Poverty and suicide: What is preventable?

Antipoverty Centre response to the Advice on the National Suicide Prevention Strategy consultation draft | November 2024

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Acknowledgement of Country

The Antipoverty Centre acknowledges the First Peoples of this unceded continent, who have been custodians of Country for thousands of generations, as its rightful owners. First Peoples have connections to place, land, waters and community that have been unbroken for 120,000 years.[1] We recognise Indigenous sovereignty and the cultural significance inherent in these connections; historical and contemporary. We recognise that distressing suicide rates among First Nations people are the result of ongoing genocidal policies for which we are all responsible for undoing.

We pay respect to Elders past and present and stand with all First Peoples in the quest for land back, self-determination, justice and truth-telling in the face of ongoing colonial violence, including that inflicted through racism in the welfare system, carceral system and labour market.

About the Antipoverty Centre

The Antipoverty Centre was established in 2021 to counter problems with academics, think tanks, charities, bureaucrats and others in the political class making harmful decisions on behalf of people they purport to represent. We are a collective of activists, advocates and researchers with direct, contemporary experience of poverty and unemployment.

We have deep expertise in poverty because we live it. We defend and fight for the rights of people like ourselves who experience violence at the hands of an economic system designed to oppress us. It is our mission to shift how people speak about and respond to poverty and unemployment in this colony.

We work closely with peer support groups, activists and grassroots civil society organisations to complement their work. Our goal is to help ensure the voices and rights of people on the lowest incomes are at the centre of social policy development and discourse. We believe there should be no decision made about us without us.

Contributors

Prepared for the Antipoverty Centre by Jay Coonan and Kristin O'Connell. We extend our deepest gratitude to Naomi Thompson for her significant contribution.

For enquiries related to this submission please contact team@antipovertycentre.org.

In this submission we have included the voices of those whose lives are affected by harmful welfare policies. We are proud to include a diversity of perspectives from dozens of people, drawing on community contributions to our parliamentary work and in-depth surveys that received responses from hundreds of people in poverty. We thank Adele, Aeryn Brown, Amber, Amy, Anne-Louise, Carmen, Deirdre, Grey, James Bryan-Hancock, Jane, Jarrad, Jordan, Justin Seymour, Kerry, Kylie, Lisa, Luke Filby, Marina Chapman, Mel Powersmith, Nathan Kearney, Olivia, Rachael, Robyn, Ruth, Timothy Collier, Trent

1 Bowler J, Price D, Sherwood J and Carey S (2019) 'The Moyjil Site, South-West Victoria, Australia: Fire and Environment in a 120,000-Year Coastal Midden — Nature or People?', *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Victoria*, 130(2):71–93.

and the many who chose to remain anonymous due to fear and shame for their quotes and stories shared in this submission and its appendix.

We thank every person who has contributed to our work by trusting us to share their opinions and experiences.

Content warning and support services

This submission includes direct quotes from people who have been harmed in employment services and through trying to navigate welfare and social services systems. Some of this may be confronting for those with similar experiences. We encourage you to seek support. We know the services below are imperfect, and that you may not feel comfortable contacting them. If you are feeling distress and do not want to access formal help please reach out to someone in your life. This could be a close friend or family member, or someone in your online community. Some services that are respected by us and our peers include:

- Roses in the Ocean – peer support: 1800 777 337
- Suicide Call Back Service – general: 1300 659 467
- SANE Australia – general: 1800 187 263
- 13YARN – for First Nations people: 13 92 76
- National Counselling and Referral Service – for disabled people: 1800 421 468
- Headspace – for young people: 1800 650 890
- QLife – fo LGBTQIA+ people: 1800 184 527
- Full Stop – for people who have experienced sexual harassment and assault: 1800 385 578
- Embrace Mental Health – multilingual service: embracementalhealth.org.au
- MensLine – for men: 1300 789 978
- Brother to Brother – for First Nations men: 1800 435 799

Introduction

This submission is relevant to the following items in the *Advice on the National Suicide Prevention Strategy* consultation draft: 'Key objective 3: Economic security', 'Key objective 4: Social inclusion' and 'Critical enabler 2: Embedded lived experience'.

While this consultation is focused specifically on suicide, we reject the implicit message that death should be the threshold at which government is compelled to act. Poverty-related suicide deaths are the tip of the iceberg beneath which lie the welfare system's unfathomable depth of widespread, unnecessary misery.

Decades of making budget savings off the backs of the poorest people in the community and ratcheting up punishment for those who dare to seek help have left us trapped in a carefully calibrated poverty machine. For many of us there is little hope of escape.

Persistent poverty is more prevalent among First Nations people, women, single-parent families, disabled people, older people, those with lower educational qualifications and people living in more disadvantaged regions.[2] Trans people are also dramatically over-represented among the population of people who are unemployed.[3]

People in poverty are the most important stakeholders in the policies that affect our lives. We are the victims of flawed economic policies and ideologies that created the dual poverty and housing crises we face. But welfare recipients are weary of constantly placing our lives and despair on the record, only for politicians to discard us and move on.

The Antipoverty Centre has long sought to draw attention to the links between suicide and welfare system payment rates, eligibility rules and compulsory activity requirements, known as "mutual" obligations. We spend an inordinate amount of time supporting people in crisis due to poverty, homelessness or abuse experienced at their job agency or activity host organisation. Many nights are spent supporting people struggling to resist self-harm and suicide. This takes a great toll on all involved.

Framing suicidality for people on social security as resolvable through employment is simplistic and ignorant. People are unemployed for many reasons, including social discrimination faced in the labour market and unsuitable jobs. Some people may never be able to sustain a paid job full-time and that is okay.

2 See: melbourneinstitute.unimelb.edu.au/news/news/employment-is-not-the-only-solution-to-ending-persistent-poverty-study2

3 See: liebertpub.com/doi/full/10.1089/lgbt.2020.0178

It was crushing to discover that the *Advice on the National Suicide Prevention Strategy* consultation draft fails to mention conditions in the welfare system, let alone substantively address the harm they cause. More obsessing over employment for people on Centrelink payments is not a suicide prevention strategy. **We implore the authors to respond to this failure by re-evaluating the priorities laid out in the strategy**, and to work with us and other welfare recipients to understand the urgent action required to prevent harm.

It is no surprise that 1 in 5 deaths by suicide were people on an unemployment payment when everything from the JobSeeker rate to rules that cause payment delays create so much distress and despair.[4]

> *This job provider was deeply abusive and harmful. I saw a different person each week who just asked me the same questions as the person before, they would call potential employers and deliberately hinder my chances of being called back. I often left crying. In the height of summer I was forced to do a fake certificate III in retail under the guise of helping me gain employment, but it was just containment. I attempted suicide in December 2019, and while in the hospital, they continued to hound me (asking for medical certificates before I was even released) and cut me off my payments. I was released with no support and no money, it was hell. I still wanted to die. – anonymous contributor #397, South Australia*

Our members, including people involved in writing this submission, have themselves often experienced severe suicidal ideation as a result of Centrelink payment rates, their housing situation and compulsory activities such as "mutual" obligations.

What we saw in 2020, when JobSeeker was lifted to the Henderson poverty line, was that this trend reversed. Countless welfare recipients spoke of how their mental health rebounded and suicidality reduced when financial distress was reduced and they were free of abusive employment services providers.

Income insecurity was treated as a crisis during the COVID lockdowns and it must be treated as a crisis now, particularly when poverty and living cost pressures are being felt even more acutely. The community knows that more services will not meaningfully reduce suicide without direct, adequate, material support.[5]

The government is not serious about suicide prevention and mental health if it refuses to increase Centrelink payments to at least the poverty line, ensure everyone has access to a secure home they can afford and abolish "mutual" obligations.

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4 See: aihw.gov.au/suicide-self-harm-monitoring/data/populations-age-groups/deaths-by-suicide-among-centrelink-income-support-recipients

5 An August 2019 Essential poll found that only 30% of people believe it would be better to spend money on services rather than increasing unemployment payments. See: essentialvision.com.au/attitudes-towards-newstart

Recent data from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare confirms what we have been saying for years: the welfare system is killing people. Bureaucrats and politicians must stop hiding behind band-aid solutions to preventable suicide deaths. Every day puts more lives and risk and the blood is on your hands.

If you read anything at all beyond this introduction, we urge you to prioritise the devastating words of the dozens of people in poverty whose perspectives are included as quotes in this submission and its appendix, particularly the contribution from Naomi Thompson.

Deprivation drives suicide

Any talk about suicide prevention is meaningless without recognising that governments are pushing people to suicide every day that they don't lift all social security payments. The *Advice on the National Suicide Prevention Strategy* consultation draft is narrowly focused within the bounds of current approaches that view suicide, ideation and mental health as directly tied to economic security in the form of employment, and not how the state creates economic insecurity through low Centrelink payment rates, abusive welfare compliance measures and state-induced unemployment.

Having promised the nation that no one would be left behind, Albanese has given welfare recipients no help and no hope. Continued austerity is a death trap for poor people. It tells us that politicians see our lives as disposable. It means more people feeling suicide and self-harm are their only option.

> *For anyone in poverty it can be isolating and a barrier to social interaction. There's no capacity to plan anything, so you just slowly step aside and withdraw from life because you can't afford to participate. It stings even more when it's your birthday. – Kerry*

People experience economic insecurity for a variety of reasons related to social and labour market discrimination as well as limited work capacity due to their health or caring duties. Poverty and punitive welfare policies disproportionately harm First Nations people, trans folks, single-parent families, disabled people, older people and migrants. We are not disposable; sacrifices to be made at the economic altar. First Nations people's experiences of poverty have been exacerbated by racist welfare policies that experiment with particularly punitive rules. Examples include paternalistic and exploitative programs like income control (BasicsCard, Cashless Debit Card and the SmartCard), ParentsNext and the Community Development Program, which exacerbate the stigma associated with poverty.

It is deeply irresponsible economic management to leave people in poverty. It's a choice to sacrifice us for the sake of numbers on a spreadsheet. Personal economic security should not be dependent upon the whims of the labour market, but grounded in a robust safety net that catches us all regardless of when we need support or how long we need it.

> *Those who are more likely to experience persistent poverty tend to be constrained in their ability to participate in the labour force. Therefore, focusing only on labour market-related anti-poverty policy measures is not enough. – Professor Roger Wilkins*[6]

The Antipoverty Centre regularly supports welfare recipients in distress who are hospitalised due to mental health crisis, who feel suicide is their best option, and who feel the government would prefer them dead. What they tell us is that they feel this way because of the welfare system. This is social murder.

Politicians in both major political parties boast of the social safety net's highly targeted nature as if that is a strength. In reality, many people who need income support are increasingly unable to access it, or receive deeply inadequate assistance.

> *I am a mental health support worker in Adelaide. The outcomes of poverty for mental health clients in this city are very often poor nutrition, dangerous temperature conditions, social isolation, unacceptable access to support and treatment, and therefore minimal chances of recovery. Commentary from those in charge, [who say] that supports to cover these areas exist, reflects a frankly dangerous level of ignorance of the on-the-ground reality faced by so many of our clients. – anonymous contributor*

The Antipoverty Centre is one of many organisations that runs on unpaid labour to offer what minimal support we can to people where they are being failed by the social safety net.

In the face of ongoing government failure to maintain quality public sector supports and its abrogation of responsibilities to so-called charities, many of which operate more like businesses and dish out abuse to people they are paid to help, individuals and activists are forced to mobilise in support of each other – often in ways that create unreasonable stress.

People in poverty are the most resilient and resourceful in the country. We look after each other emotionally. We provide crisis support when the system pushes people to the brink. We share information and advice for navigating complex systems designed to make it harder for us to access government programs and payments. We provide material support, ensuring to the greatest extent we can that those around us are fed, housed, receive healthcare, and have other needs met. We do this at great emotional cost. But it is never enough.

The work many people who rely on income support do to care for community and keep each other alive is difficult, incalculable, mundane, traumatising and unending. And it should not be necessary.

6 See: melbourneinstitute.unimelb.edu.au/news/news/employment-is-not-the-only-solution-to-ending-persistent-poverty-study2

We are forced to fight for our survival because a system that is purportedly there to help instead makes it seem that the government would prefer us dead. In the face of hostile public debate and state violence, people living and helping each other to live is a significant form of resistance in the face of social murder.

Refusing to ensure that everyone has enough to afford the basics creates a need for formal and informal supports that otherwise wouldn't exist, placing extra strain on those of us who already struggle the most.

The numbers reflect our experiences

For many of us who have relied on Centrelink payments long-term, they are less adequate than they have ever been. The data shows that welfare recipients are dying by suicide at alarming rates. Around a third of all working age people who died by suicide were on either the JobSeeker payment or Disability Support Pension, while making up 8.8% of the working age population.[7]

After steadily increasing, suicide rates among people in the poorest communities dropped to their lowest point since 2014 while the COVID supplement was in place, which brought the JobSeeker payment to the Henderson poverty line. During the period of the COVID supplement deaths by despair also dropped.

