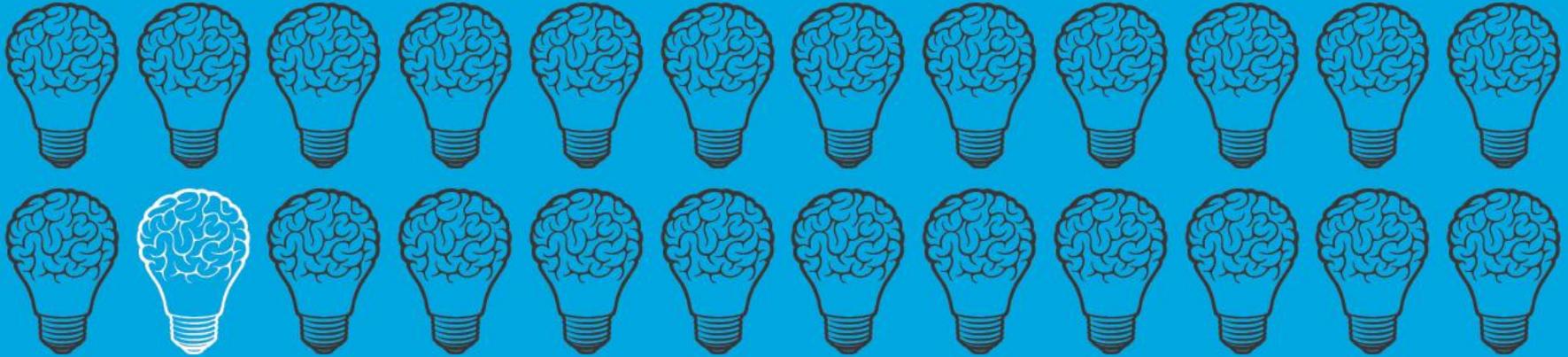


THE REAL STORY



What Australians think about poverty and how we shape the debate

STATE OF THE FAMILY REPORT



PART ONE

Learning from the literature: Income, poverty, and social attitudes

The poverty wars

- » Debates have raged in Australia about whether poverty means not having enough to cover basic essentials (absolute poverty) or living below an agreed standard (relative poverty)
- » This gave rise to the poverty wars of the 2000s, where conservative commentators and think tanks began arguing that poverty rates were being exaggerated by measures of relative poverty
- » In recent years, the poverty wars have resurfaced

The changing demographics of poverty

- » Wages are stagnating and living costs are rising
- » Discretionary costs (consumer goods, holidays, etc) are going down, but essential costs (housing, energy, transport, childcare, etc) are rising
- » Some measures show that income inequality is decreasing, but it's important to remember that this is *household income* - more people are working in each household, but this does not mean that incomes are rising
- » Work is becoming less important than owning property or inheriting wealth
- » These changing patterns could change people's attitudes to work and poverty

Australian attitudes to poverty and welfare



Targeted support vs universalism

- » Welfare systems that are very targeted lead to declining support – for example, the value of Youth Allowance and Newstart has eroded over the last twenty years
- » In Australia, the most popular aspects of the welfare system are the ones that are universal, such as Medicare. For example, family payments and the age pension are given to most of the target population and have both been increased in the last ten years
- » This is not a coincidence. Universalism generates support.

Shaping public opinion

- » Attitudes to welfare and poverty are not fixed. They are shaped by debate
- » O'Grady (2017) found that in the UK, the first round of welfare crackdowns in the 80s was unpopular. Attitudes did not change until the 90s, when Labour changed its rhetoric on welfare.
- » This could be explained in many ways. It could mean that some actors are more influential in particular debates. It could also mean that a political consensus is needed to change attitudes.



PART TWO

Perceptions and
reality: A survey of
Australians

The results

- » The survey showed that in the last twelve months, 16 per cent of Australians have experienced a situation where they could not afford to buy basic necessities such as food or shelter
- » 52% agreed that most Australians are sympathetic to those experiencing poverty
- » 79% agreed that people can find themselves experiencing poverty through no fault of their own
- » 85% agreed that nobody who works full-time should live in poverty
- » 85% agreed that nobody deserves to live in poverty

The results (continued)

- » 85% agreed that Australia should be a country that looks after those in need
- » Only 38% agreed that any Australian could work their way out of poverty if they really tried
- » Just 11% agreed that people who rely on government support deserve to live in poverty. Over 70% rejected the statement
- » 58% agreed that people experiencing poverty are fundamentally the same as I am. Only 8% disagreed.

Trends from the survey

- » Australians are much more sympathetic to people experiencing poverty than they think they are
- » Attitudes towards people receiving welfare are sympathetic
- » People with recent experiences of poverty hold less sympathetic attitudes
- » Nobody deserves to live in poverty

What it means

- » Australians are sympathetic to people experiencing poverty
- » Perceptions do not match reality when it comes to attitudes towards poverty
- » The findings of the survey challenge the perception that Australians are apathetic or even hostile to people in need of income support
- » The least equivocal statement in the survey drew the most empathetic response from participants
- » People who reported lived experiences of poverty showed less sympathetic attitudes than those who hadn't



PART THREE

Saying what we mean: A language analysis from the Network

Metaphors: Poverty as an opponent

Our language analysis found **poverty as an opponent** to be a common metaphor. For example:

- » 'Poverty is a silent killer'
- » 'Education is our greatest weapon against poverty'
- » 'We need to fight poverty'

But by turning poverty into the enemy, this metaphor suggests it alone is the actor causing harm.

Metaphors: Poverty as a disease

Poverty as a disease was another common metaphor. For example:

- » 'A policy that gets the prescription right'
- » 'Our aim is not only to relieve the symptom of poverty, but to cure it and, above all, to prevent it'

But poverty as a disease is limiting.

