

SPEECH

Dropping off the Edge: the distribution of disadvantage in Australia

INTRODUCTION

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**Check against delivery

Your presence here today is a sign of the interest of the Australian community and its political leaders in the findings of this social research.

I have been project managing this work, through Jesuit Social Services, for the last ten years.

Our motivation in promoting this research comes from our experience of working with young Australian families over the last 30 years.

Australia has clearly become more prosperous, as a result of economic growth over the last fifteen years. But it has become clear from our experience, and that of thousands of other community service organisations, that not all Australians share in these “good times”.

Moreover, our intuition has been that these disadvantaged Australian families increasingly come from the same localities.

So we decided to test that proposition to see if it could be validated... statistically.

We were amazed!

Our previous findings in 1999 (Unequal In Life) and 2004 (Community Adversity and Resilience), focusing on New South Wales and Victoria alone, have been reinforced and we have discovered that it is a pattern throughout Australia.

We knew from our casework with young people and families that the path to lifelong disadvantage for many individuals came from:

- Early school leaving
- No further training
- Low job skills
- Long term unemployment
- And then decades of involvement with mental health services or the criminal justice system.

But now we know and can show statistically that this is a pattern not just for individuals but also for whole communities of young Australians in particular locations throughout Australia.

Just like the challenge of indigenous disadvantage, the alienation of whole communities within mainstream Australian society simply cannot be tolerated, especially in times of such obvious economic growth and prosperity.

Mainstream government programs and services will not reach these communities any longer.

Without specific programs focusing on locational intervention, they will become and remain “untouchable”.

Jesuit Social Services and its partner in this research, Catholic Social Services, believe that this issue is not one for political point scoring.

It needs coordinated action now, before these communities fall off the edge!

Professor Vinson has been an outstanding Australian leader in helping us to identify these structural changes taking place in Australia today.

He has spent a lifetime educating two generations of social workers within New South Wales.

He has a strong background in statistical research, being the foundational Director of the New South Wales Bureau of Crime and Statistics in 1970.

He even was called upon to run the New South Wales prison system for a few years in 1979.

There, in the prisons, he saw the implications of governments and communities failing to make the right interventions early in life.

This insight was reinforced by his recent work in educational reform in New South Wales, highlighting the importance of good pre-school and primary school education for families in need.

I have much pleasure inviting Emeritus Professor Tony Vinson to introduce our research findings contained in ***Dropping Off The Edge***.

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