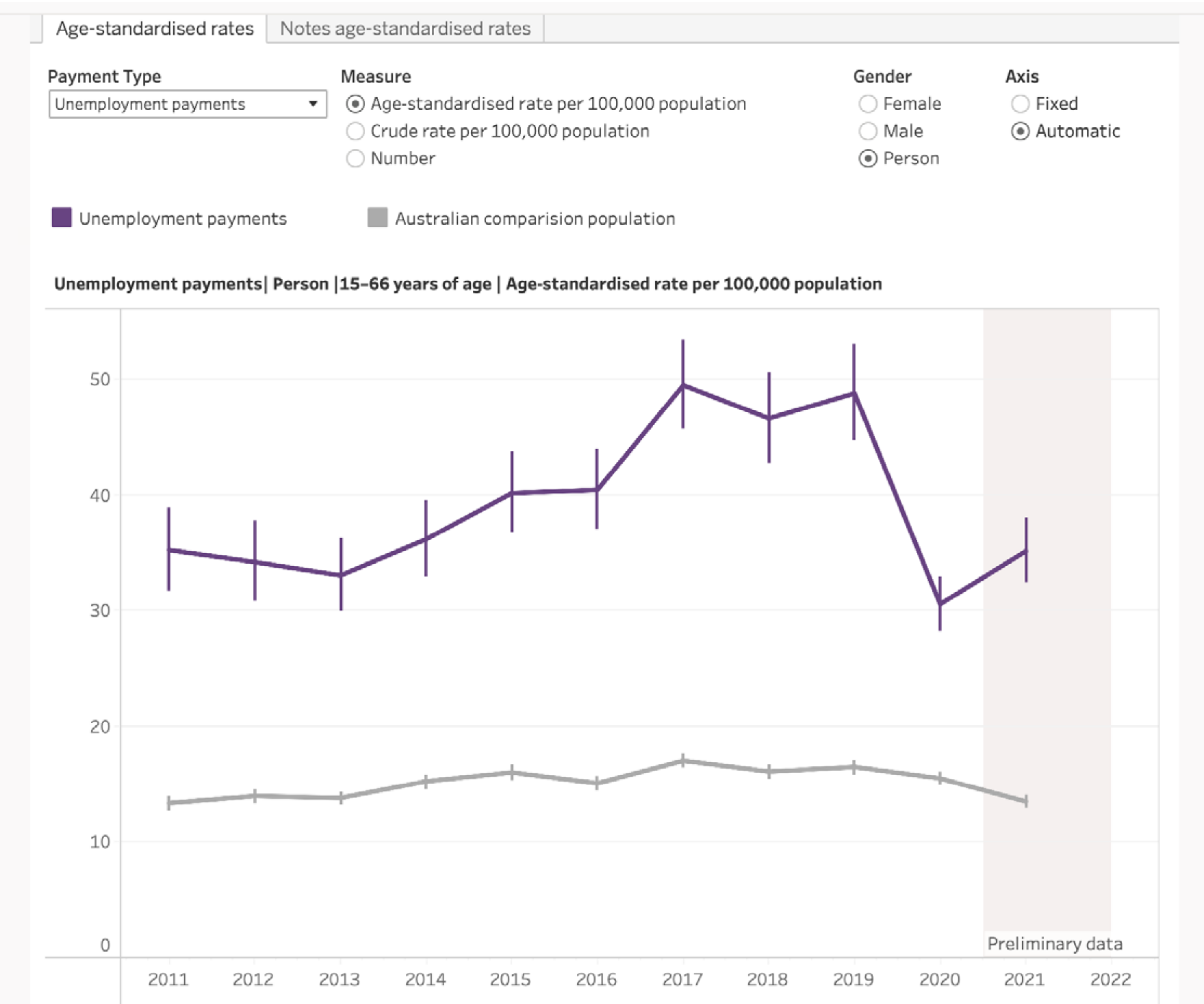
According to Australian Institute of Health and Welfare data published in May 2024:[8]

- Suicide rates for people on unemployment payments (JobSeeker and Youth Allowance) reduced by 37.4% between 2019 and 2020.
- In 2019, unemployment payment recipients accounted for approximately 20% of all suicide deaths among people of working age. The suicide rate for those who received an unemployment payment was 4.5 times that of those who did not receive an unemployment payment in the preceding 12 months.
- For all age groups between 16 and 65 years, rates of death by suicide are highest among those who received the Disability Support Pension.
- During 2019, the most recent pre-COVID year, suicide among DSP recipients was 3.6 times that of their comparison population. During the same year, DSP recipients accounted for 14.5% of all suicide deaths among adults under 75.

7 Based on 2019 figures for the purpose of comparison with AIHW data. See: abs.gov.au/statistics/people/population/national-state-and-territory-population/dec-2019 and data.gov.au/dataset/ds-dga-cff2ae8a-55e4-47db-a66d-e177fe0ac6a0/details?q=

8 See: aihw.gov.au/suicide-self-harm-monitoring/data/populations-age-groups/deaths-by-suicide-among-centrelink-income-support-recipients

From the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare as cited above:



When the mutual obligations were removed and the payment was increased, my life significantly improved, as did my condition, as happened in 2020. This allows me to see a better future for myself and plan ahead. It is long past time they overhaul this malignant system. – Robert, Victoria

As life-changing financial support was taken away from people on JobSeeker, the suicide rate began to rise again in 2021. With no new data available and living costs spiralling in recent years, we fear the next set of suicide statistics will be even worse for welfare recipients.

Unemployment is by design

We are told that the best form of welfare is a job. That our failure to train, to present ourselves in the best light, to write the perfect resumé, are the reasons we are unemployed. That all we need is the right combination of coaching and coercion to pull ourselves up by our bootstraps.

The current proposals in the consultation draft are too focused on improving economic security through employment alone, failing to consider the externalities unemployed people experience. Our economy is not designed to foster economic security. Contrary to the myths perpetuated by government, it does not provide affordable access to education, healthcare or housing.

We are not in poverty by accident. Every politician, bureaucrat, think tanker, professional advocate, academic and journalist who drives the insipid debate and dictates our lives is responsible to varying degrees.

The current policy direction of the draft strategy inadvertently contributes to anti-welfare rhetoric and needs an overhaul with people in poverty leading the agenda.

> *Anti-welfare rhetoric is easy populism, useful for campaign purposes. It is not recent, nor is it confined to one side of politics, as some of the quoted material in this report demonstrates. It may be that the evidence in this Royal Commission has gone some way to changing public perceptions. But largely, those attitudes are set by politicians, who need to abandon for good (in every sense) the narrative of taxpayer versus welfare recipient. – Commissioner Catherine Holmes*[9]

To offer "financial counselling" as a means to educate people out of poverty when their income is so low they're unable to pay bills and feed themselves is an absurd proposition that could only be put forward by someone who has never been poor or experienced suicide ideation while living in poverty.

The individualisation of the problem of unemployment and poverty is itself a driver of despair when the underlying and structural reasons for unemployment are not visible to people in the welfare system nor acknowledged by politicians. Welfare policies and structural forces – from Reserve Bank decisions to racial, disability and age discrimination – are working together to lock millions of people out of paid work.

Unemployment is by design. Unemployed people are wielded as a macroeconomic lever – the dial is turned up and down at the whim of a bureaucrat without a thought for the harm done to hundreds of thousands of people thrown into a threadbare safety net. Whether trapped in the welfare system, working in low paid jobs, or barred from accessing income support altogether, people in poverty are

9 See: robodebt.royalcommission.gov.au/publications/report

all fodder for the RBA's outdated monetary policy and austerity. And there is no need to keep people doing the job of being unemployed in poverty – it is a choice by politicians to impose poverty on us.

Enough money to live is the foundational protection against mental ill health

Economic security, economic exclusion, or whatever euphemistic language is chosen to obscure our poverty, is not a "wicked problem", as it is so often described by paternalistic professional welfare advocates and politicians. The cycle of poverty is not created by us, it's a self-perpetuating system imposed on us.

We reject the ideological underpinnings and framing of poverty as a "wicked problem" lending itself to intergenerational cycles of disadvantage that cannot be helped by simply giving people money.[10]

This narrative serves the interests of the architects of the poverty machine and those who perpetuate it. It is the reason why, despite endless cycles of consultation, targeted programs, and "place-based" experiments there are more of us in poverty, not less. Supports and services can never fulfil their aims while trying to counter the effects of having insufficient resources.

In 2020 the JobSeeker payment was lifted to the Henderson poverty line and "mutual" obligations were suspended. People who benefitted from these temporary policy changes reported significant improvements in their physical and mental health, as well as feeling better equipped to find and keep paid work. It improved wellbeing and helped people become more productive both in and out of paid work.[11]

While there are many investments that can be made to improve our ability to afford the basics – such as free healthcare, dental, education, public transport and an expansion of public housing – such investments take time and there is no sign that governments at any level plan to make the necessary changes in these areas. Poverty, ultimately, is a lack of money to cover costs.

> *In a wealthy country like Australia, the ultimate cause of poverty is a lack of political will to bring it to an end. – Australian Human Rights Commission*[12]

All working age income support payments are substantially below the Henderson poverty line and vastly inadequate to provide for the needs of people who rely on them.

10 For more see: canberratimes.com.au/story/8065888/the-plan-to-tackle-disadvantage-is-no-answer-to-the-poverty-crisis

11 See: cfecfw.asn.au/treating-families-fairly

12 See: Submission 244, aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Community_Affairs/PovertyinAustralia/Submissions

Whilst Australia's unemployment payment ranks 2nd lowest among 38 OECD countries, we rank 5th highest on the price level index – we live in one of the most expensive countries on earth.[13]

The government must stop pretending that the tweaks they have made are meaningfully helping people on payments, because for most of us they aren't. For many, the gaslighting of being told repeatedly that government policies have made life better are only making hard times harder to take.

Leading mental health researchers argued that bringing back the COVID supplement was "absolutely the first and most decisive action the government could take" to address the alarming increase in mental distress.[14] Suicide Prevention Australia has repeatedly called for a significant increase in welfare payments.[15]

> *The second I was able to leave the system my mental health improved so much... Sometimes it's okay to just give poor people money and not ask for anything in return, sometimes just asking people to live their life as best they can given their circumstances is enough to generate trust between poor people and the people dictating how they can survive... Sometimes kindness is enough. – Lisa, Victoria*

It has been demonstrated that government can easily ensure no one is living in poverty, preventing deaths by suicide that are linked to deprivation. There are no excuses for refusing to lift income support payments to achieve this. None.

The idea that people need enough money to live should not be a radical one. We don't need more demeaning food banks, voucher programs, services or depressing mental health "awareness" campaigns. We need money. We need it urgently. Politicians know this.

Economic exclusion is exclusion from support

In recent decades, governments have prioritised strictly targeting welfare policies that reduce the number of people accessing income support, which has been viewed as a positive policy outcome and "incentive to work".

As a result, the welfare system has become increasingly residualised, punitive and deters people from accessing support they are entitled to, as shown in the Antipoverty Centre's *Punishment for Profit* employment services report.

13 See: oecd.org/en/data/indicators/benefits-in-unemployment-share-of-previous-income.html and oecd.org/en/data/indicators/price-level-indices.html

14 See: theguardian.com/australia-news/2021/sep/10/experts-urge-higher-income-support-payments-to-stem-youth-mental-health-crisis

15 See: suicidepreventionaust.org/our-work/submissions

I struggle greatly with anxiety and depression and I'm neurodiverse. Every appointment caused me to have a Panic attack and a meltdown. I would have to sleep for 16 hours afterwards because I felt like Killing myself. I couldn't go through this anymore. Instead of ending up harming myself or them I just left and stopped reporting or answering their calls. – Luke Filby, New South Wales

Rather than pushing people into paid work, these policies have instead pushed people into homelessness and financial dependency on others who do not even have adequate resources themselves. From the work we do supporting people directly, we know this financial dependency and exclusion from income support leads to relationship breakdown and traps people in violent homes.

Survival and despair must not be criminalised

People living in poverty and those without paid work are not preternaturally disposed to commit "crime", however, acts related to deprivation and survival are criminalised as property offences on this continent. It is no surprise that the confected "youth crime crisis" is coinciding with a cost of living crisis and the increasing surveillance of people acting for their own survival, or as a consequence of the despair they feel. In turn, criminalisation and incarceration are part of a self-perpetuating cycle of poverty and contribute to the factors that increase suicide risk.

I went food shopping the other day. For the first time in my life I contemplated shop lifting because I could not afford the food I wanted to buy. I have consistently put back into society and now I and many like me have been left behind on the scrap heap, forced to contemplate breaking the law to eat. I would prefer my name remain anonymous as I don't want people to know that I'm considering stealing food, I don't want that "stigma" attached to me even though I'm living a stigmatised life while on Job Seeker. – anonymous contributor

Crime statistics published by the Northern Territory government encapsulate both the problem and a necessary part of the solution: people need enough money to live.

