Welcome to our October 2019 edition of ResearchPress. This month we explore the complex dimensions of poverty, homelessness for veterans and older Australians, the importance of social inclusion, and mental health prevention for our young people.

Road to poverty relief in Australia

Anti-Poverty Week 2019 and the Senate Inquiry into Newstart have put poverty under the spotlight. Research points to the rising rate of hardship in Australia, with one in eight adults and one in six children reportedly living in poverty. The situation is worse in households where government allowances are the main source of income – almost 80% lived in poverty in 2017, compared to 39% in 1993. While household incomes have risen markedly overall, and affordability in Perth has improved relative to other capital cities, the lowest earners in WA and other States have had little real income growth and are vulnerable to financial stress. NSW research suggests that single parents, social housing tenants, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (Aboriginal) Australians, people with disability, and regional households are the most likely to live in poverty.

Food insecurity has featured strongly in poverty research. Foodbank’s 2019 Hunger Report showed that, in the last year, one in five Australians have run out of food and been unable to buy more. The number of people seeking food relief has grown significantly and food charities are struggling to keep up with demand. The research found women are particularly vulnerable and more likely than men to feel the adverse mental health effects of food insecurity. A Tasmanian study also revealed the extent of food insecurity for young people on government payments.

Energy poverty is another growing issue across Australia. Research from St. Vincent de Paul has found electricity disconnections in eastern Australia are most common in regional areas. In WA, data has revealed a marked increase in power disconnections, prompting concerns low-income earners are not coping with recent electricity price hikes. Underemployment, limited wage growth and stagnant government payments have all played a role in energy poverty across the country.

Job insecurity also contributes to poverty. Anglicare suggests that entry-level jobs are becoming less available, exacerbating the barriers faced by older Australians, people with limited education and people with disability. These groups spend five years on average looking for work, and this reflects broader trends of rising long-term unemployment and underemployment in Australia. The relationship between poverty and unemployment is circular; unemployment limits income, and low income creates barriers to finding work.

Combating poverty requires a range of policy measures. There are calls for more help for welfare recipients to find work, such as tailored, person-centred programs. Digital technologies can assist in welfare distribution, but should avoid punishing the disadvantaged or generating further obstacles to employment. WA research provides a framework to alleviate food insecurity and Australia’s Food Waste Strategy has been called into question. Researchers have also recommended a national review of energy concession arrangements to address power affordability issues, as well as a strategy for transitioning to low-emissions energy while limiting price hikes.
Economy and Banking

Supporting financial choices in uncertain times
The buoyancy of Australia’s weakened economy in an uncertain global climate continues to capture headlines. The Reserve Bank of Australia (RBA) has slashed interest rates to a record low of 0.75% to ease monetary pressure and continued spare capacity in the labour market, despite some encouraging figures. High household debt remains a key concern. The RBA Governor has hinted at an extended period of low interest rates, but not all banks have been willing to pass on the full cuts. The Treasurer has increased pressure on banks, calling an inquiry into the pricing of residential mortgage products.

The Federal Government has released the findings from its independent review of the coordination and funding of financial counselling services, following recommendations issued by the Financial Services Royal Commission. The review affirms the central role of these services, but highlights challenges faced by the sector, such as increasing demand, fragmented delivery, and the array of complex situations and financial products that can lead to financial hardship. The review recommends implementing a nationally consistent approach for financial counselling, overseen by a single independent body. The sector has welcomed it as an important step to improving access to services for vulnerable people experiencing financial stress.

Society and Community

Helping vulnerable renters
More people are renting privately than in previous generations, and are doing so for longer and at later stages in life. This includes families with children, people with disability, and older people. Many of these are low-to-moderate income earners who struggle with rental affordability. Productivity Commission research shows that 170,000 Australian households have less than $250 available each week after paying rent. Vulnerable renters are at a disadvantage in the rental application process and can be heavily impacted by involuntary moves, which increase the risk of financial hardship, homelessness and mental health problems.

Research suggests low-income households would benefit from increases to Commonwealth Rent Assistance payments and from State tenancy law reforms to improve security of tenure, raise minimum eviction notice periods and impose minimum rental property standards. Expanding tenancy support services and long-term supported accommodation for people with mental illness has also been recommended. Reforms such as the First Home Loan Deposit Scheme and stamp duty rebates may also help low- and middle-income earners gain entry into the housing market.

Homelessness amongst veterans and older adults
World Homeless Day coincided with two major reports. A study by the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute found that the estimated rate of homeless veterans (5.3%) is significantly
higher than for the general population (1.9%). The lack of reliable national data and issues with reaching this group are problematic, impeding suitable service responses. The strongest risk factors for veteran homelessness are higher levels of psychological distress during service; and relationship breakdown and unemployment following transition. WA’s Veterans and Families Strategy acknowledges that mental health and housing services are often the first points of contact. The Strategy aims to empower case workers and other frontline staff to provide greater support options for veterans and their families.

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare has found a sharp increase in the rate of over 55s receiving specialist homelessness services, especially for women. Declining rates of home ownership are contributing to housing stress as more older people are renting or paying off mortgages beyond retirement age. This is spurring action on many fronts, including a review of Australia’s retirement income system. Meeting the needs of older people through quality aged care services will be a key focus, after shocking findings by the Aged Care Royal Commission. The recent release of Ageing with Choice: Future Directions for Seniors Housing 2019-2024 will complement the forthcoming WA 10-Year Strategy on Homelessness and WA Housing Strategy 2020-2030. Alongside other initiatives in aged care planning, these can support the wellbeing of vulnerable older Western Australians.