What does 'poverty as a disease' really mean?

- » Disease may be prevented by hygiene and healthy living. Therefore, individuals could take steps to not become poor. They may be to blame for their condition.
- » Most diseases are treated or managed. Therefore, poverty can be managed or removed in individual cases with enough effort.
- » Diseases are communicable through people who are unwell. Therefore, poverty can be spread through contact.
- » Most diseases have not been created by humans. Therefore, people are not responsible for the existence of poverty.

Metaphors: Poverty as a pathway

Poverty as a pathway is a popular metaphor across the Network. For example:

- » 'Newstart is designed as a bridge until people find paid work, we get that.'
- » 'Our young people know all too well that the passport to a good life in Australia is to work so they can achieve their goals and ambitions.'

The main limitation of this metaphor is its implication that people have gone to the wrong place, and its tendency to mask the difficulties of moving from one place to another.

Metaphors: Poverty as a trap

A more promising metaphor describes [poverty as a trap](#). For example:

- » 'People living in the shadows'
- » 'Back from the brink'
- » 'Breaking away from poverty'
- » 'Deep poverty'

Poverty as a trap emerges as the most persuasive metaphor because offers a sense of what life is like for real people.

Blame, sympathy, and passive language

Many of the materials we reviewed contain passive language:

'A section of our working community are now beginning to also fall off the peloton of prosperous mainstream Australia, and **find themselves in poverty** and increasingly reliant on welfare support to get through.'

The excerpts also reveal a tendency to do this through abstraction:

'At other times the services, housing or educational investment just isn't there, and more or less the same people **find themselves excluded from** mainstream society, living in continuing hardship and deprivation.'

Negating frames

- » 'Australia is a **low-spending country** on social security.'
- » 'The gap between what a **job seeker receives** and what the **average Australian earns** is growing bigger and bigger.'
- » 'Every teenager wants to work. I don't think I've talked to a single one that **just wants to sit at home and sit on the dole.**'
- » 'Income tax is **not the main pressure** on household budgets.'

A FEATURE ARTICLE
IN THE BUSINESS PRESS
CALLED OUR LEADERSHIP
A "BUNCH OF MORONS."



TO COUNTER THAT
SLANDEROUS STORY,
OUR NEW MARKETING
SLOGAN IS "WE'RE
NOT A BUNCH OF
MORONS!"



PROBLEM
SOLVED.



IT WAS
DECEP-
TIVELY
EASY.

IS IT TOO LATE TO
RETHINK OUR NEW
MARKETING SLOGAN?



WHEN WE SAY, "WE'RE
NOT A BUNCH OF
MORONS," IT KINDA
SOUNDS TO MY EARS
AS IF WE ARE.



BUT IT
SAYS WE'RE
NOT.

AND YOU'RE
NOT A RAT-
FACED WASTE
OF OXYGEN.



THANK
YOU.

Ending equivocation: Saying what we mean

Much of the material we reviewed assumes that people need to be persuaded about the existence of poverty and the need to take action. In many cases, this manifests itself in the use of qualified language:

'Let's not replay the same old inaccurate story - that Australia's young unemployed people **are lazy and don't want to work.**'

At other times, communications buy into idealised notions of the 'deserving poor' by equivocating about deservingness:

'Old age pensioners, people with disability and their carers these days, **are undoubtedly deserving.**'

Saying what we mean (continued)

- » Offering a goal: The absence of a vision of a just life for all leaves much of the language as defensive against attacks that people are victims of their own behaviour.
- » Who are the poor? Examples from broader civil society include, 'people are sinking economically', 'predatory lending' and 'this is an unmitigated disaster for real people'. All of this language strips people of their agency and turns them into passive actors. In speaking about poverty in such dire and disempowering terms, it becomes harder to portray people as having the same agency in their own lives as anyone else.

Putting people first

Many of the materials we reviewed reveal a silencing of people who experience poverty themselves. Much language continues to be about 'them':

'Such low incomes are linked to higher rates of [homelessness and rent stress](#).'

A simple change to say that 'People are becoming homeless because of low income rates' would make this statement much more powerful. Similarly, the use of phrases like 'rough sleepers' masks the human experience of homelessness:

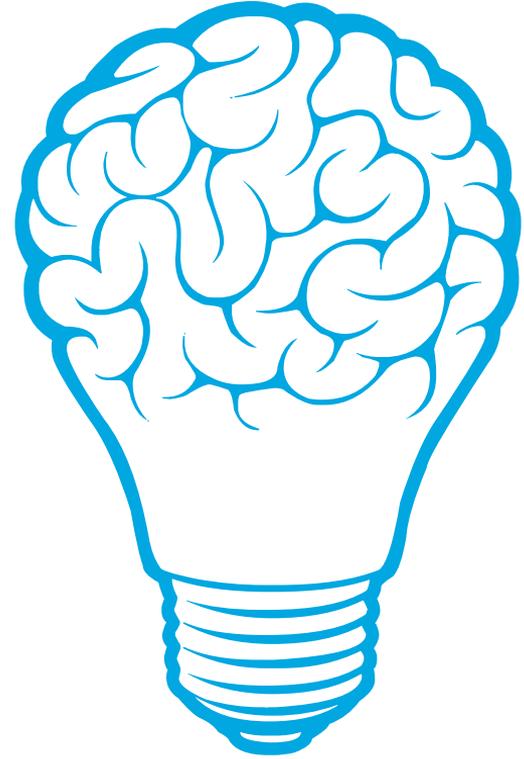
'One study found 43% of [rough sleepers](#) were on unemployment benefits.'

Emphasising that people are sleeping rough, rather than referring to 'rough sleepers', would make this statement more persuasive.

» Don't argue about how many people are in poverty

» Assume your audience agrees with you

» Say it and mean it





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