Welfare to work and vulnerable families, children and young people: An Agenda for Australian Research

Outline of this report

This report sets out an agenda for Australian research examining the impact of welfare reform and labour market deregulation on the well-being of families and young people experiencing acute disadvantage. The agenda, which was developed by the research team, field workers and advisors at two workshops, identifies some key questions which can guide research at the intersection of policies relating to work, income support, and social service delivery in Australia.

We offer this agenda as a resource for Australian social policy and other researchers to further research on policy developments that may profoundly affect the fortunes of some of Australia’s most vulnerable citizens.

Developing the research agenda

In December 2007, the research partnership (consisting of researchers from the University of Sydney, the University of New South Wales, UnitingCare Burnside, the Anglicare Diocese of Sydney and the Association of Children’s Welfare Agencies) was awarded seed funding from the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) to develop a collaborative and cross-disciplinary research agenda to explore issues relating to work and welfare (and recent Australian reforms) as they affect vulnerable families, children and young people. This helped support a Research Advisory Workshop, and preparation of two reports (which were presented at the Workshop and will be available from ARACY in due course).

Research Advisory Workshop

The Research Advisory Workshop was held on 13 February 2008 at The University of Sydney. This brought together leading researchers from universities, the community sector, and government agencies, to develop and consolidate project development and a broader research agenda, and to discuss possible research methodologies and advocacy strategies for addressing the problems identified. Attendees included members of the Advisory Team, convened to provide expert advice to the research team throughout the collaboration.

Research Forum with Field Staff

The research agenda also grew out of a Research Forum with Field Researchers held on January 24 2008. Attendees included members of the research team, along with field staff and researchers from UnitingCare Burnside and Anglicare. The field staff work with families and young people who often have complex needs and experience multiple disadvantage, and who interact with a range of government systems including income support, employment services, public housing, child protection and health services. Field staff consulted with their colleagues prior to attending the forum in order to capture a broad range of users’ experiences across these systems. The forum was important for ensuring subsequent research development was informed by an understanding of how the reform process is playing out on the ground, and the voices of service users and field staff working with disadvantaged children, young people and their families. (A report on this forum, which was presented at the Research Advisory Workshop, is one of the two that will be available from ARACY. The second surveys lessons from international research on welfare to work programs.)
An Agenda for Australian Research

1. Improving policy coherence in Australian work and welfare

1.1 Mapping policy conflict

- How do (federal) work and income support policies interface with (federal and state) policies in the area of education, disability, childcare, child welfare, youth, housing, community development, and family policies, and how do these intersections affect people experiencing multiple disadvantages?

- What assumptions and priorities are embedded in each policy and what are the consequences for individuals and families who interact with a broad array of systems?

- How does income management mesh with state approaches to improving education and preventing child maltreatment?

- How does the ethos of welfare quarantining and sanctioning fit with (or contradict) a social inclusion agenda as proposed by the Rudd Government?

1.2 Assessing the impact of policy conflict and coordination

- How are the lives of disadvantaged children, young people and families affected by policy conflict?

- In general, what are the costs of policy conflict across levels of government, and what are the implications of improving policy coordination for people experiencing multiple disadvantages? What savings might there be for community agencies (for example, less time spent in advocacy)?

2. Work and welfare policies for vulnerable families, children and young people: impact and experience

2.1 Impact of workforce participation

- How are welfare reform policies affecting work participation, economic stability, family functioning and child wellbeing in targeted families?

- Which groups are work and welfare policies working well for, and for whom are they detrimental? What are the factors affecting how different groups are faring under these policies?

- How effective are sanctions in increasing or maintaining workforce participation? Do people actually comply in predictable ways in the face of sanctions?

- How do welfare reforms and child support scheme settings impact on the use of extended family supports, including the involvement of non-custodial parents?

- How does unresolved parental conflict impact on the provision of shared care and the exercise of shared parental responsibility in working families?

- What are the implications of changes in work and welfare policies for family breakdown, domestic violence, out of home care, and the workload of child protection authorities?

- How do child protection interventions relate to welfare profiles and the nature of low paid work? Are welfare-to-work policies associated with the current increase in child protection notifications?

- What are the long term implications of welfare-to-work policies for disadvantaged children?
What effect do welfare-to-work policies have on achieving parenting goals among people in child protection, family dispute resolution and early intervention programs?

How might researchers use available data sources, including the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children to explore these problems?

2.2 **Experiences of paid work**

What is the role of work, and the meaning of work, in the lives of highly disadvantaged parents and young people? What do vulnerable parents and young people feel they are gaining from work?

How are parents subject to welfare to work organising the care of their children? How (and why) do parents maintain and change these arrangements?

How do vulnerable families combine income support and paid work?

To what extent do assumptions that paid work will improve child and family wellbeing and alleviate poverty depend on job quality?