Overcoming gender inequality and protecting women’s interests

Women experience high rates of anxiety, loneliness and depression. Family and domestic violence (FDV) data shows the heavily gendered nature of intimate partner homicides. Violence against mothers also has a significant impact on children. Calls have been made for more child-centric responses to FDV, and greater supports for Aboriginal women and victims on temporary visas. Greater engagement with men may bring about self-generated change in perpetrators and combat wider societal behaviours that underpin male violence. Understanding victims' histories of exposure to violence can help optimise service delivery, as can FDV risk assessment tools.

WA’s draft 10-year Women’s Plan has revealed the top issues facing women include balancing work and family responsibilities, FDV and attitudes to women. The 2019 Women’s Report Card also contributes to the evidence base on the need for systemic and cultural change to achieve gender equality in WA. The Women’s Plan will be launched in early 2020, accompanied by an implementation plan that sets out actions to drive change over the next 10 years. Feedback on the draft Plan is invited by 25 November 2019.

Investing in youth mental health: A national priority

A suite of reports highlight the prevalence of mental illness amongst our youth:

- A Victorian survey found that one in two young people feel alone. Young adults aged 18-25 report significantly higher rates of loneliness, social isolation, social anxiety and depressive symptoms than adolescents. International research points to the stigma associated with loneliness, and how it is linked to key moments of life transition.


• **62% of young people** believe their mental health is declining. Rates for young women (double those of men) and Aboriginal Australians are especially concerning.

• **Aboriginal people are over three times more likely to use** specialised public mental health services in times of crisis. Services need to be appropriate and culturally safe.

• **Other issues** around work-preparedness (the changing nature of work, gender inequalities and socioeconomic disparities), housing affordability, poverty and the detrimental impacts of abuse and neglect on both the young person and their family, have received attention.

The Productivity Commission’s draft report on mental health calculates the estimated cost to the economy is nearly $500 million a day. Suicide is the leading cause of death for Australians aged 15-44. The report calls for substantial reforms and emphasises the need for better support at a young age, when mental illness tends to first emerge. **Prevention is key**, especially in schools. The Productivity Commission’s holistic approach has been welcomed by the community and mental health sectors, particularly its call for a national agreement. The report adds to strong evidence that effective, targeted early intervention and supports for children and young people should be a social and economic priority for Australia.

**Inclusion, transformation and access in disability**

Recent Australian Bureau of Statistics data shows that people with disability still experience poorer outcomes overall. Half of all older Australians have disability; primary carers live with disability and on low incomes at twice the rate of non-carers; and women with disability face economic abuse and targeted violence. A survey has revealed that children and young people with disability are targets of exclusion in schools, through enrolment refusal (also known as ‘gatekeeping’), suspensions, restraints and bullying. Rates of abuse and violence, as well as use of restraints, in WA schools are higher than other States and Territories. These findings support growing evidence of the benefits of inclusion, in schools and the broader community. In its first substantive public hearing, the Disability Royal Commission will focus on education, including inclusiveness and the use of restraints in education as it relates to students with disability.

Various groups continue to report issues with the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and the administrative appeals process, including people experiencing homelessness or psychosocial disability, and migrants and refugees. A new Parliamentary inquiry will explore broad issues relating to the Scheme’s implementation and operation, such as the quality of NDIS plans. The Australian Government has affirmed its commitment to better coordination between the NDIS and mainstream service systems to meet the needs of people with disability. One such outcome is the responsibility for disability-related health supports, now available to participants on NDIS plans. The Government has also developed a national roadmap for improving the health of Australians with intellectual disability. Among its recommendations is increasing the focus of the NDIS on optimising health outcomes for people with intellectual disability.
Environment

Caring for our communities

Infrastructure is vital to community and economic wellbeing. Actions are being taken nationally to build a collective sense of people, place and home. In WA, the State Government is working towards Perth’s City Deal to “connect, activate and future proof Perth’s communities”. Geelong is exploring systems solutions to create a city for everyone, through deep community engagement and participatory design. And Victoria is looking at prospects of decentralisation to maximise its sustainability. No initiative can go far without securing our environmental future; every building counts in incentivising affordable green infrastructure whilst supporting vulnerable consumers.

Hot off the Press

- KPMG. Unleashing Our Potential: The Case for Further Investment in the Child Care Subsidy.
- Office of the Advocate for Children and Young People (NSW). What Children and Young People in Juvenile Justice Centres Have to Say.
- Office of the eSafety Commissioner. Online Safety for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women Living in Urban Areas.
- Pilbara Development Commission. Pilbara Half Yearly Housing and Land Snapshot.
- Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety. A History of Aged Care Reviews.
- SNAICC - National Voice for our Children. Establishment of a National Commissioner for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Young People.
- South Australian Centre for Economic Studies. Newstart Allowance: Is it Time to Raise it?
- Tax and Transfer Policy Institute. Do Payroll Tax Cuts for Australian Firms Affect their Use of Capital and Labor?

For more communities related resources, visit our website: