

SPEECH

Dropping off the Edge: the distribution of disadvantage in Australia

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**Check against delivery

THE WEB OF DISADVANTAGE

Social statistics should never dull our minds to the reality of the human lives and circumstances behind the numbers. Each and every one of the 25 indicators used to chart the distribution of disadvantage throughout Australia is a sign, at the very least, of lives failing to thrive.

Individual set-backs like frail health at birth, not being inoculated against preventable illness, suffering childhood injuries or being maltreated, or simply developing in poor economic circumstances, can take their toll.

Dropping Off the Edge shows that in some Australian communities that toll increases many times over when infant misfortune is followed by a succession of later set-backs. The piling of disadvantage upon disadvantage has harmful consequences for the individuals and families affected that can spill over to the next generation. It can also cultivate a local social climate of resignation to poor circumstances. The result can be very costly to the society as a whole.

Our profiling of Australia's most disadvantaged communities using social, health and economic indicators, highlights the central importance of limited schooling in triggering and sustaining concentrated local disadvantage.

Those who start their schooling well behind taws, whose participation is spasmodic and who leave at the earliest opportunity, face an uphill battle.

Of course, education is not destiny but our findings show an unmistakable pattern associated with inadequate education and training – unemployment, low income, poor health and 'making ends meet' by criminal means resulting in high rates of convictions and imprisonment.

Where these characteristics are concentrated there, too, we find high levels of confirmed child maltreatment.

Public discussion of these problems usually focuses on them as separate issues. Our approach has been different: *Dropping Off the Edge* has painstakingly linked information from diverse sources across 6 states and the ACT. This process enables one to see

forms of disadvantage in their social context and reveals their remarkable degree of geographic concentration.

A simple count of how many times places throughout Australia appear in the highest ranking 5 per cent on each of the indicators shows that just one-and-a-half percent of the localities account for six to seven times their share of top ranking positions.

Moreover, the different strands of disadvantage inter-lock. Our examination of the correlations between them shows a high degree of inter-dependence so that progress in overcoming one limitation, say, unemployment, can be inhibited by related factors like limited funds, poor health, inadequate training or having a criminal record.

This web-like structure of disadvantage counters attempts to break free of it.

Our study's main analysis simultaneously took into account each locality's position, high or low, on **all** of the available indicators. A single score was calculated for each locality summarising its general vulnerability to the range of problems represented by the indicators.

The localities within each jurisdiction were then ranked from the most to the least disadvantaged and the results displayed visually in the form of disadvantage maps for each Australian jurisdiction. The result is a hierarchy of disadvantaged communities and all of our evidence points to the stability of that structure.

The disadvantage rankings in the two states we have previously studied in this way (Victoria and NSW) have remained remarkably stable over the past decade. Even longer term comparisons over 30 years show that the characteristics that distinguished severely disadvantaged communities then are almost identical with the key distinguishing characteristics today – early school leaving and the absence of other training, low work skills, low income families, poor health, unemployment and criminal convictions being to the fore. Today we must add limited computer access to the list.

Because statistics are life-less representations of human events and circumstances, it behoves us to ask how well these technically arrived at findings tally with the real world and real people.

For my own part, my experiences in parole, crime statistics, prison administration, community development and public education certainly resonate with the present findings.

To be a corrections field officer is to see at close quarters the compounding effect of multiple strands of disadvantage within offenders' lives, homes and neighbourhoods.

I have also found that many preschool-aged children from disadvantaged areas arrive at school with language and behavioural problems which, in the absence of appropriate assistance will, in all probability, block their educational progress.

Their attendance at primary and secondary schools serving disadvantaged communities that are under-supplied with experienced, able teachers to guide the predominantly novice staff, does not help in overcoming their difficulties.

That children from some localities are positioned at an early age for ongoing failure offends our national values, especially the idea of a 'fair go'.

But should we brace ourselves for the reality that some communities will inevitably 'fall off the edge'?

The present findings include at least two grounds for dismissing such pessimism. First 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 New South Wales that the wellbeing of communities that have received comprehensive assistance has improved following the commencement of those projects.