During the short period that the Coronavirus Supplement lifted the JobSeeker payment to the Henderson poverty line and "mutual" obligations were not enforced, property offences plummeted in the NT. The average figure was 1,104 between April and September 2020, and for the corresponding periods in 2018, 2019 and 2021 the average was 1,823, 1,604 and 1,773 respectively.[16]

The below chart uses a colour pattern to demonstrate the extreme harm caused by the deep poverty imposed on people who rely on income support to survive. The highest figures in each offence category are deep red, and the lowest are deep green. Looking at data for the years 2018–

16 Antipoverty Centre analysis of Northern Territory Crime Statistics data published by the Department of the Attorney-General and Justice. The data can be accessed via: pfes.nt.gov.au/police/community-safety/nt-crime-statistics/statistical-publications.

2021, across every category the lowest number of offences recorded was during the period of the full COVID supplement.

					WELFARE PAYMENTS AT THE POVERTY LINE																				
Number of offences	Dec-19	Jan-20	Feb-20	Mar-20	Apr-20	May-20	Jun-20	Jul-20	Aug-20	Sep-20	Oct-20	Nov-20	Dec-20	Jan-21	Feb-21	Mar-21	Apr-21	May-21	Jun-21	Jul-21	Aug-21	Sep-21	Oct-21	Nov-21	Dec-21
0711 House break-ins	257	348	280	285	145	98	70	73	69	144	197	208	217	273	244	234	191	190	157	152	230	244	260	233	222
0711 Commercial break-ins	160	259	230	220	109	75	62	44	91	114	145	152	149	251	183	187	183	181	128	115	160	160	193	215	201
081 Motor vehicle theft and related offences	125	149	178	180	101	84	53	47	55	107	147	116	123	137	138	139	122	126	128	101	137	144	167	145	149
08* Theft and related offences (other than MV)	639	739	750	753	404	331	317	297	346	415	625	613	584	709	645	785	640	700	557	573	665	683	685	631	620
12 Property damage offences	711	744	782	797	458	421	450	487	528	627	814	761	714	747	600	761	704	656	533	602	748	729	731	775	690
Total property offences	1,892	2,239	2,220	2,235	1,217	1,009	952	948	1,089	1,407	1,928	1,850	1,787	2,117	1,810	2,106	1,840	1,853	1,503	1,543	1,940	1,960	2,036	1,999	1,882

We are not claiming that this effect is wholly attributable to increased social security payments as more investigation is required, however, it is notable that communities in the NT were not subject to strict or extended lockdowns during the relevant period.

Employment policy is not an appropriate response to poverty

We note that the authors of the consultation draft include a direct correlation between suicide and unemployment and underemployment.

The general vision of this part of the strategy is severely lacking. We encourage you to look more closely at the realities of people locked out of employment. Consider what the lives of people who are forced to survive on poverty payments are like and how these circumstances affect our mental health. The strategy should focused on helping people and addressing their immediate material conditions, not setting an expectation that people can only expect security and safety if they are able to achieve goals that are unattainable for many.

The overall direction centres employment and *paid* work as a solution to mental ill health. This overlooks how employment laws and the nature of the contemporary labour market also contribute to suicide, or that being trapped in an unsuitable job can also drive bad mental health outcomes. It also ignores the extraordinary amount of unpaid caring and other labour being performed by unemployed people every day – labour that is vital to the functioning of our economy and society.

We acknowledge there are many benefits to employment, but employment is not a necessary condition to addressing the drivers of suicide caused by poverty, housing insecurity and exposure to abusive (un)employment services providers.

> *I fulfilled all my obligations but my payment was continuously suspended. I worked as a healthcare worker during COVID but as my son was home from school I had to cut back on shifts, I was constantly terrified I'd bring covid home to my elderly mother. All this contributed to my hospitalisation in 2020 for suicide attempt. – Amy, New South Wales*

The poverty trap does not even end with employment. On current policy settings, a person on the minimum wage can only work one 3-hour shift a week before their JobSeeker payment is cut at a significant rate. Payments are reduced as employment increases, with welfare recipients barely reaching the Henderson poverty line before they are cut off income support altogether.

> *Stressed to the point of considering suicide. Trying to find work, being harassed about work, getting texts that you having a telephone meeting but nothing happens, worrying about not being able to find enough jobs to apply for and all the time having your income threatened. Finally finding some temp work then them complaining it's not enough hours. I was ecstatic as I had finally found some work but they were dismissive as [they said] it should be full time. – Ruth, Victoria*

But addressing people's needs has positive employment outcomes. The government knows what would help people find and keep a suitable job: ensure no one who needs a Centrelink payment is living in poverty; abolish "mutual" obligations including Work for the Dole; and work with unemployed people and our communities to develop meaningful support and employment pathways delivered by the public sector.

Debt by any name is a death trap for people in poverty

Robodebt victims died by suicide, but deadly debt collection practices do not begin and end with Robodebt.

There is no humane way to extract money from people living in poverty who cannot afford the basics. Issuing debts to poor people is dangerous and harmful, "legal" or otherwise. It only brings more of the horrifying outcomes already produced by abhorrently low payment levels: distress, hunger, homelessness and suicide. This is the inevitable result of pursuing welfare recipients for so-called debts they cannot afford.

Welfare recipients are in no position to cope with the distress brought on by receiving a Centrelink debt notice, no matter how small. Robodebt was a scandal not because of the method used to unlawfully raise debts, but because of the human toll on people affected by it.

In many cases, so-called debts are generally due to errors in the system or unfair, confusing rules. A lawful "debt" is rarely a fair debt. No one in poverty should be forced to repay Centrelink for money paid out by mistake. The government must stop treating accounting and administrative errors that lead to overpayments as cause for punishment and abandon its punitive debt recovery approach. The culture and purpose of Centrelink's debt collection unit must be dismantled and replaced with a model that treats us with humanity. The role of public servants should be to ensure that accurate payments were made, including backpay for underpayments. When incorrect payments are made by Centrelink where an amount needs to be repaid, this should operate similar to HECS-HELP where repayments are deferred until a person has a liveable income.

Refusing to act on lessons learned

The Antipoverty Centre has been raising the alarm about government services minister Bill Shorten's use of Robodebt victims and this royal commission to distract from an alarming increase in "debt" collection activity since Labor came to government. Before even establishing the Robodebt royal commission – a key election promise – the new Labor government was enacting yet another debt collection "human tragedy" by ramping up collection activity, implying that welfare recipients were cheating the system and that the Morrison government had been too soft on the welfare cop beat.[17]

This was a perfect example of dog-whistling to create negative perceptions of welfare recipients among the broader public – the kind of rhetoric that Commissioner Catherine Holmes identified as a key part of the rot at the heart of the welfare system.

More reviews, more consultation, more bureaucratic structures and administrative changes as announced by the government in response to the Robodebt royal commission will do little to materially help people faced with a "debt" they cannot afford.

We and many other advocates have called for the reinstatement of the 6-year limit on debt-raising many times. We welcomed the government's decision to pursue these changes in the wake of Robodebt as a first, tiny step towards a safer system, however there has been no action in the year since they committed to do so.

Compulsion and coercion are devastating forms of abuse

Compulsory activity requirements for people on JobSeeker, Youth Allowance, the Disability Support Pension and Parenting Payment – known as "mutual" obligations – have a detrimental effect on people's health and ability to get and maintain a job. As a result of interacting with the system, many

17 See: ministers.dss.gov.au/media-releases/8286

people experiencing bullying and abuse in employment services can feel that suicide is the only escape.

> *Mutual obligations completely and unequivocally fucked up my mental and physical health, created an extra drain on the public health system, made it nearly impossible for me to find a job, and almost got me killed. – anonymous contributor #314, Victoria*

These activity requirements have evolved into a complex system compelling people to participate in a variety of fruitless and harmful activities at the whim of employment service providers who have enormous discretion over what we are forced to do and the power to cut off our income.

At its worst, the system exposes people who struggle to find and maintain a paid job because of trauma resulting from experiences of child sexual abuse to the same institutions that harboured their abusers, living in the knowledge that they can be cut off their poverty payment at any time and be forced to work for free for those who exploit poor people through the Work for the Dole forced labour program. This is not a hypothetical – in our work as advocates we have supported people in this situation.

One harrowing story that is on the public record involved an APM caseworker accessing information about TJ Davis's history and weaponising a recent suicide attempt to mock and bully them when they sought help with reporting requirements.[18] It is only with support from the Australian Unemployed Workers' Union and the Antipoverty Centre that TJ has been able to successfully push back against abuse.

> *I was an Employment Consultant for 18 months with APM and witnessed countless incidents that were degrading, unethical & nothing more than KPI driven tactics. The most toxic environment I have ever been employed within and have recently resigned to ensure I maintain my personal integrity. Bullying of staff and jobseekers like nothing one could imagine. Not sure how to go about sharing my experiences in a private manner to at least lay straight at night for all affected, past and present. – anonymous contributor #519, Western Australia*

One of the many dangerous practices rife in (un)employment services is the government's reliance on privatised providers to act as unofficial mental health crisis support. Unemployed people with complex mental health support needs are left in the clutches of providers whose primary role is to coerce and punish people into a job. In some cases, these providers are able to collect additional payments from government for referring people on their employment services caseload to a related entity that offers "counselling" services – often staffed by people who are still in training, creating another vector for harm.

18 See: sbs.com.au/news/article/tj-called-an-employment-service-provider-for-advice-they-say-an-agent-made-jokes-about-suicide/fv0f3xzg9

Punishment for Profit report key findings

In 2023 the Antipoverty Centre and GetUp published the Punishment for Profit report, based on an in-depth survey that received more than 600 responses as well as workshops and conversations with 20 report contributors.[19]

The survey asked respondents whether they had ever had a positive experience with "mutual" obligations. We found:

- Only 14.24% of people said yes. When subsequently asked whether they felt "mutual" obligations are useful, only 2.22% of people said yes.
- 85.26% said a job agency or other provider had made a mistake or done something that caused a problem with their payment, such as a suspension, reduction or cancellation.
- 40.51% had experienced bullying or abuse by a provider.
- 93.35% of respondents said "mutual" obligations have a negative effect on their mental health. In 278 optional written responses related to this question, the two most common themes were anxiety (135 mentions) and stress (112 mentions). Depression was mentioned 78 times.

I was rendered burnt out by the work for the dole program and had no support available. It made me feel crushed. – Lili, Western Australia

More than 9 in 10 people experiencing negative health consequences due to "mutual" obligations is devastating. As people who see horror stories from employment services every day and know that they are inflicting mass violence on people in poverty, even we did not expect such a result.

A demoralising government inquiry

There was no solace for distressed welfare recipients in the government's Workforce Australia inquiry response published earlier this year. The inquiry itself treated abusive organisations that cause us harm and profit from our poverty as credible witnesses (many of which will also be given credibility by the National Suicide Prevention Office in this consultation). This in turn contributed to distress among people who had hoped the inquiry would address the harm being caused by "mutual" obligations.

Despite evidence in our submissions and at an inquiry hearing from the Antipoverty Centre and the Australian Unemployed Workers' Union about suicidality linked to "mutual" obligation and employment services, the term "suicide" was not mentioned once in the 650-page report.

19 See: bit.ly/PunishmentForProfitReport

Governments, indifferent to the suffering they create, absolve themselves of responsibility through claims of economic efficiency, security, or "helping" those they harm. The cost in lives, culture, and dignity goes uncounted. The dehumanising brutality of these welfare "solutions" should shock our collective conscience, but mainstream awareness of their full impact remains limited. The systems that cause harm are cloaked in bureaucratic language, their effects hidden by distance and policy opacity. – Timothy Collier

Over the course of the inquiry, 4 million payment suspension notices were issued to welfare recipients living hundreds of dollars a week below the poverty line. A quarter of all payment suspensions and cuts are applied to First Nations people.[20]

The Workforce Australia inquiry failed unemployed people in many ways. Despite its shortcomings, the government's response to this inquiry was an open admission that the privatised services profiting from our poverty are hurting people.

There is no safety without somewhere safe to go

Poverty is exacerbated by a housing crisis is the inevitable result of decades of bad, inequitable policies that have dismantled our once-robust housing safety net.

The role the home plays as a fundamental site of care is undermined or denied altogether by the erosion of access to secure housing that has come from extreme marketisation and ruthless cuts to public housing. [21]

While many welfare recipients in the unregulated private rental market tell us that 50–80% of their Centrelink payment is spent on rent, others are not get into a rental at all or are being made homeless by rent increases they can't absorb.

But home ownership does not bring housing security for the poor. Home owners who have relied on JobSeeker have reported to the Antipoverty Centre that they were forced to sell their home, returning to the private rental market and perversely becoming eligible to receive the CRA pittance. Even those who own outright are seeing their homes crumble around them because they cannot afford repairs.

