poverty)
- affected by chronic disability or ill health or unemployment
- from single parent households families with a large number of children (this is evident in both the Smith Family study and FACS study of severe hardship)
- who do not live at home, and do not have support from a family.
- of indigenous families

## WHAT IS THE SOCIAL COST OF CHILD POVERTY

Barnardos sees poverty as critical in determining future prospects of children and young people, and as making children vulnerable to physical abuse and neglect, and homelessness.

The Brotherhood of St Laurence “Life Chances Study shows the impact of low income and associated disadvantages in a longitudinal study of children. Other studies show us that sustained economic hardship lead to poorer physical, psychological and cognitive functioning (New England Journal of Medicine 1997).

The relationship of poverty to educational outcome, and lifelong disadvantage is clear (Connell and White19--):

*“Low income has material effects, such as lack of books and equipment and difficulty in supporting older children in long-term study. But there is much more to it than direct effects of income. There is a*

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<sup>2</sup> In 1982 the NSW COSS gave us some information: 50% of female headed single parent families lived below the poverty line. 19% of two income families with three or more children were below the poverty line. 19% of male single parent families were below the poverty line.

*complex of environmental and psychological pressures involved with poverty, ranging from damaged self esteem (sharpened by media prejudice against welfare dependants and unemployed) to racism (given the ethnic composition of families in poverty). There is also a complex cultural dynamic around education and educational selection, with families in poverty being excluded from educational decision-making, their skills undervalued and their children often seen as innately less intelligent to map all this would take a volume."*

Recent work undertaken by the Smith Family (Sydney Morning Herald, December 2002) show that children in low income continue to be educationally disadvantaged because of lack of access to computers.

Weatherburn and Lind show the relationship between economically disadvantaged communities and crime, pointing out

*The conventional view has been that disadvantage increased the motivation to offend but...a growing body of research evidence drawn from studies of individual families suggests that economic and social stress exert their impact on crime by disrupting the parenting process."*

The impact of poverty on the parent child relationship is one of the greatest causes of concern to Barnardos.

### **THE LINK BETWEEN ABUSE, NEGLECT AND POVERTY?**

Of particular concern to Barnardos Australia is the relationship between poverty and abuse and neglect of children. The statistical predominance of incidence and severity of abuse shows a clear correlation with poverty.

While every case of abuse and neglect has its own set of causes, to understand the phenomena of abuse and neglect we must look at the underlying sociology of child abuse.

*"It is necessary to overcome the emotional impact of specific incidents, to go beyond the level of clinical diagnosis of individual cases and to examine trends revealed by data in large cohorts of cases against the background of a broader social and cultural focus." (Nigel Parton 199- )*

In 1987, Professor Tony Vinson of the University of New South Wales undertook a study comparing child abuse "registration" rates<sup>5</sup> (ie. confirmed cases) from the top 10% socio-economic postcode areas and the lowest 10%. (The criteria he used were Australian Bureau of Statistics Indicators of Socio-Economic status.) If abuse and neglect are classless then the notification rates should be the same. Professor Vinson states:

*"This was clearly not the case. Of the total of 1,435 registrations 86.8% came from the lower socio-economic group. Residents of low status areas were predominant in registration cases involved all grounds.*

- Sexual assault was 85.6%
- Not coping 89%
- Neglect 87%
- Emotional abuse 87%

*..This finding remained unaltered, no matter which way injuries were classified according to their relative seriousness."*

Further work by Professor Vinson in 1987 showed a marked difference in abuse rates among the poor and the very poor ie. the lowest 4% of postcode areas. The rate of physical abuse notifications for the most disadvantaged group was twice that of the control group ie. 5-10% lowest areas. For the cases where there had been a previous notification, the rate of the disadvantaged group was 3.2 times higher than the comparison group.

The Department of Family and Community Services undertook similar research in 1989. They utilised a definition of poverty based solely on 1986 income of less than \$15,000 and concluded that:

*"The existence of such poverty is shown to be significantly related to all types of child abuse.*

*A comparison of the 23 postcode areas with the highest and lowest percentage of families in poverty revealed total child abuse rates were nearly six times higher in poor areas. Neglect was 11 times higher, emotional abuse 6 times higher, physical abuse 5 times higher and sexual abuse 4 times higher."*

A recent analysis of Barnardos abuse prevention programs revealed that over 70% of clients were dependent on pension or benefits.

