

SUMMARY

Dropping off the Edge: the distribution of disadvantage in Australia
A report by Professor Tony Vinson for Jesuit Social Services and Catholic Social Services Australia

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Dropping off the edge – a major new study mapping levels of social disadvantage right across Australia – has found that despite our nation's recent strong economic growth, some communities remain caught in a spiral of low school attainment, high unemployment, poor health, high imprisonment rates and child abuse.

The report, carried out by Professor Tony Vinson for Jesuit Social Services and Catholic Social Services Australia, finds that pockets of concentrated and severe social disadvantage have become entrenched across rural and remote as well as suburban Australia.

It finds that just 1.7 percent of postcodes and communities across Australia account for more than seven times their share of top rank positions of the major factors that cause intergenerational poverty, including: low income, limited computer and internet access, early school leaving, physical and mental disabilities, long-term unemployment, prison admissions and confirmed child maltreatment.

The report estimates that in Victoria, where adequate surveys have been conducted, nearly one-third (33.1%) of all communities suffer from 'low social cohesion' – where inadequate levels of community reciprocity, trust and resources make it more difficult for individuals and families to overcome the individual and family problems that lead to poverty.

The report highlights the particularly strong link between intergenerational poverty and low educational attainment. By detaching individuals, families and whole communities from the modern economy in this way, the report argues that disadvantage is holding back the nation's economic potential. Concentrated disadvantage of the kind demonstrated in the report, robs the nation of needed skilled workers, adds to labour shortages and, by inflating welfare expenditure, reduces government than would otherwise be necessary.

The report complements other recent studies based on OECD data showing Australia to be (1) near the bottom of OECD rankings on child poverty and (2) experiencing widening gaps in income, wealth and opportunity between the rich and the poor.¹

The report lists the highest ranking disadvantaged communities in each state, dividing them, where the data allows, into six bands of comparative susceptibility to poverty (see pages 66-86).

And it finds that in every state, a low number of communities are massively over-represented when it comes to the factors that cause or demonstrate disadvantage (see pages 26-47):

¹ (1) UNICEF, An overview of child well-being in rich countries, February 2007; (2) A B Atkinson and A Leigh, The distribution of top incomes in Australia, ANU, February 2007.

- **In Tasmania:** just four of the state's 29 Local Government Areas account for 43.3 percent of the top ranked positions of the key indicators of disadvantage.
- **In Victoria:** just 1.5% of all postcode areas account for 13.7% of the top 40 rankings of indicators of disadvantage – a nine-fold over-representation.
- **In NSW:** just 1.7% percent of all postcodes account for 12.5% of the top 40 rankings of indicators of disadvantage – a more than seven-fold over-representation.
- **In Queensland:** 25 of the state's 459 Statistical Local Areas appear between 6 and 11 times in the top 20 indicators of disadvantage.
- **In South Australia:** just 2 of the state's 114 Statistical Local Areas (1.8%) account for 10.3% of the top 12 positions across 23 indicators of disadvantage – an over-representation of 5.7 times.
- **In Western Australia:** just 2 of the state's 142 Local Government Areas (1.4%) accounted for 7.8% percent of the top 14 positions across 21 indicators of disadvantage – an over-representation of 5.6 times.
- **In the ACT:** just two of the territory's 24 postcode areas account for 26% of top-five positions across 23 indicators of disadvantage.
- **In the NT:** the Darwin Region is the most generally disadvantaged locality, although all regions feature prominently in four of the eleven indicators of disadvantage.

Dropping off the edge concludes that this new data, which lists the factors that cause social disadvantage and the places where disadvantage is most acute, offers hope that disadvantage can in fact be reduced. Making inroads into disadvantage is possible if we have the right level of will joined to the correct programs targeted to the right locations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Policy development should be targeted to the communities suffering the greatest disadvantage. Some suggestions include:

Government Planning and Funding

- Integrated planning between government departments and between all levels of government to address the compounding effects of disadvantage experienced in identified areas.
- The establishment of flexible funding pools, contributed to by all levels of government, to support innovative local projects which address issues of locational disadvantage.
- Shaping of broader policy measures, especially in education, to meet the needs of communities experiencing a marked concentration of social disadvantage.

Health

- Concentrating on the early years of life, including post-natal outreach services, parenting support programs, childhood diagnostic services and adolescent health services.

Education and Training

- Aiming to raise educational attainment by improving early education programs, pre-school attendance, improving primary schools and provide financial incentives to attract experienced and successful teachers to the most disadvantaged schools.
- Guaranteeing three and four year old children living in areas that fall within the 10 per cent most disadvantaged localities in each state/territory 18 hours per week of free preschool to support a good start to formal education.

- Support for projects which combine personal support, attention to educational deficits and skills development for disengaged young people.

Community Strengthening

- Building local community cohesion alongside tangible measures including training and work placement.
- Creating in selected localities of Commonwealth and State/Territory funded community strengthening projects of appropriate duration which exemplify 'best practice'.

Transport

- Improving transport options to enable people to travel to jobs and access vital education, health and human services. This applies to rural as well as urban areas.

Housing

- Authorities administering to socially disadvantaged neighbourhoods have a particular responsibility to attract and support the contributions of other government and non government agencies.
- Suppliers of water, electricity and gas might use this report to deal more equitably with the default and delays in the payment of fees.

Prisons

- An ever increasing number of prisoners come from a relatively small number of neighbourhoods. The correctional arm of governments should monitor the social impacts of its own operation and synchronise its endeavours with other Government portfolios.

Data Collection

- Establishing an Australia-wide uniform social data system to illuminate the spatial distribution of social disadvantage.
- Improving inter-governmental co-ordination in the collection and policy application of social data.

Based on overseas experience, the report emphasises that all place-based policies to reduce social disadvantage must be given long-term (at least 7 to 8-year) timetables for success, not the short (1 to 3-year) time lines they often receive.

The report calls for more Commonwealth-led initiatives to reduce disadvantage, starting in 10 areas of high national priority in NSW, Vic, Qld, Tas, the ACT(see page 102):

State/Territory	Priority areas for effective intervention
NSW	Windale, Bowraville-Kempsey
Victoria	Rosebud, Braybrook
Queensland	Mt Morgan, Woodbridge
SA	Programs in place - Anangu Pitjantjatjara Lands, Onkaparinga, North Western, Port Augusta, Salisbury, Murray Bridge
WA	Programs in place - East Kimberley, Kwinana, Lower Great Southern, Girrawheen/Koondoola/Balgra/Mirrabooka, Armadale, West Pilbara
Tasmania	Southern Midlands, Break O'Day
ACT	Narrabundah, Causeway

The report concludes with an appendix of computer-generated maps illustrating the distribution of disadvantage across all states and a number of capital cities.

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