20 429,865 of the 1,628,330 (26.4%) total Workforce Australia payment suspensions applied were imposed on First Nations people in 2023. More recent data shows this level remains steady. See: https://www.dewr.gov.au/employment-services-data/job-seeker-compliance-data

21 See: abc.net.au/radionational/programs/philosopherszone/housing-pt-1-care-ethics/14035870

We own our home outright, thanks to a loving uncle who passed away and left the bulk of his inheritance to me & my brother. It was just enough for us to buy our house… Now, we don't have enough money to carry out necessary repairs/maintenance on it. There are leaks in our roof, mould on all our ceilings, ivy all over our roof that sometimes grows through the 3-in-1 light, fan & heater in the bathroom. We also only have one working built in heater as the other died a year ago & we can't afford repairs or replacement. There are extra costs involved in home ownership so why are they not seen as important as equally important as covering rent? Not that rent assistance is particularly great. It barely covers a thing. – anonymous, Tasmania

Since the 1990s – when people relying on income support also had more adequate payments and generally weren't forced to try and survive in such deep and persistent poverty – social housing stock has effectively been cut by more than half when accounting for population growth.[22]

I tried to succeed in getting a job, but due to my mental health situation, I was unable to keep it. Because my salary disqualified me from Public housing, and despite being on the waiting list for 4 years, when I lost the job I had to re-apply for housing and was put at the back of the queue again. – Trent, Western Australia

Governments built more than 30,000 public dwellings in every five-year period between 1945 and 1995.[23] The population in 1950 was 8 million, 18 million in 1995, compared to 26 million today.[24]

At its inception, public housing in Australia was not means-tested and was designated 'for those who were in need of proper housing … and who … did not desire or were unable to purchase their own homes. [25]

The number of 'greatest need' households on public housing waitlists has almost doubled since 2016.[26]

22 See: theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/jan/20/from-interest-rates-to-the-race-for-space-what-is-fuelling-australias-rental-nightmare

23 Troy P (2012) *Accommodating Australians: Commonwealth Government Involvement in Housing*, Federation Press.

24 See: abs.gov.au/statistics/people/population/historical-population and abs.gov.au/statistics/people/population/national-state-and-territory-population

25 See: researchbank.swinburne.edu.au/file/6ff9b926-63aa-4282-b6c0-9cf876f25849

26 See: rba.gov.au/publications/bulletin/2023/mar/renters-rent-inflation-and-renter-stress.html

The experts are those who live it

Advice about people in poverty must come directly from people in poverty, not those who speak over and for us. We should be viewed and treated as equals, not subordinate “lived experience” objects. We have demonstrated that welfare recipients are capable and worthy of respect. While there is a role for academics, economists, service providers, unions and business to play, they are not experts in poverty and cannot represent people with direct experience of social policies that leave us behind.

In welfare policy, it is unheard of for people directly affected by policy decisions to have a meaningful role in determining their direction. We recognise that, while imperfect, this is substantially better in the area of mental health policy. We’re happy that so-called lived experience is incorporate in the strategy. We have written about this at length and many of the principles we advocate for are addressed in the draft strategy.

“Lived experience” has now largely become a term used to pay lip service to including people while devaluing their contributions. We have observed that professional advocates and government have increasingly co-opted the term, tokenistically “consulting” to with the aim of manufacturing consent for their foregone conclusions. Similarly, politicians including the prime minister have devalued this concept by speaking ad nauseum about so-called lived experience of poverty far in the past, at a time when the welfare state was in many respects far more supportive.

We use the terms “people directly affected” or “direct experience”, with the specific meaning of a person who themselves has contemporary, ongoing and/or recent experience of poverty, unemployment or the social security system and who is affected by other government policies related to people who experience economic exclusion. When referring to people with direct experience in a policymaking context, we mean people who have this expertise and are also actively involved in advocacy, policy or peer support work.

Our recent experience of consultation on the new Parent Pathways program has given us an insight into how to avoid improperly conceived processes in this area.[27]

To merely include poor people in policy work through focus groups and surveys is not enough. You must ensure that the design and ongoing oversight of welfare and related policies are led by those affected by the system and related policies, including strategies for suicide prevention. Any advisory body, working group or similar body must include representatives with direct experience of poverty, unemployment and the welfare system.

27 See: drive.google.com/file/d/1rbuH_hZivDRWy8qjIDtwNZiHgBrx7nQs/view?usp=sharing

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Preventative action can be taken today for immediate benefits we will see tomorrow

Ensuring that no one on a Centrelink payment is living in poverty and that everyone who needs income support can get it is not a silver bullet to end suicide among low income people. But it is the low hanging fruit the government could act on tomorrow to alleviate many forms of suffering, reduce environmental factors contributing to mental ill health and suicide, and free up severely strained healthcare resources for those with acute needs.

> *The COVID supplement did more to get me on my feet than I could've done at any other point in my life... There are many more like me. – Nathan Kearney, Queensland*

The Antipoverty Centre has put forward proposals across a range of policy areas including approaches to policy development, poverty lines and welfare payment rates, payment eligibility, conditionality including "mutual" obligations and income control, public housing provision, protections for private renters, Centrelink debt collection and effective marginal tax rates for government to address the gaping holes in the so-called safety net. Rather than include the details of these proposals in this submission, we provide the following overview and would welcome any opportunity to discuss the specifics and their relationship to mental ill health and suicide prevention.

1. As a triage measure we urgently need all income support payments lifted to at least the Henderson poverty line, like they were overnight in 2020. Payments should be linked to the relevant poverty line by household type, plus a 25% uplift for disabled people to account for the higher cost of living with disability.[28]
2. End compulsory "mutual" obligations activities including forced labour programs such as Work for the Dole and work with welfare recipients to design a high quality, voluntary, public sector employment service.
3. Immediately abolish the partner and parental income tests that trap people in violent homes along with eligibility changes to ensure everyone who needs income support can get it regardless of visa status, family situation or occupation.
4. End all forms of cashless welfare such as the BasicsCard, which is still infantilising 31,573 people (82% of whom are Indigenous), to restore agency for people subjected to income control against their will.[29]

28 See: melbourneinstitute.unimelb.edu.au/publications/poverty-lines. According to research, "...the average cost of disability in the long-run was higher at 63% of adult-equivalent disposable income ... with the same level of income, the living standard is lower in households with people with a disability compared to households without members with a disability." See: doi.org/10.1186/s13561-020-00264-1

29 See: data.gov.au/data/dataset/australian-government-income-management-program/resource/a9a52454-06ba-433c-8a26-2be04810609b

5. Immediately pause debt-raising and collection activities until a safe system for recovering Centrelink overpayments can be designed that does not extract money from people who can't afford to live.
6. Reduce effective marginal tax rates of up to 76% that apply to the 1 in 5 JobSeeker recipients who have a job[30] by increasing the income free area, lowering the taper rate and increasing the tax free threshold to more closely reflect settings in the past, before perverse indexation outcomes took hold.
7. Restore public housing stock through direct investment in buying and building high quality public homes to reach at least 5% of dwellings in the near-term, and reorient the system to its original purpose of ensuring it is accessible to all people who do not desire or were unable to purchase their own homes.
8. Introduce strong protections to prevent people in the private rental market from unfairly losing their homes, whether eviction-by-rent-increase or other means.
9. In 2020, ACOSS found that even when JobSeeker was at the Henderson poverty line a third of people were regularly skipping meals.[31] It is not adequate, but it is the best measure of poverty we have. Over the long term we need a new, sophisticated measure of poverty for the 21st century, developed with unemployed advocates and other people on low incomes. An independent body should be tasked with revising the poverty line and Centrelink payments rates must be tied to it. Our ability to survive must not be dependent on political whims.

Please raise the rate for Jobseeker payment. I am studying a lot every day but am anxious and worried about being unemployed. I have been feeling suicidal and without hope for as long as I've been receiving a Centrelink payment. I'm 'Income managed' which feels like I have no control at all, over anything in my life. There is always fear … It is punishing and bullying to force compliance to look for work. Mostly people do want a job as it brings satisfaction, an income, and social connection. Let people be free to motivate themselves. – Anne-Louise, NT

30 See: data.gov.au/data/dataset/jobseeker-payment-and-youth-allowance-recipients-monthly-profile

31 See: acoss.org.au/media-releases/?media_release=survey-shows-increased-jobseeker-payment-allowing-people-to-eat-regularly-cover-rent-and-pay-bills-2

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Appendix: The voices that must be heard

Comments from survey contributors

To inform the Punishment for Profit report, we conducted an in-depth survey that received more than 600 responses from people who have used employment services because of compulsory "mutual" obligations requirements. We are also undertaking an extensive housing quality survey that has so far received more than 400 responses. This below table contains quotes that refer to abuse, mental ill health and suicide in relation to experiences in the welfare system. Comments below are from people who have contributed to these surveys and given permission for their written responses to be used with the attribution as shown. There have been many more stories shared with us, some involving self-harm and suicide attempts more harrowing than anything included in this submission, that we do not have permission to share.

Notably, we have not asked questions about suicidality in either survey. In some cases these responses were prompted by questions about mental health or wellbeing, and for others there was no obvious link between the question and mental health at all.

Experiences of "mutual" obligations

anonymous contributor #406, South Australia	[I had] paid work in a place I had worked for many years but which became toxic during the same sex marriage debate. The violent transphobia and rape culture behaviours of my team mates and direct supervisor toward a transgender woman at work and their bullying and harassment of transgender children and their parents drove me to seek psychiatric care, call lifeline, etc. My 8 year old is transgender. But I could never quit my job because working there is a condition of my job plan. I think it's really important to note the horrible abusive workplaces that people are forced to stay in because Centrelink won't let you leave. – anonymous contributor #406, South Australia
Deirdre, South Australia	It's so easy to give up, every time I think about the maze I'm trapped in I get de-pressed and frightened… I feel redundant and without value in the community. But in the end they don't give a toss, we are just cannon fodder. No wonder all these charities are drowning in money, few tax obligations and free staff paid by the taxpayer plus they get a few hundred [dollars] for everyone they take on [in Work for the Dole].
anonymous contributor #224, Western Australia	It's a humiliating, degrading and I hated every interaction I had with them.
Adele, New South Wales	As stated previously, I have contemplated suicide on many occasions due to being made to feel completely worthless.

anonymous contributor #41, New South Wales	20 job applications a week on top of a 9-5 unpaid admin + copy service. I was set up to fail and it nearly ended in suicide.
Rachael, New South Wales	My last provider and my experiences with them as horrible. I did end up contemplating suicide and I was generally in a horrible mental health spot. And as I felt unsafe and threatened because he 'nicely' threatened to report me to Centrelink because I was struggling to find work and I may have ADHD, may be on the spectrum and I have been diagnosed with anxiety and depression so I feel that would affect my chances in the job market and it felt like I was not being taken seriously. I did end up crying in the elevator after that particular appointment and I was contemplating ways to end my own life as I was made to feel like a burden or as if I was a waste of space just for struggling to find work. I was particularly angry because I was fed up with this and I had only been in the system for three years by the time I have been typing this.
Olivia, Victoria	Severe increase to mental distress, anxiety and depression. Exacerbated existing mental health conditions. Forced to attend in-person appointments while dealing with chronic illness and mobility issues, which made these conditions worse. Frequently wanted to commit suicide after attending job network appointments, and dealing with the system in general.
anonymous contributor #362, Queensland	the whole system is just pointless those working there do not know what they are doing they are arrogant and dismissive they would be responsible for many suicides and worsening mental health issues.

On welfare deterrence

Many people fear the welfare system and decide that the risk of accessing income support is greater than the benefit of receiving it. Others are locked out altogether. The below comments are from people who indicated that they want to be on a Centrelink payment but don't currently get one.

Respondent	Why aren't you getting a Centrelink payment?
Robyn, Queensland	I have a partner who works (so I am invisible and have no financial independence)
Jane, South Australia	I got very distressed and ill when on mutual obligations, near suicidal at times.
anonymous contributor #279, Western Australia	It is too punitive going in there.

Respondent	Why aren't you getting a Centrelink payment?
Ruth, Victoria	Was cut off due to getting work but work ended as was temporary. Unable to face abuse from job network especially when I'm on an assignment and they want you to come see them which puts job in jeopardy.
Amber, Queensland	I went off jobseeker because I was about to be forced into Work for the Dole. I don't feel any more ready to find work or be 'productive'. I'm exhausted from this whole process, and feel like I've wasted so much of my time trying to prove I deserve not to starve just because I struggle to find work.
Grey, Victoria	It took so many years for them to believe I wasn't just lazy and unwilling to work :') I hate them all so much they make life miserable. I reached the point I was going to walk in front of a train so I called clink up to cancel my payment even though it put me in a terrible living situation.

