

## POSTCODES OF POVERTY

*Autumn 2007: View from the Peak*

The links between mental health and levels of social advantage are well established, so MHCC was interested in a recent report describing the areas of distinct disadvantage across Australia. In contrast to the economic growth of Australia as a whole, the report provides sound contemporary evidence for what we in the community sector already know: that some communities are caught in an ongoing cycle of disadvantage, and a sustained approach is required to stop the cycle.

The report, *Dropping Off the Edge: the Distribution of Disadvantage in Australia*, was compiled by Professor Tony Vinson from Sydney University, and commissioned by Jesuit Social Services and Catholic Social Services Australia.

It is the most comprehensive study of its kind to date in Australia, drawing on data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, Medicare, Centrelink, and a number of Government agencies to paint a picture of the most disadvantaged areas down to postcode level where possible.

In both Australia and NSW, 1.7% of the localities had over 7 times their share of the top ranked positions of the factors that create intergenerational poverty, factors covering social distress, health, community safety, economics, and education.

One key finding is that many of the disadvantaged areas have intergenerational and established disadvantage spanning more than 30 years. This points to a clear need for sustained approach in community development. Targeted Government programs need to be established for a minimum of 8 years in these areas, unlike the 2-3 year pilot programs we frequently see. The consolidated disadvantage of decades cannot be reversed in a year or two.

Disadvantage was described as a combination of inter-related social factors including lack of adequate access to health, housing and education options. If disadvantage is to be tackled effectively the numerous factors that define disadvantage must be taken into consideration as a whole.

The report also highlights the role of 'low social cohesion' in creating and maintaining social disadvantage, and recommends initiatives such as free pre school, child care and special programs for under-five-year-olds, post natal outreach services and parenting support programs, properly funded public education and training, boosted social housing, decent public transport and services for young people, the aged and the disabled — all of which strengthen communities.

So what can be done about such entrenched disadvantage? Professor Vinson remains optimistic, saying:

We have strong factual evidence, based on a sample of more than 37,000 residents of Victoria, that areas characterised by strong connections between people and residents' involvement with their community, are localities protected from the most harmful consequences of social conditions like unemployment, low income and limited education. Our

findings show that the impact of these conditions is reduced, sometimes dramatically, when local social bonds are strong.

Second, we know from our monitoring of a limited number of government sponsored 'community strengthening' projects in NSW that the wellbeing of communities that have received comprehensive assistance has improved following the commencement of those projects.

Achieving a fairer society and reducing the gap between rich and poor is possible, and the report states that only relatively modest expenditure on a limited number of communities is needed. Governments need to think beyond electoral cycles, and see the value in investing in areas that have fallen off the edge.

More information is available online at [www.australiandisadvantage.org.au](http://www.australiandisadvantage.org.au).



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