Relatively short-term supportive interventions (usually around two to three years) have seen crucial improvements, especially in young children. The elements of assistance provided have ranged from job training and work placement, to educational outreach, health services, parent support and the cultivation of social cohesion.

How disappointing then that the support of these constructive endeavours is withdrawn prematurely at both State and Commonwealth levels.

Disadvantage entrenched over decades cannot be turned around in a few short years. In fact our evidence to-date indicates that when this happens you get a 'boomerang' effect – a rebound to previous levels of disadvantage.

What is needed is persistent effort nearer to seven or eight years – as happens to good effect overseas – rather than the Australian norm of two or three. It is possible that an inadequate single 'dose' of community assistance may be more harmful than no help at all.

It is time to get serious about drawing the most severely disadvantaged neighbourhoods of our society into the mainstream economic and social prosperity characteristic of present-day Australia.

That need involve relatively modest expenditure on a limited number of communities that have 'fallen off the edge.'

What needs to be done? The first requirement is that the information needed to monitor the convergence of strands of disadvantage in Australia continues to be compiled under government auspices.

A collaborative structure is needed to ensure a productive division of labour between Commonwealth and State agencies involved in community strengthening but in one essential respect the Commonwealth needs to exercise strong leadership. It needs to conduct a number of carefully documented projects of extended durations to exemplify 'best practice' in the field. The number need not be large but the emphasis should be on establishing links between sustained beneficial outcomes and the processes employed. Possible sites for this work are nominated in the report.

No trend is clearer from our results than the centrality of inadequate education to the onset and persistence of social disadvantage.

A good beginning to education is vital.

The universal provision of preschool has its advantages but priority needs to be given to those in greatest need – children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Three **and** four year old children living within the 10 per cent most disadvantaged localities in each jurisdiction should be guaranteed 18 hours of free preschool to support their good beginnings to formal education.

But a good beginning needs to be backed by experienced teachers if educational progress is not to become ensnared in other strands of disadvantage. We have to attract a higher proportion of experienced, able teachers back to the primary and secondary schools serving disadvantaged communities. A modest extension to the promotional grades could signify to eligible and motivated older hands the importance attached by our education authorities and society generally to meeting the needs of disadvantaged children and young people.

Apart from guiding the repair of social damage that already exists, the information contained in *Dropping Off the Edge* can be used proactively to monitor changes in localities and intercept problems before they wreak maximum harm.

Here are just a few examples of what is needed. We know that what are called 'place effects' – the net influence exerted by a locality on people's wellbeing – are particularly strong during the early stages of life and later adolescence.

Post-natal outreach services, parenting support programs and children's diagnostic services should be strongly represented within highly disadvantaged neighbourhoods, including those in rural and remote areas.

The same is true of adolescent health services. The policing of disadvantaged areas can be linked with the work of other social agencies in pursuit of improved community problem solving.

Adequate community transport in disadvantaged areas within and outside of the metropolitan areas can mean the difference between some people utilising or failing to take advantage of available services.

Let me conclude with a question: can we economically, let alone morally, fail as a nation to make a sustained, systematic effort to turn around the prospects of people in our most disadvantaged communities?

After taking into account the size of the eligible populations, the most disadvantaged 3 per cent of Australia's localities (68 places in all) have:

- double the rate of unemployment and
- more than 2.5 times the rate of long term unemployment of the remaining places in Australia;
- almost double the rate of disability support and psychiatric admissions
- more than double the rate of criminal convictions
- approaching three times the rate of imprisonment.

- Their proportion of confirmed child maltreatment cases is more than 3.5 times that of the remaining localities.

These are remarkable disparities.

They should compel sustained remedial action.

INDICATORS

SOCIAL DISTRESS: low family income, rental stress, home purchase stress, lone person households

HEALTH: low birth-weight, childhood injuries, immunisation, disability/sickness support, life expectancy, psychiatric admissions, suicide

COMMUNITY SAFETY: child maltreatment, criminal convictions, imprisonment, domestic violence

ECONOMIC: unskilled workers, unemployment, long-term unemployment, dependency ratio, mean taxable income, limited computer use/internet access

EDUCATION: non-attendance at preschool, incomplete education (18-24 years), early school leaving (population), post-schooling qualifications

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