What is poverty? A reflection on the welfare system, mental health and suicide

By Naomi Thompson

Poverty, It's the word we hear bandied about when it comes to those on lower incomes. The ads for charities always stereotype it with the small, thin, crying, starving child. Just $5 they say can save this child from suffering.

In churches they show you children from Asia, for my church it's Thailand. They tell you the story of the people and what a sponsorship could mean. Usually they're in just as bad a state as the African children you see in other ads.

No matter what, it's always a picture of absolute poverty. Those who have nothing and can't survive.

But what is poverty actually? And what does it look like in wealthier countries? Is it a problem or are the charities right that it's more like the people with absolutely nothing?

The Cambridge Dictionary defines Poverty as:

> the condition of being extremely poor:
>
> a lack of something or when the quality of something is extremely low:

The Collins Dictionary defines it as:

> Poverty is the state of being extremely poor
> The Condition of being without adequate food, money, etc
> Scarcity or dearth
> A lack of elements conducive to fertility in land or soil

But what about charities? How do they define what poverty is?

Well the Australian Council Of Social Services (ACOSS) says:

> *We use two poverty lines – 50% of median income and 60% of median income, whereby people living below these incomes are regarded as living in poverty.*

World Vision Australia defines Poverty as:

> *Poverty is the severe lack of certain possessions which significantly reduces the quality of a person's life. People living in poverty struggle to meet basic needs, including having limited access to food, clothing, healthcare, education, shelter and safety. People affected by poverty may also lack social, economic, political or material income and resources.*

Mission Australia Defines Poverty as:

> *Poverty is defined as having a lack of resources or money to fulfil immediate basic needs – such as food, housing, clothing – and for long-term savings or wealth.*

When you look at the definitions, you realise the idea conveyed is someone who doesn't have enough resources to adequately look after their needs. This might be the African child in absolute poverty who has absolutely nothing but it could also be the person in Australia who gets some money but not enough to pay for things like bread and milk, housing or clothes.

In Australia, there's typically a small group of people who fall into the latter definition. These people are those on Social Security which includes not just those who are unemployed but those who are disabled and students too among others, those working minimum wage with or without any Social Security benefit and often Single Parents.

For me, I fall into a few of those groups. I've been on and off again employed due to casual employment, caring and health. I'm also disabled and have typically worked minimum wage jobs.

When I was young, I experienced a lot of trauma through family and domestic violence. This led to severe mental health issues culminating in two suicide attempts.

Over time I've learned much about myself, my mental health conditions and how the trauma I've experienced has shaped who I am today.

One of the challenging things about mental health is that fact it's often two extremes, easily treatable early or chronic and unyielding on the other. Johns Hopkins Medicine and the NIH in the US both report that at least 30% of all cases of Depression (Major Depressive Disorder) are deemed treatment resistant. That is the condition has failed to respond to at least 2 different treatment methods. I personally fall into this category.

The other challenging thing about mental health is the fact it's invisible. When you see a pregnant woman you realise she's pregnant and you don't think of geez she's fat and needs to lose some weight, you think how awesome is it that she's going to be a mum. You don't look at a kid who broke their arm or leg playing sport and think wow, what a lazy person who's putting it on to get stuff, you wonder instead what the story was and how the injury happened.

Mental Health falls into a group of conditions that are invisible. You can't see their impact straight away. So it's never easy to tell how much someone is impacted by their condition.

The other challenging thing about Mental Health is that it goes in waves. A broken limb is immediately broken and once set immediately begins healing, it doesn't unheal part way through or get rebroken spontaneously. Mental health is unfortunately not like that. You take 10 steps forward, 2 back, 5 forward, 20 back etc.

As I mentioned earlier my mental health culminated in 2 suicide attempts. Both happened in my early 20s. Looking back I can see exactly how things went and what could have changed everything and possibly stopped my mental health from being treatment resistant.

The number 1 factor that influenced everything was stress. I didn't know it at the time but I had undiagnosed Autism and ADHD. Both impacted my ability to consistently study which often meant leaving things to the last minute and stressing out over them. Even so I mostly was able to keep it together. A smart brain with common sense can go a long way.

The bigger issue than undiagnosed Neurodivergence was the stress from untreated mental health and financial challenges. I had no money and I couldn't juggle working and studying. So I was on the student payment at the time. This meant I could barely afford food. I remember living off mostly cups of tea and the few meals that were included with my accommodation. I remember the 3am hunger pangs, the trouble sleeping, the weight loss, the tears, the worry.

At the time I reached out to Headspace to access mental health support after being told to get stuffed by my university when asking them for assistance. I learned so much about myself by seeing the psychologist there but the biggest issue was the lack of Medicare funded sessions. I'd get coverage over the first half of the year and I can remember myself thriving and doing so well, stressed but coping. And then second semester would come and I would end up self harming, stressing, sleeping, missing class, being late on assignments etc.

My lecturers were incredibly flexible and caring. They wouldn't pass me if I hadn't done the work but they often didn't penalise me for being late so long as I did the work and turned it in before the end of semester. Their compassion is one of the only reasons I have a degree today.

In the end, my mental health would get so bad I'd end up spending 2-4 weeks in a psych ward in hospital. I had multiple admissions over multiple years because I lacked support.

What would have made such a difference was adequate support whether via medicare funded sessions or enough money to fund my own.

It took me 2 runs at my degree to finish it. I came back after 9 years after starting to finish my degree. This time I had consistent support. I still didn't know I was neurodivergent and my study was still inconsistent but I was in a better place and I worked hard to make sure I got the support I needed in class. One lecturer I had I didn't like very much. He probably didn't like me either. First time around I failed several of his classes multiple times and I kept trying to do what he wanted but could never seem to get it right.

He remembered me all those years later and before class even started he emailed me saying he would be watching me. I couldn't believe it. But none the less I worked my butt off. Unbeknownst to me it was his last semester of teaching but we worked together and I eventually got a Distinction in his class. It's one of my proudest moments because I know how tough of a teacher he is and yet with adequate support I was able to prove to him I can do it and I hope he was glad to finish knowing I can be a great student.

By this stage I'd moved from a student payment to the then Newstart or unemployment payment. I was thankfully enrolled in the DES or Disability Employment Services system. I'd been through the not disabled side previously and found it incredibly difficult to meet requirements due to my disabilities.

Let me tell you, Employment Service Providers are a whole new world unto themselves. They behave like politicians but you can't hold them to account.

I could recount 10,000 stories to you about them but I won't. But I will recount a few of the good ones I remember, not necessarily all of them I experienced but definitely all were witnessed.

AC

One provider I saw before entering the DES system was terrible. They were always busy, everything was a group appointment and they insisted you use the computers to job search then and there during the appointment. All of them walked around like they were constantly angry.

I remember one particular appointment well because it was in October and my car rego was due. Then I was less organised and would get it all done like 2-4 weeks before rego and struggle to have time. As it turned out, they dropped an appointment down the same day my car was getting a rego check and it was like 40oC outside. In truth it was probably more like 37-38 but I remember it was exceptionally hot for one my town and two me. I nearly died trying to walk to the appointment that day.

I got there and they sent me to the computer, told me to login to MyGov. It was new and shiny then. Told them I didn't have an account, so they said create one. So I did to a point, then it wanted me to access my email.....well that was the moment they absolutely lost it. You see, I did a Bachelor of Information Technology, I'm actually quite smart around computers and even then I took security protections with my email account. It required a 2 Factor code that could only be generated with my physical phone.......guess which person didn't have their phone with them that day?

Yup me. When I realised what was needed I knew there was a nearly 0% chance I'd be able to log in to my emails. It took a significant amount of work to authenticate my identity to access my emails without my phone. But when I realised the issue, I spoke to the worker and she looked like she'd blown a gasket inside.

There was a lady next to me, an older lady. We ended up chatting a bit. Turns out the provider wasn't even her normal provider, she just got a letter saying go here and this time and date or lose your payment. Well she hit the jackpot that day. She through no fault of her own as far as I could tell managed to both crash, Blue Screen, Freeze and my guess half corrupt her computer. It was impressive what she managed to cause it to do. Well she did all this right after I told the lady I couldn't access my emails.

Oh you should have seen her reaction. She was trying very hard not to explode and yell. She was pissed. She started blaming this lady for all the computer issues and saying she should suspend her payment and mine too.

At the time I was pretty terrified but these days I look back in amusement. These days I know my rights and responsibilities, I didn't back then.

That was one of the few interesting appointments I've had. The kicker is I'd called and said, 'Hey my car is in for a rego service and I can't change that, can I change the appointment time?' and the provider said, ‘No we will not vary the appointment in any way’. Had they changed it, I wouldn’t have witnessed the epic meltdown of the worker.

Another provider was perpetually incompetent. I was in the DES system with them. They had a new worker every 3 months or less. So in a year I saw 3-5 workers with this one provider and each time a new worker came on they’d redo the job plan. 2 were actually decent and tried to work with me and with my study and interests to find work that was relevant and I genuinely would rate them as fantastic. The others were let’s just say a bit odd.

To begin with, I think most had me on weekly appointments and at this point I think I was studying at uni and staying on campus but in a town anywhere between 40-60 minutes down the road. I believe **I spent a lot of time on medical exemptions but irrespective what I remember was the never ending “your payment is on hold”, “your payment is suspended messages”.**

Wanna know why? Because the “geniuses” at that provider thought that if you book an appointment and then don’t tell the job seeker and expect them to have telepathic mind reading that that is reasonable. So naturally I wouldn’t show up to appointments I didn’t know about. This was of course around when they introduced the traffic light demerit system. I can look back and see the two demerits from them listed as failed to attend appointment.

My payment was on hold anywhere between 3-5 times in a 7 week period. You’d think that might raise some red flags but nope. I later found out they were so incompetent they lost their DES contract and it was brought out by my next and larger provider.

Apart from the terrible communication, what I remember the most was the changing workers and the absolutely asinine mutual obligations (MOs). One worker insisted I use the phone so much I had a panic attack and dissociated in response.

Another one thought that consistency was key so she insisted I take a photo of something orange and show her at every appointment. She legit put that in as a job plan obligation.

I was very clear that I was studying my bachelors degree and I wanted to pursue a job in said field as a programmer. Which last I check, Software Engineer was still on the list for skilled migration, as it was back then.

At the time the provider insisted I take up study through a private college. With zero regard for the fact I’d been caught up in the Fee-Help scandal.

The next provider was terrible. One of the largest in the country. So many terrible things happened while with them.

On so many occasions I remember talking about being suicidal and inflicting self-harm on myself and all they could do was say get an exemption. I was barely functioning and their response was to say, 'Deal with it'.

I can remember explaining to them that I'm not going to get a GP appointment for 2-4 weeks and they would respond by increasing appointments from fortnightly to weekly and insisting and asking even more so that I get a medical certificate for an exemption and would hound me even after getting it to submit it. They showed no regard for the fact I was struggling and that I was struggling to find the energy and motivation to even submit the certificate to Centrelink.

I remember on another occasion the worker kept saying things that were stressing me out and pushing me beyond my ability to cope. It got so bad that I began shutting down in the middle of the appointment. By the time I got back to my car, I broke into tears and as I started to drive home my memory goes blank. It turns out I dissociated. For literally 3 whole days. I don't know how I got home or how I managed to do it safely but somehow my body did what was needed to get home and that's all I know.

I am genuinely horrified that that was the response to that appointment by myself.

I remember on another occasion that my payment was on hold. I went to the provider to fix it. They told me only Centrelink could fix it. I went to Centrelink and spoke to them and told them "Hey, I'm with X provider, my payment is on hold, they told me only you can fix the issue". They told me only the provider can. I believe I went back to the provider who told me only Centrelink can do it again. So I went back to Centrelink and told them what had happened. As it turned out the branch manager was near the desk where I was and upon overhearing they commented I was like the 30th person that day from said provider to come in for that very issue and they had clearly had enough of it and were ready to have some serious words with the provider over it. I believe said branch manager contacted the provider because the issue was resolved after that.

On another occasion, I was housesitting and petsitting for a friend and unbeknownst to me their youngest dog wasn't desexed. I woke up that day expecting a phone appointment around about lunch time. The first thing I noticed was the blood on the bed sheets. I didn't worry about the appointment because it wasn't for several hours, so after working out what was going on with the dog, that it was her first period and I didn't in fact need to take her to a vet, I continued on with my day expecting the phone call later near lunch. Instead of calling then, my employment services provider decided to call something like 4 hours before the appointment time without warning and when I didn't answer the call, they marked me as non-attending and gave me a demerit.

This provider I was with probably the longest and through that time I told them I have caring responsibilities for my father and I was once again back studying my bachelors degree to finish it off. I could explain very clearly to the worker what I wanted. I wanted to sort my dad out, finish my degree and start my own business. And rather than working with any of that, they continued to put me forward for job roles that were inappropriate to my situation such as 5 days a week of full-time work. In fact it was 2 weeks before my official graduation date that they finally acknowledged the study I had been doing. At no point were my caring responsibilities ever considered and all of this contributed to additional stress that negatively impacted my mental health.