In Canada, a country with similar cultural background the National Council of Welfare stated:



*"One fundamental characteristic of the child welfare system has not changed appreciably over the years; its clients are still overwhelmingly drawn from the ranks of Canadian poor."*

Research by Elizabeth Fernandez of University of New South Wales<sup>8</sup> which surveyed 290 admissions to State Welfare Department Central Region, showed us that inadequate housing and financial problems figured heavily in the data concerning entry of children to substitute care.

Mary Hood studied 500 child abuse notifications in South Australia in 1998 showing an overwhelming connection between families coming to the attention of child protection and poverty, unemployment and family disruption. Her study shows *"child sexual abuse cannot be exempted from economic factor, and in this respect is like physical abuse and neglect". For all types of abuse she concludes, "These connections to low income and family disruption carry through when the seriousness of the abuse is looked at."*

There is often resistance to linking abuse with poverty, which usually revolves around the argument that:

- The poor are most likely to come to the attention of welfare officials.
- There are class misunderstandings about what constitutes abuse.

However, work undertaken by Pelton<sup>1</sup>(199-) indicates that:

- Increased reporting does not produce an increased proportion of report of abuse and neglect from middle and upper income families.
- Rates of incidence of reporting vary with the level of poverty. That is, the very poor have the highest rates of abuse and neglect.
- Severity of abuse is linked with poverty levels. That is, the greatest damage to individuals comes from the very poorest groups.

### **HOW ARE POVERTY, ABUSE AND NEGLECT LINKED?**

*"(Money) supports, deepens and enlarges the social systems that relieve individuals from their own personal failings."*

Parenthood can at times be a stressful experience for most people regardless of income level. However, financial resources can make the difference as to whether or not behaviour towards children remains socially acceptable.

Poverty affects child rearing because it dictates:

- Social isolation.
- Conditions of the parent-child interaction (attitudes in childrearing, which includes a sense of hopelessness and predisposition to violence).
- Lack of access to information about parenting, resulting in an inappropriate skills and expectations.

Social isolation leaves children vulnerable as:

- the parent gets little relief from the consistency of children (there are no baby sitters or emergency support for stressful events);
- there is a lack of social policing, ie. an absence of other adults' involvement with children which can often impose social restraints on the appropriate treatment of children;
- the lack of emotional and practical support (such as emergency childcare) makes the task of child rearing more difficult.

Social isolation is related to poverty and housing is a critical link in this relationship. Evictions, moves to find affordable accommodation and the policies of public housing authorities which move people into areas without adequate social infrastructure, as well as the inability of many families to purchase housing in areas with developed infrastructure, lead to a situation in which it is difficult for families to develop social networks. Not only is one family likely to move but the neighbourhood may be characterised by a shifting population, hence networks do not develop. The neighbourhood remains an important source of support for children and young parents.

The effect of moves on children's behaviour is often dramatic and can greatly add to stress in a household. Difficulty of settling into yet another school and loss of valued friends may lead to a situation in which behaviour deteriorates, and the stress on vulnerable parents is increased.

Social isolation is greatly increased by an inability to afford the costs of socialising. The costs of a baby-sitter, entertainment and transport make the ability to befriend others more difficult. Add to this the depression or sense of inadequacy often coming in

the wake of poverty and you can see some of the barriers to having a working social support system. In a paper by Whiteford, Bradbury and Saunders, *Inequality and Deprivation Among Families with Children: An Exploratory Study*, the authors state:

*"It is in the area of social participation and recreation that some of the greatest inequalities are evident. Pensioners and beneficiary families are far less likely than middle and high income families to spend on items like restaurant meals or holidays. Far higher proportions are not spending on telephones, or postal charges, or on books, newspapers or magazines. There are also significant differences between expenditure areas such as going to the cinema, theatres, concerts or sports events."*

Added to the impact of social isolation is the fact that poor families are more exposed to their children, leading to greater difficulties with child rearing. This is obvious in situations of unemployment where adults may be forced to spend a lot more time around the house than they otherwise would. Overcrowding brought about by the cost of housing greatly increases the contact between parents and children, particularly where families live in flats without access to a garden.