What are the characteristics of the jobs held by disadvantaged sole parents and young people, and what are the characteristics of the jobs they want (or need?)?

In what ways (if any) do the experiences of mothers subject to welfare to work requirements differ from the experiences of other (similar) groups of workers?

Would more job training supports improve the level of workforce participation among the disadvantaged?

Is Australia in danger of creating a new underclass of ‘working poor’ under current welfare and work policies?

To what extent has the quantum and nature of family friendly provisions in industrial agreements changed under new workplace relations laws?

How have understandings of ‘dependence’ and ‘independence’ changed among young people and what policy dynamics have promoted any identified shifts? How do changed understandings influence the work participation decisions of parents and young people?

2.3 **Experiences of bureaucratic systems in practice**

How do front line workers in Centrelink and Job Network agencies apply income support rules?

How do vulnerable people negotiate bureaucratic requirements around applications for benefits, exemptions and complaints, and what are their support needs?

How might we better incorporate procedural justice into existing complaint and advocacy mechanisms in income support and industrial relations systems? What appeal processes and advocacy supports are required for those who are unable to understand and/or negotiate simple complaints systems?

2.4 **Stakeholder responses to welfare reform**

How are employers responding to welfare to work, and has the risk of maltreatment increased for vulnerable workers?

How are Job Network providers responding to those people required, under welfare to work, to use their services?

Should Job Network classifications be geared towards the concept of job readiness, as opposed to a typology based on risk of long term employment?
o Are emergency relief services feeling increased demand on their services (for example, as a result of breaching)?

o What are the implications of welfare reform for welfare professionals (in terms of supports and advocacy for clients subject to welfare requirements)?

o What are the implications of welfare reform for welfare agencies? What direct effects are there (if any) on welfare agency contracts?

o What indirect effects are there for services (eg the changing needs of clients)?

o Do welfare agencies spend more time advocating on behalf of clients with Government departments? Are clients presenting with more needs and for longer durations? Do welfare organisations need to reassess their service models in order to better meet such needs?

2.5 Assessing new income management policies

o How are vulnerable people currently experiencing income management?

o How will mandatory income management affect vulnerable income support recipients, and how does this compare with the experiences of those who enter income management arrangements voluntarily?

o How (and how well) will income management function as a strategy for enhancing school attendance and reducing child abuse and neglect?

o How will income management impact on inter-organisational collaboration and cooperation? How will a mandatory reporting regime affect trust between disadvantaged people and organisations such as schools?

o What capacity building initiatives should be operating instead of, or in concert with, income management regimes?

o To what extent has Centrepay proved to be an effective income management system and for whom? Should effectiveness be determined, to what extent is this contingent on (1) voluntary participation in the scheme; and (2) case management?

2.6 General

o How has the poverty profile in Australia changed over the last decade and how have changes to income support (including Family Tax Benefit) and child support arrangements affected this profile?

3. Towards new principles for welfare

3.1 Rethinking policies and outcomes

o What are the central goals of welfare reform policies, and which other goals should be prioritized?

o How should outcomes in the work-welfare system be measured?

o What policy/organisational changes would support these outcomes?

o What is the likely impact of economic recession on vulnerable people in the context of welfare to work?

3.2 Rethinking work and job readiness

o What does job readiness mean? Is there a threshold of readiness (eg ‘participation readiness’) that vulnerable people encounter prior to ‘job readiness’?

o How could ‘job readiness’ be better assessed?
What job creation measures are required in areas of relatively high unemployment in order to give the term 'job readiness' meaning?

How can employment options be created for those groups that mainstream employers frequently reject, including people with mental health difficulties or episodic illness; people who are homeless or in insecure housing; and people with challenging or erratic behaviours?

What can be done to improve pay, conditions and job security in low-paid work to create stable and family-friendly employment opportunities for disadvantaged workers?

What education and training initiatives are required to overcome barriers to people with complex needs or disability, and others who require flexible pathways in order to undertake vocational education and training and improve their employment prospects?

How can the CDEP program be used to build the capacities of Aboriginal people unable to attain mainstream work and provide important community services? Which CDEP positions should be converted to public service positions at award rates of pay?

How can parenting courses such as Burnside's innovative NEWPIN model be used to create pathways into vocational training and employment?

3.3 Rethinking the service and policy mix

What universal services would help fulfil the goals of promoting economic participation while promoting family and child well-being?

How might we better assist parents to maintain employment while continuing to access the child and family support services they need?

What are the likely returns to investment in tailored supports for people experiencing multiple disadvantages (as opposed to prioritising compliance within the welfare system)?

What is the role of earned income tax credits? What supports does and should the taxation system provide for disadvantaged families and young people?

How might communities be engaged in identifying and solving their own problems?