In my early 20s it meant lots of hospital stays in psychiatric wards. **The ongoing stress from being my dad's sole, unsupported carer with the unforgiving mutual obligations and the threat of financial insecurity from having my payment suspended ultimately lead to me being hospitalised for another month in 2023.**

I can now look back over the years and I can say conclusively that there were multiple things that made my life and mental health worse, and things that could have been done that would have helped instead.

The overwhelming thing I needed more than anything else was mental health support and the ability to access a psychologist across the entire time I was studying would without a doubt have allowed me to complete my degree sooner and with better results.

Secondly, it would also have helped if I didn't have to worry about my financial situation constantly. This would have meant that instead of starving I could have had something to eat and felt like I could bring my best to the studies I was undertaking.

Thirdly, not all my studies were conducted under a study payment and that often meant dealing with mutual obligations. It would undoubtedly have made a massive difference if there had been support there to focus on completing my degree and transitioning to work after my study.

I am also convinced that the whole thing would have been better if my caring responsibilities had been taken into consideration and the employment consultant had the flexibility to work with my caring while supporting me.

At one point, I engaged voluntarily with my housing provider through a similar employment service they provided and in 2 weeks, I got more help and understanding from them than I did from any of the compulsory providers that I was required to see.

This for me stands out as a massive sign that the entire employment services industry is woefully inadequate. Every time I have voluntarily spoken to someone about setting up my own businesses, I have had very thoughtful, helpful and meaningful engagement with them. I can't say the same for the compulsory employment services providers I've been required to see as part of getting my payment.

What has underpinned all these things has been the fact I've been in poverty.

If I had more resources, then I could have changed everything. Instead of taking 10 years to finish my degree, I'd have done it in 3 or 4. Instead of ending up in the hospital for my mental health and getting to the point of attempting suicide twice, I would have been able to access mental health care and adequately get the support and healing I need. If I had more resources then perhaps my Autism and ADHD might have been diagnosed and treated sooner allowing for better outcomes through study and better support to engage in more casual work while studying. If I had more resources then I'd be able to advocate better for my father and get him the supports he desperately needs instead of me trying to do it all.

Poverty doesn't just impact a person in the here and now. It has massive flow on effects and impacts a person and everyone around them.

After my second suicide attempt, the hospital called my mum and I experience endless mocking, psychological abuse and scorn for that suicide attempt for weeks and months after by my mum and my sisters. This ultimately cost the relationship we had.

Poverty took that relationship from me. Poverty is taking the relationship I have with my father.

Poverty took my chance to finish my studies quickly and well.

Poverty impacts everything!

It's easy to sit in nice clothes, in a nice office, in a nice neighbourhood with a nice house to go home to but it often means people don't see the reality of the situation for the poorest in the country. We pride ourselves on the country value of a fair go, I would argue I haven't been given a fair go.

While most people aren't Christians, in the bible it says:

> 36 "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"
>
> 37 Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.'
>
> 38 This is the first and greatest commandment.
>
> 39 And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'
>
> 40 All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."
>
> Matthew 22:36-40 (New International Version)

The idea behind these verses is so simple that anyone, Christian or not would agree. If you believe in God then love him as much as you can and love your neighbour, that is anyone who isn't you as much as you love yourself.

That means caring about people and their circumstances. That means giving everyone a fair chance and helping them to make something of their lives. Our country is build on Judeo-Christian values, and while God can be separated from those values, I am certain those values matter to all Australians.

This is why poverty, poor mental health support, inflexible and uncaring employment services and broken mutual obligations matter.

Science now says every person alive has a single common ancestor. That means for better or worse, we're all family. We should care about family and care about the impact that policies and choices have on each other.

How can you have a fair go if you're never given a fair go?

I live in regional Australia, I want to setup a game development studio and give the kids in my community a taste of video game development. I want to give them a fair go. I can't do that if no one gives me a fair go first.

We can't leave the system as it is. It all needs fixing. Employment services providers need to change, mutual obligations need to change, the mental healthcare system needs to change, the rates people are paid for income support need to change. If we don't invest in our own people then we won't have a country where people will live in.

Messages to Minister Rishworth

In Anti-Poverty Week 2022, we delivered messages to social services minister Amanda Rishworth's office on behalf of welfare recipients. We are including the most relevant messages in this submission as nothing the government has done in the past two years has addressed the issues raised.

The remainder of this appendix contains the documents that were hand-delivered to the minister's office.

AC

AC Team <team@antipovertycentre.org>

Would you like us to include your message for the #BTPM protest?

carmen [redacted] 16 October 2022 at 19:21
To: AC Team <team@antipovertycentre.org>

Hi...Please, I would like to deliver a message. I am a single parent, I can't get a job be abuse i have arthritis in both my knees, I have arthritis in my lower back and my foot, I have depression and arthritis from going through domestic violence and other traumatic experiences, I have just had surgery to have cancer removed from my ear cartilage, and I couldn't even afford to buy the pain medication, I have been rejected for disability support and rejected at tribunal, I have written letters to minister bill shorten and they just tell me, they have no power to do anything, I have to choose between rent and bills and food, the toll it has taken, I applied for the Return to work program and they are probably going to reject that now too. I can't even afford to pay for bills, it's like a constant battle to survive.

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From: AC Team <team@antipovertycentre.org>
Sent: Saturday, October 15, 2022 4:39:40 PM
To: Antipoverty Centre <team@antipovertycentre.org>
Subject: Would you like us to include your message for the #BTPM protest?

[Quoted text hidden]

Dear senator Amanda Rishworth

My name is Mel. I come from a disadvantaged background, originally from Tasmania. I've been on Youth allowance, Newstart (now called jobseeker), and I'm now in receipt of the disability pension. I don't have any family support and spent time in 'the system' aka out of home care. Being on Newstart allowance was a harrowing experience; I barely had enough money for food, and I was expected to attend redundant courses that were lower than the qualifications I already had, paid for by taxpayer money. There were people in my course who were illiterate; a man cried because he couldn't use the computer. That system instilled in me a sense that I was unemployable and a basket case. I have been pursuing a career of my own accord without the mutual obligations since being on the pension. Honestly, I would like to live on wages, but I defend the right for people to receive such payments. Destitution doesn't need to exist.

I was homeless and couch surfing when I first arrived in Brisbane In recent years. I have been enrolled in a PhD. On receiving the scholarship, I thought that I would finally be able to move out of community housing, where residualisation was evident and where I was acutely aware of the stigma (a result of governments steering housing provision to the market and neglecting social housing). Unfortunately, this accommodation has been very precarious. In some share houses I have been bullied (due to being in receipt of Centrelink or having a disability) and finally in 2020 I was sexually assaulted by a property owner who I was living with. This perpetrator owns many properties in Brisbane and is a lawyer and took advantage of his power. He no doubt benefits from negative gearing, which is unopposed by the Labor government. I have not yet sought legal advice and had no confidence in taking the matter to the police. After the assault my mental health declined, and I have taken 2 years off my studied- I am now back.

Apart from that, I've also been working as casual research assistant, looking at welfare policies of all things. After 170 dollars every fortnight, for every dollar I earn, I lose 50 cents from the pension, meaning that I'm only marginally better off for working, and still cannot afford appropriate accommodation. Meanwhile, your government is proceeding with the stage three tax cuts which largely benefit high income earners. Decreased revenue also precludes the possibility of investing in infrastructure that would change people's lives, such as public housing.

I hope that precarious housing does not jeopardise my PhD again and condemn me to being in poverty for the rest of my life, but that is how it feels. I feel like I've been spending all my life chasing the illusion of social mobility. While I appreciate that the system exists, I believe that it could be more efficient if it fostered social mobility rather than punishing people. People would be able to flourish and contribute to society in different ways.

I'd like to add that I've been hearing people have anecdotes about growing up in public housing in the past, but it's a shame that people can't grow up in public housing these days. Anthony Albanese grew up in public housing in a time before residualisation, systemic underinvestment and demonisation it is subjected to today. Private rents are absolutely crushing people on low wages and now that the NRAS scheme is being phased out, there will be a massive shortfall of affordable housing. 30,000 homes is a token amount- we need more significant investment in public housing, so that people can realise their potential. It needs to be built to help smooth out intergenerational disadvantage, allow people to actually save for deposits, to house people with disabilities, to provide homes for Aboriginal people, for women escaping domestic violence, and for the elderly who live om meagre pensions and are suffering due to high rents and loneliness. Imagine people having disposable income to spend in the economy, rather than all the money being spent on rent.

I would also like to comment on the patriarchal and outdated household-level income testing that applies to certain payments if a claimant cohabitates with a partner. It can't be assumed one partner can financially support another person, especially with the rising cost of living and stagnating wages. Removing that person's payments can place them in a dependency relationship, and the government is effectively making it harder for people to have more independence and leave abusive relationships. This system is built on a male breadwinner model from the 20th century and need to be retired.

I would like to know what the Labor party stands for.

Kind regards,

Mel Powersmith.

AC Team <team@antipovertycentre.org>

Raise the rate

[redacted] 11 October 2022 at 12:22
To: team@antipovertycentre.org

I'll be 63 in a couple of weeks. No one will employ me at my age
I went food shopping the other day. For the first time in my life I contemplated shop lifting because I could not afford the food I wanted to buy.
My next door neighbour is older, an ex tradie, his knees and back are gone due to hard work, he is a year away from the pension, he is shoplifting food to survive, he is giving me some of it.
I have volunteered all my life but due to a bad motorbike accident that almost severed my right hand 10 years ago I have had to stop doing that.
I was a volunteer Wildlife rescuer
I have volunteered for
The Womens Hospital
The Childrens Hospital
Op shops
When I lived in a regional town I volunteered with
The CWA
The CFA
The SES
I have consistently put back into society and now I and many like me have been left behind on the scrap heap, forced to contemplate breaking the law to eat.
I would prefer my name remain anonymous as I don't want people to know that I'm considering stealing food, I don't want that "stigma" attached to me even though I'm living a stigmatised life while on Job Seeker.
Raise the rate and lower the retirement age. I'm tired

Sent from my iPad

AC Team <team@antipovertycentre.org>

Centrelink story

[redacted] 12 October 2022 at 01:05
To: team@antipovertycentre.org

I saw your callout for stories so here I am.

I'm actually pretty well off as far as Centrelink recipients go. I'm a single parent so I get the parenting pension and family tax benefit. Rent assistance too, which covers about 20% of my rent. In February this year I discovered I could get an additional $60 a fortnight education suppliment if I study, so I began to study my masters degree while looking after my son. This allowed me to send him to daycare 1 day a week (obviously I also get childcare subsidy) and give myself a little breathing room, time to deep clean, look after my mental health, grocery shop etc.
I was recently able to get my son in to a second day at daycare and have been looking to pick up work since, my first day at my new job is actually tomorrow!

Despite being on so many payments (which equates to about $1400 hitting my account each fortnight) and having no debts, afterpay, or anything like that, I am having to access community kitchens and foodbank at least once a month. Rent alone takes up 40% of all my money at $260 a week ($520 a fortnight). The unit next to mine has just gone up for lease advertised for $330 a week and I am seriously worried my landlord will up my rent to similar when it comes time to renew. If they do, I simply won't be able to afford it.

I also have car insurance and basic health insurance, because I'm over 30. My electricity bill is on a payment plan. I can't afford to have internet at my home and so I have to hotspot from my mobile phone to access the internet to undertake my studies or watch TV. When my phone lags or freezes I panic because without it I can't contact anyone, but my phone is an old model and I can't afford to upgrade it.

I am nervous about starting this job. Nervous because it's a 25 minute drive from my house to even get there, and I worry about the additional fuel costs I'll incur. I had to buy a new shirt to wear that fit the uniform requirements, which was $20. I had to skip dinner on Monday because of it. To be honest I don't want to work yet, I think I have enough on my plate being a single parent with no help to a 1 year old, studying a master's degree and maintaining a clean home, but I feel have no choice. Things are getting so expensive. But it's 2 months until Christmas and I have absolutely no money to buy my son anything. I'm so ashamed I feel like a failure of a mother.

On top of all of this, I have a medication I am supposed to take daily and I haven't been able to afford it for 13 months now. I don't want to know what effect that's having on my health long term
As well, I recently went to my doctor and was told I am prediabetic. He advised that I need to eat less carbohydrates and more proteins, but for years I have been eating a bowl of plain pasta at least 3 times a week to help make my money stretch. I can't afford meat more than 2 days a week, and I do worry about my son's health in our carb heavy diet. I also want to excersise but I can't afford to buy a supportive bra, or running shoes.

One of my friend suggested onlyfans, or uploading videos to pornhub, which she does to make sure she has enough money to feed her kids, but I just couldn't bring myself to do it. I cried a lot when I realised that if my landlord raises our rent next year I might have to reconsider, or move into my car. No hate to women who do it because they want to, but that's not me.