In addition there is smaller opportunity for "positive time" for families. The holidays and outings, which can do much to dispel tension and boredom, are not available to the poor.

The third way in which poverty is linked to parenting standards relates to educational levels and ability to gain access to material on child development (including the child rearing manuals which figure so prominently in middle class families) Families who can afford it usually buy baby manuals, childrearing guides and magazines which are sources of information, ideas and supportive text about the rigours of child rearing.

Poverty clearly effects levels of violence in families. Garbarinos<sup>14</sup> studies of violence reveal that "very poor" families of his study had rates of violent behaviour which were twice as high as the high income groups. Similarly, unemployed breadwinners had a rate of physical violence 62% greater than for other families. Parton<sup>15</sup> argues that:

*"Essentially the existence of more violence towards children in lower social classes*

*emerges in response to more fundamental form in terms of physical and social environment and social organisation... Families are expected to provide adequate food, clothing and shelter in a society which does not always give (them) the resources necessary to do this."*

In Australia the National Committee on Violence<sup>16</sup> states:

*"Both the victims of violence and violent offenders in general appear to be drawn disproportionately from relatively disadvantaged backgrounds."*

One link between violence and poverty is inadequate nutrition. It is hard to show patience with a whingeing hungry child when you are also hungry or operating on an inadequate diet.

A further aspect of a parent's functioning affected by poverty is the need for patience and hope. These factors are sapped by a sense of being unvalued in the community. Being unable to meet obligations, having to do without, having to limit children in consumption or participation in ordinary aspects of life such as school excursions, are all demoralising for parents.

Children are not passive recipients of what is happening. Their own frustration's and reactions to poverty may directly contribute to their parent's ability to cope.

## **HOW IS POVERTY LINKED with YOUTH HOMELESSNESS**

According to ACOSS (2002) *Any serious commitment to address homelessness must focus attention and resources on a core set of factors which underlie homelessness. These are poor access to housing, poverty and unemployment. Any of these factors, alone or together, place people at greater risk of homelessness.*

The Burdekin Inquiry (1987) pointed to the issue of income and homelessness between young people. In analysing the causes of youth homelessness:

*"There is a strong link between family poverty and youth homelessness. Many families are simply unable to support an adolescent. Poverty is linked with drug and alcohol problems, social isolation and domestic violence, which may compel a young person to leave home. In many cases problems*

*could be overcome if adequate family support services were available.*

SAAP study "Income Status of homeless people in SAAP 1999-2001" adds to our understanding of poverty and the lack of housing.

Weatherburn and Lind point to the strong correlation between children from socially disadvantaged neighbourhoods and poor adolescent outcomes particularly juvenile crime. These are all highly related to homelessness.

One particular group at risk of homelessness is young people who have left the care system. They are often entirely dependent on Youth Allowance, and dependent on private housing market, as are group they are often subject to Centrelink breaching. Their income is low, costs for housing high and their income may be precarious. They have no-one to fall back on and limited ability to find the resources needed to establish a household (even with the Youth allowance loan scheme).

## THE POLICY RESPONSE

Those working in child welfare need to acknowledge the link between poverty and their work. Child welfare agencies must be advocates for reform of policy so that child poverty is removed. As Parton states

*"Well meaning mental health professionals may be drawn to the myth of classlessness, believing that the association of child abuse and neglect with poverty constitutes one more insulting and discriminatory act towards the poor... In fact, the myth does a dis-service to poor people and to victims of child abuse and neglect; it undermines development of effective approaches to dealing with their real and difficult problems and directs us towards remedies more oriented to the middle class."*

Nowhere is this more evident than in discussion on Aboriginal poverty and abuse and neglect in the current Australian debate on children's welfare.

The cost of child poverty is high and prevention needs to be prominent. Barnardos United Kingdom has looked at the cost of poverty and deprivation on the lives of young people and identifies that failure to pay for remedial work such as educational support, and care leads to considerably greater social expenditure. (Barnardos United Kingdom 2000)

*In almost every instance positive investment in children's lives is cheaper than dealing with the consequences of not investing. They're costs- to children, to their families and to community, to our own economy, and to our society- are so much higher than we can afford to ignore.*

This study shows a series of case studies for example that poverty related to parental alcoholism led to costs of cost 153,000 pounds for one child in terms of remedial education, costs of juvenile crime and care for his own child. Early investment in the family would have cost 16,000 pounds.