I have another friend (without children) on jobseeker, who is in a DV relationship. She knows she is but she can't leave because she simply can't afford to. She has had to sell most of her belongings already to have money for food and goes without her anxiety medication. She can't even afford to put credit on her phone to call for help. She can only access the internet via the house wifi that he monitors and controls. She's trapped.

I hope our situations help you in parliament.

AC

AC Team <team@antipovertycentre.org>

Would you like us to include your message for the #BTPM protest?

[redacted] 15 October 2022 at 18:49
To: AC Team <team@antipovertycentre.org>

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

I received a letter today advising that my rental assistance would be reduced with the justification being;
Due to an increase in the cost of living, the amount of rent you must pay before you are entitled to receive Rent Assistance has increased. This has affected your rate of Family Tax Benefit.

So, as my rent hasn't gone up enough, as I'm not under quite the right amount of financial pressure, my rent assistance is to be reduced. Yes, cost of living has increased, but that's no reason to expect more support, in fact you should expect, less?

I guess I should be grateful it hasn't been reduced more.

I expected with the change of government, that I voted for, that it would be more understanding for those struggling financially. It seems that's not the case, though sure, my Job Seeker payment is now indexed for CPI, so I guess I should be grateful.

It seems the message here is that I need to be poorer. Sure, they're different payments, but ultimately it's money given in one hand and taken in the other.

To say I'm less than impressed is an under statement. I just wanted to pass on my reflections of these current changes.

Oh, whilst I'm here, Workforce Australia obligations, this new system you couldn't do anything to change or stop coming on board, is something I'd have expected from the Howard government. I guess as a member of the undeserving poor I again should be grateful for the limits on the hoops you could've imposed.

Yes, I'm frustrated and I'm angry at how a party I've supported all my life has shown itself to be just as ruthless as any other when it comes to making life as hard as possible for those in need. I just wanted you to understand that I don't get what it is you're trying to achieve. I don't get why it is that you cannot help us, those that can't even afford to own cars to benefit from an unaffordable cut in fuel exercise, with pressures we cannot escape. As I'm sure there's a justification, that there's a plan. Oh, that's right. I just need to get a job. Thanks, all better now. Oh, I am working? Yes, but I'm obviously at fault for not being well enough to work more or better yet, I should get a job that pays more. My rent issues can be fixed by buying a house. Just as my mental health can be fixed by being more positive. I'm tired of being let down by government. I just hoped. It seems that was a mistake.

Best regards,

AC Team <team@antipovertycentre.org>

Why welfare needs to be above the poverty line.

[redacted] 11 October 2022 at 22:04
To: team@antipovertycentre.org

I am a mental health support worker in Adelaide.

It seems frankly odd that the idea that people need to be able to live above the poverty line is something at all controversial. Nevertheless I daily see the impacts of poverty on my clients.

Almost all of my clients are receiving jobseeker payments. It is only a small minority of clients who can work while accessing a service like mine, and in all honesty the expectation that they will return to work is also unfair and cruel, though getting them onto the DSP for mental illnesses is akin to climbing Everest. (The DSP would still see them in poverty of course, but even that would constitute a profoundly positive change in their lives.)

I see clients going without adequate nutrition regularly. I see them unable to afford essentials like power bills or phone credit. I see them unable to access their community and even health appointments due to a lack of transport, and I see them unable to engage in the activities that are so vital to recovery such as meaningful activities and socialising.

The services on offer to support in these areas are rarely enough, and often cannot be accessed because of deficits in another area. For example, I mentioned food before, and one common referral for clients is foodbank which allows clients to purchase food at lower costs. However, if a client has no vehicle or license, they are unable to transport the food. They of course cannot afford taxis or ride shares, and few services will offer transport to clients, especially in the long term. Often it feels like the system is built around an assumption that people will have someone in their lives that can fill these gaps, however and again, that is rarely true for those accessing a service like mine.

I mentioned moving clients onto higher levels of supports such as the NDIS or the DSP, however these programs have insanely high thresholds of evidence, such as access to OT or psychiatric reports which cost roughly $2,000. If clients cannot afford these reports, which is almost always, they are left waiting to access these professionals via the public service, which can take years (and they may not be able to access them even then). These are years in which their health deteriorates, of course. A lot of my clients are struggling even to afford seeing a GP with so few being able to bulk bill.

The outcomes of poverty for mental health clients in this city are very often poor nutrition, dangerous temperature conditions, social isolation, unacceptable access to support and treatment, and therefore minimal chances of recovery. Commentary from those in charge that supports to cover these areas exist reflects a frankly dangerous level of ignorance of the on the ground reality faced by so many of our clients.

Thank you.

AC Team <team@antipovertycentre.org>

Would you like us to include your message for the #BTPM protest?

Justin Seymour [redacted] 16 October 2022 at 06:25
To: AC Team <team@antipovertycentre.org>

Good morning Kristin. I've written a large message for Minister Rishworth. Please feel free to add my name, Justin Seymour.

The message is the following;

Good day Minister Rishworth. My name is Justin and I'd like to share my story of living on JobSeeker.

For the past 10 years, I've been struggling with chronic pain, fatigue, brain fog and other symptoms due to living with a condition called Fibromyalgia. It has no cure, and is life long. It has essentially ended my life goals and dreams, and forced me to live each day as it comes, only doing what's required to live to the next day. Some days I'm forced to do more than I can handle, like going to Woolworths, or the Doctor's office. Even preparing a meal is difficult. I can stand in the kitchen and cook for 30-60 minutes, but that will lead to 2 or 3 days of intense and severe pain. I tend to only eat things that I can either make in 10 minutes or less, like sandwiches, or when I can actually cook a full meal, it's generally something like pasta, because it's all I can afford and is easy to make in bulk. I don't remember the last time I ate any meat that wasn't cheap mince or super processed like sandwich meat.

I'm going to do some maths here on my current living situation. I currently receive the maximum amount of JobSeeker, Rental Assistance, Energy Supplement and the paltry Pharmaceutical Allowance. Right now, that is $796.50, due to a $38.50 Advance Payment reduction. I live in a Rooming House, with 6 other people. My rent covers some bills, like water, gas, electricity etc, and is $420 a fortnight. That is 52.8% of my total fortnightly income. That leaves me with $376.50. After some debt repayments totaling $90 a fortnight, that leaves $286.50.

$286.50 to survive 2 weeks. That's supposed to cover food, medication and travel. People like to claim that JobSeeker is $40 a day. That may be true when you look at the overall total, but for me, it's closer to $20 a day.

I can't afford to drive or maintain a car, so travel is restricted to Uber rides, as I can't walk to the local bus stop. I have barely left my house in the past few months, unless I absolutely have to, because I can't afford to. JobSeeker is too low for me to afford to have a social life outside of my computer.

Food prices are going up seemingly weekly at this point, so I'm surviving on pasta and sandwiches. Fibromyalgia also comes with food intolerances, so I'm forced to choose products that my stomach is okay with. Do you know how many products contain Garlic? I've got a pretty good idea because I can't eat it, along with many other foods, and have to check every packaging. Garlic is a very cheap additive for pre-made or processed foods, but because I can't eat it, I can't make those choices, forcing me to spend more money that I really can't afford to. I'm constantly picking unhealthy choices because JobSeeker is too low for me to afford healthy options.

My current medication is supposed to help lower my pain. However, opiates don't work for my level of pain, forcing me to use other methods. Recently I was prescribed medical cannabis via THC/CBD oil. This isn't on Medicare and is $250~ a bottle. 1 bottle is supposed to last 50 days, on the dose that I'm on. However, I'm skipping as many days as I can and just doing everything while in pain, because I can't afford to pay that much every 50 days. I'm living in constant, life altering pain, because JobSeeker is too low for me to afford my medication.

I know this is a lot to read or hear, but I do hope this makes you and the other ministers realize that while you discuss budgets for the country that equate to trillions of dollars, a few hundred dollars extra each fortnight will change the lives of hundreds of thousands. While the covid supplement was available at its full amount, being $550 a fortnight, I could afford to eat better. I could get my medication and not have a panic attack when reading the price. I could actually live, and not just try to survive each fortnight. It's shameful that the Labor government is acting worse than the previous Liberal government in terms of their treatment of the unemployed and disabled.
[Quoted text hidden]

AC Team <team@antipovertycentre.org>

Story for BTPM

[redacted] 11 October 2022 at 15:17
To: team@antipovertycentre.org

My family has given me permission to share their story anonymously, I hope this helps with the fight.

My brother is a 34 year old man living in Brisbane. He has a young daughter who he co-parents with his ex-partner, and he works hard to provide his share of child support. He has a part-time job but it doesn't pay enough for him to not be on Centrelink.

My brother lives with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder and ADHD, which means there are not many employers out there willing to give him a shot. Earlier this year he had to make the agonising decision to go off his ADHD medication, because he couldn't afford the ongoing psychiatrist appointments to get his prescriptions done.

In May his JSP had him kicked off his payments because they set one of his appointments on one of his regular work days, which he could not afford to give up. He couldn't pay rent. He lives with my sister who is a disability pensioner, and stress is a trigger for her epilepsy. So he took out predatory payday loans that he wouldn't be able to afford to repay.

All of this caused my brother's OCD to spiral into suicidal ideation, and it got to the point where my mother and sister had to make sure he was never alone for more than five minutes. For several days he couldn't do much more than cry and scream.

My mother, an aged pensioner who lives in regional Queensland, has had to come out of retirement and take up relief teacher shifts, to pay for my brother's mental health appointments. He should probably be on DSP but the application requires more costly specialist visits that our family can't afford.

To anyone paying attention: my brother's story is the rule, not the exception. Our system is killing hardworking people with its punitive rules and payment rates. It is forcing parents to come out of retirement so they can make sure their adult children aren't starving.

Raising the rate to above poverty levels would mean my brother could afford proper mental health care. He could afford to buy nice presents for his daughter instead of feeling like a deadbeat dad every birthday and Christmas. He would probably be able to work more.

My brother would literally give someone the shirt off his own back. He likes having a part time job where he can spend time with his daughter, and he works hard to be a good dad. "We can't afford it" is not a valid excuse when we are giving tax cuts to the rich, and when keeping people in poverty is already costing us so much.

AC Team <team@antipovertycentre.org>

Messages for Amanda Rishworth on the 17th Oct

Jordan [redacted] 9 October 2022 at 23:05
To: team <team@antipovertycentre.org>

Hey Antipoverty Centre folks,
Thanks for the work y'all are doing! Wanted to add my bit for the thing on the 17th.
Idk if this is exactly what you're looking for, as it's a fair bit longer than a tweet, which is where the original call was, but hopefully it's useful:

I've been living in poverty on Centrelink payments - Austudy then Newstart/Jobseeker - since leaving high school almost 9 years back. I have never been able to afford housing that meets my needs as a disabled person with trauma from multiple domestic violence situations from various cohabitors. I can barely afford anywhere to live at all, actually, and the fact that I am once again likely having to find a place to live, with current prices within my greater area STARTING at ~70% full Jobseeker payment, is soul-crushing.
I spend hundreds of dollars a month on medication and medical equipment I need to live on a day-to-day basis. I can't afford to see specialists for things like my ADHD or autism. I can barely afford basic foods - almost any meat I buy is nearly off, any veg frozen, any snack half-price or made from scratch. Almost all of my money goes directly to rent, bills, food, medical. The paltry leftovers aren't enough to cover keeping my car on the road - I have to ask for help pretty much every year to cover CTP etc. (Also, almost every job I've ever applied for has specifically stated that applicants need a car, so people on Jobseeker are literally priced out of being able to work.) New clothes are cast-offs from friends or from the clearance section at an already-cheap store. I've never been able to buy my own phone - which, by the way, is needed just to access Centrelink payments, and an up-to-date phone with reasonable technical specs is a necessity for the vast majority of jobs I've worked or applied for.
COVID supplements - which merely raised me to around the poverty line, not even properly out of poverty - changed how I could live and feel for about a year. I didn't have to count every cent to make sure it would last for 2 weeks til next pay. I was able to get medical care I desperately needed but couldn't before afford - even then, though, I had to rely on the goodwill of those specialists to charge much less than usual rates. I could afford car service and registration without having to beg others for help. I felt vaguely human and part of society for a brief time. My mental health, despite the turmoil of the time, had never been better.
I'd like to be able to continue taking the medications that allow me to get up of a morning and do anything other than stare into the distance. I'd like to be able to afford taking any of the jobs I've been applying for, in industries important for Australia but currently struggling for workers. I'd like to be able to afford glasses that don't give me a headache. I'd like to be able to afford chicken that I don't have to immediately take home and sniff and hope it's not gone bad. I'd like a lot of things, that you and so many take for granted as part of your everyday lives, and would cost you and Australia so very little. I just want to be human again. Is that so much to ask?