Prevention is obviously a best approach to poverty. The obvious implication is that attempts need to be made to raise the income of families. Employment is the most desirable route to ensuring adequate income. The risk of being in poverty amongst wage earners is 3.2% (Smith Family 2002)

Levels of Centrelink payment have been criticised as being below a number of poverty measures. For example, The Brotherhood of St Laurence compared Centrelink payments with the Henderson Poverty line in 2000 to show that payments were well below that Line. However once again measurement definitions make comparisons difficult.

However in addition, the administration of Centrelink payments is critical for families, even those working. Disruption of low incomes is seen as a major issue in pushing low income families into poverty. The issue of breaching individuals from benefits is a critical issue for people with few financial resources. The relationship between the tax and Centrelink system is also a source of economic hardship for some families because of "cashflow" when estimating income. ACOSS 2002 stated that 610,000 Australian families had debts to Centrelink. The problem of Centrelink debt also arises because of difficulties in estimating income when Child Support Agency payments are haphazard (ACOSS states that in 2002 the average debt to Centrelink because of this is \$1,500 per child.

The critical importance of housing policy and the availability of low income housing. There is a direct link between homelessness and family income<sup>3</sup>.

These issues are predominantly a Federal responsibility, however State Governments must bear their share of the responsibility. The States have an important role in assisting with critical services to

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<sup>3</sup> "Our Homeless Children" evidence of O'Connor and the Brotherhood of St Laurence to the Burdekin Inquiry

families with children, services that can make the difference between a family making it or not. These include access to housing, childcare, public transport and power.

We must heed the calls of the Aboriginal people to address the social deprivation that they have suffered, this must be done as priority as the plight of Aboriginal children is so dire. A strategy to follow here is outlined by the Brotherhood of St Laurence and SNAICC publication "Aboriginal Child Poverty" (1990, Melbourne).

The acceptance of poverty as a causal factor in child welfare has profound implications for services funded by Government and run by non-Government agencies. The design of community services to aid early identification for children at risk and offer meaningful services are particularly important. Family Support Services must address the following areas:

- Break down the social isolation of targeted families, part of this is the development of neighbourhood community and family supports. Programs such as those where older women can be employed to go into families and assist with child management and running a household are good examples of such a service.
- Increase the support and practical helping resources available to families.
- Sustain and improve parenting skills particularly in relation to violent methods of discipline and punishment and everyday family management.
- Improve the ability to negotiate with and gain access to community agencies and services.

The targeting of these services is of extreme importance. There must be a targeting of services to areas with the poorest populations and adequate attention must be given to the development of social infrastructure in new areas. One important factor in designing such a service is to recognise the extreme vulnerability of families living in poverty. They simply do not have the resources to avoid problems over the long term. Vulnerability to housing problems, the loss of employment, the temporary or permanent break-up of a partnership, hospitalisation, can be all make or break situation for parents. As Whiteford et al.<sup>18</sup> state:

*"The lack of various forms of insurance suggests that unforeseen contingencies can potentially have a disastrous impact, made*

*worse by the fact that there is so little to fall back upon."*

## CONCLUSION

Child Welfare workers need to acknowledge the role of poverty in their work. They must advocate for change and make service design appropriate to the "causal" connections.

Barnardos believes that the eradication of poverty needs to be a priority of government. A model such as the Irish anti poverty strategy, and work earlier in Australia through Henderson needs to be utilised. We need clearly defined targets and outcomes measures and a definition of poverty- particularly the relationship between absolute deprivation and relative poverty.

As part of this wider strategy:

- Adequacy of income through employment and supportive Centrelink administration of social security should be consistently examined and young people have adequate income. This is a particularly important issue for single young people with no family to fall back on.
- Government at the State and Federal levels should work to alleviate specific outcomes of poverty:
- Educational disadvantage needs to be specifically targeted
- Use of childcare for low income Australians needs to be dramatically increased, through Federal policy.
- Housing affordability needs to be addressed
- Social isolation and area disadvantage.

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**PREPARED BY . . .**

**Sue Tregeagle**

**Bachelor of Social Studies**

**Grad. Dip. Social Administration**