^ So that's the message for her, but feel free to pass along to Tony Burke & the rest of Albo's gang if you have anything coming up for that too. I'll probably send something similar off to my local, especially as they're also Labor; been meaning to for a while, and now something's finally written, lol.
Also, those reading and putting all these together, please take care of yourselves ❤️ Can't imagine there's much sunshine and rainbows in these. Again, thanks for the work!

- Jordan

Sent from Proton Mail mobile

AC Team <team@antipovertycentre.org>

Protest 17/10 - my experience on welfare

[redacted] 9 October 2022 at 18:12
To: "team@antipovertycentre.org" <team@antipovertycentre.org>

Hi team,

I wanted to share my experience of being on welfare with you. Hopefully you can share it on the experiences you're writing for the minister's office at the protest on the 17th.

I appreciate it is quite long so I understand if you want to edit it or print it instead of hand writing it out.

I would also appreciate if you could post it anonymously or just with my first name (due to my future career)

Thank you for all your hard work. If you ever organise a protest in Brisbane I'll be there!

In solidarity,

[redacted]

Since 2019 I've been studying towards becoming a counsellor to help ease the mental health crisis for people that live with complex mental illness like myself.

In 2018 at age 32 I found myself unable to work due to mental ill health and relocated to Brisbane for treatment and to be close to my family. Although I tried to live independently, I was unable to afford to while still paying for psychiatric treatment, including regular therapy and expensive medications. I ended up living with my parents so I could get treatment. When I tried living out of home in 2019-2020 I rarely ate until the introduction of the pandemic relief payment. Suddenly I was able to not only afford treatment but to have regular meals, live out of home, and have a social life. When this payment ended, I was forced to return home to my family and now, at almost 37 years of age, I feel unappreciated and ignored by a government that has, in the past, claimed to represent working class people. I also know that I would never have qualified for DSP, despite spending 4 years in and out of psychiatric hospitals.

I have one year left until I graduate. I study full time, and my mental state does not allow me to work while I complete my studies and associated placement. Without my parents, both in their 60s, who do not own our home nor any significant assets, I would not only be homeless, but probably dead. I am well aware of my privilege. Many people do not have family they can turn to for support. Certainly without mine I would not be here today.

I urge the minister to raise the rate of all welfare to at least the Henderson poverty line. There are so many people who need that support to survive. And with it many would have the potential to do more than that - although economic contribution should not be required to be worthy of a decent income in our society, nevertheless many do want to make a contribution. Myself included. And we simply cannot afford to with the cost of living, and the stagnant welfare rate, as they stand.

AC Team <team@antipovertycentre.org>

My story for Rishworth

Marina Chapman [redacted] 10 October 2022 at 18:06
To: "team@antipovertycentre.org" <team@antipovertycentre.org>

Minister (or appropriate honorific) Rishworth,

I, and many other welfare recipients need you to understand the urgency of our situation while living on an income well below the poverty line in Australia. We need you to read our stories, hear them, and most important of all - Raise all welfare rates ABOVE the poverty line.

My name is Marina. I'm a forty-seven year old woman, wife, and mother from Tasmania, who relies on the paltry JobSeeker payment to get by. We struggle to put good food on the table, pay our bills, maintain our house and garden to safe standards, and struggle to get our medical needs met - all because we exist in financial poverty.

I've struggled all my life to maintain a job, due to a combination of life-long mental & physical health conditions. These conditions are largely due to my traumatic childhood, traumatic life events in adulthood & the complexities of my ADHD that went undiagnosed until late last year.

I shouldn't need to explain to you how difficult it is to manage in life when you can't afford to access specialist medical care or diagnoses due to poverty. I've suffered for decades and contemplated suicide many times. Fortunately for my husband & children I've never attempted suicide. However, I have gone so far as to plan my death & purchase the means. Imagine, if you will, the pain & panic of discovering your loved one has the means to kill themselves & they won't tell you where it is hidden. That was my husband a few short years ago, trying desperately to convince me to stay alive.

The suffering of poverty extends beyond the individual, like ripples in water when a rock is thrown in. Families & communities suffer too.

When poverty is a major contributor, (if not the cause) of such suffering, and you have the power to reduce it significantly with the stroke of a pen - then it is up to you, as a government elected by the people of Australia, to look out for the most vulnerable of all Australians. A society is only as strong as it's weakest, most vulnerable member. And by that measure, Australia is very weak.

Raise all welfare rates ABOVE the poverty line.

End punitive "mutual" obligations.

Close down the job service network & bring an end to the businesses of those poverty police.

Break the Poverty Machine!

Marina
Hobart, TAS

Sent from Yahoo Mail on Android

AC Team <team@antipovertycentre.org>

Raise the Rate

[redacted] 10 October 2022 at 20:06
To: AC Team <team@antipovertycentre.org>

Hi Kristen,

Here's my reality:

Currently, I am completely burned out and have been for at least 5 years. Five years ago, I had a 15 year old in and out of hospital and in a wheelchair. I also had a 13 year old living with ME/CFS and at school part time, when he wasn't getting a cold that left him in bed for 6 weeks at a time. As single parent, I was also working 30 hours a week, twice the number of hours required, yet still needing income support! I had a breakdown that year, and have never recovered.

I lost my job as my bosses retired a couple of weeks before lockdown in 2020. When the covid supplement was introduced, I was able to pay my rent, bills, and provide for my kids, the younger one was bedbound with ME/CFS. My second job was down to an hour a week.

Once my youngest turned 18 just before Christmas, I lost family tax benefit and child support, as well as JobSeeker being back to the normal rate. I still have that casual job that varies a lot during the year, from 3 hours a week to 25 hours a week. I had another one that came to an end recently.

This year, I was diagnosed with autism and ADHD, my younger kid, who still lives at home was also diagnosed with autism. This kid is still mostly bedbound with ME/CFS too. I can't in good conscious subject him to the torture that is mutual obligations as this will send his health backwards.

I have been dealing with job search agencies & mutual obligations on and off for over 20 years, since I was fired for being pregnant. Not once have they helped get me a job. Instead, I have been advised to straight out lie to potential employers about my circumstances!

I am worried about how I will continue to pay rent as it's $10 a day more than Jobseeker... however there are no rentals in the area, cheaper or otherwise. Both my son and I have high health needs and I'm still completely burned out.

Jobseeker needs to be raised so that I can take care of my health, and my kids health, keep a roof over our heads, pay our bills, as well as have a better chance of finding employment and other opportunities to bring in an income.

Regards,
[redacted]

AC Team <team@antipovertycentre.org>

My son's story

Kylie [redacted] 11 October 2022 at 09:23
To: "team@antipovertycentre.org" <team@antipovertycentre.org>

Hi, I am writing on behalf of my son.
He is 222yo and tries to survive on Jobseeker.
He was unable to complete school past year 10 thanks to his ADHD and ASD. He is actually high functioning but just has no ability to focus and concentrate.
He would love to work in landscaping but this requires a car. He is in that predicament where he needs a job to get the money to buy a car, but he needs a car to get the job.
Outdoor labouring is the only job that has any possibility of maintaining his interest.
And even then, the anxiety and social barriers he has make it difficult to interview and have made it difficult, in the past, to hold a job long term. Let's not even look at mutual obligations. These are difficult and are they really worthwhile?
He is better off to live out of my home, for a variety of reasons. But he just cannot afford to do this unless he lives in a share house. Anxieties and other disabilities make this difficult.
I decided late last year to really stretch my budget and buy a small apartment. Afterall, stable accommodation is the key to stability both mentally and physically.
The provision was that he had to pay rent(afterall, I have a mortgage) and he had to have a roommate. We have struggled with a long term roommate due to his anxiety and social issues.
And even with this assistance, I am still having to offer further and regular financial assistance.
$100 here or $100 there. There is just no way you can live on the Jobseeker payment. You cannot pay food, rent and other bills. It is just impossible.

The lack of money exacerbates his anxiety. And the latest script for antidepressants is $50. I have had to pay for that as well as it is necessary for him. He does have a medical cannabis script but the cost of this is just not sustainable. So, forget that.

In a nutshell, I am lucky to be able to assist my son financially. This may not always be possible and it compromises my own financial security for the future. But with the assistance I provide, it means he is less of a 'burden' on society.
Not everyone is as lucky to have this help.
I know what has happened in the past when I have tried to make him be more self-sufficient, and we can't go back to that place.
I ask you to raise the rate and make the DSP more accessible. Too many people are unable to live adequately at the current rate and too many people have a disability which means they should be eligible for the DSP.

--
Regards,

Kylie [redacted]

AC Team <team@antipovertycentre.org>

Message for Minister Rishworth

Aeryn Brown [redacted] 11 October 2022 at 16:33
To: "team@antipovertycentre.org" <team@antipovertycentre.org>

Hey guys,

Just passing along a message for the esteemed Minister. ^__^ Best of luck with the protest on Monday.

Cheers,

Aeryn Brown

+++

Minister Rishworth,

My name is Aeryn Brown. I am one of the nearly 900,000 Australians who are either unemployed or underemployed and who receive either Jobseeker Payment or Youth Allowance (Other). I have relied on Centrelink as my sole source of income for nearly 15 years, since the end of January 2008 - Newstart for three years, Austudy for nearly six years, and (currently) a second stint on Newstart/Jobseeker for another six years since completing my Bachelor's degree in October 2016.

I am also disabled - one of the approximately 420,000 people on Jobseeker who have been locked out of receiving the Disability Support Pension due to not meeting the stringent criteria or who simply cannot afford the cost involved. My disabilities are psychiatric (major depressive disorder and social anxiety disorder), neurological (migraines) and neurodevelopmental (probable autism and ADHD).

To be completely honest with you, trying to survive on Jobseeker is something I would not wish on my worst enemy. Every two weeks after my public housing rent, water and electricity have been paid, I am left with $442.40 to somehow buy groceries, fill the prescriptions for the medications I take, pay my bus and train fares, and pay bills. I can no longer count on both hands how many times during the last decade that my strict budget has gone into the red and left me unable to afford my medication or enough food. I consider myself extremely fortunate that the $442 I'm paid every second Tuesday only has to support one person - myself. If I had to support a child or a partner as well, it would be impossible to survive.

Additionally, because I remain unemployed almost six years after finishing my degree, I'm required to engage with an employment service provider. I was previously linked with a jobactive provider (between October 2016 and February 2018), but their harsh treatment of me during the 15 months I was a client of theirs caused me to have a mental breakdown. After a 12-month exemption I was placed with a Disability Employment Services provider that, again being completely honest with you, are utterly useless. I have lost count of the number of consultants I have been shuffled between during the three years, eight months and one week that I have been on their books. I no longer bother to build any semblance of a relationship with them because I see no point. The *only* job I have found in the last three years, eight months and one week I have been with my current provider was a temporary position as a polling officer for my local council's election last December. Nearly six years of being knocked back for virtually *every job I apply for* has left me demoralised, depressed, furious at my DES provider, and with constant thoughts of committing suicide. In fact, the *only* reason I continue to apply for jobs is because **I AM REQUIRED TO DO SO.** Were it no longer a condition of continuing to receive my Jobseeker payments, I would abandon what I have come to consider an increasingly futile attempt at getting into stable, steady employment and focus solely on studying for my Master's degree. And were I not terrified of dying, and were I not concerned for the feelings of my friends and family, I would have killed myself when I was first diagnosed with depression in 2011. Because honestly, what's even the point anymore? At least if I'm no longer around, your government no longer has to waste $683.40 on me every two weeks. I have told my DES provider that my mental health is currently on a knife's edge, and I was brushed off. They did not care. I could have killed myself right after that, and they still would not give a damn.

I have felt hope and like a human being precisely *once* in the last decade - that one time being the short period of time in 2020 where the previous government temporarily doubled Jobseeker. For the first time in my independent adult life, I was no longer just barely surviving - I was *thriving*. I had more than enough money to pay my bills, to fill the prescriptions for my medications, to buy groceries, and to pay my bus and train fares whenever I needed to go out. I didn't need to add up the cost of groceries I was buying as I was putting those groceries in my shopping trolley. I was able to save for Christmas presents. I was finally able to replace my 30-year-old refrigerator and my 20-year-old mattress. My DES provider got off my back and left me alone for a little while. But most importantly *my depression went into remission*. For the first time in nearly a *decade*, I wasn't depressed. My mental health was the best it had ever been because my low income was no longer a stressor. In the two years since, my depression has returned with a vengeance and is now even worse than it was previously, because I no longer have hope. I can't plan for the future because frankly, I don't know if I even have one.

I know you probably don't care about what I have to say. Why would you? I'm just one of nearly a million of your fellow Australians who are lazy, shiftless bludgers, right? We deserve to be punished for the supposed crime of being unemployed, after all.

But I have to hope that you do care, even just a little. I voted for the Greens in the election earlier this year, but I directed my preferences to Labor because I believed that you and your government would do the right thing by your fellow Australians. So do the right thing - do what your party was voted into government to do. Raise the rate of income support to the Henderson Poverty Line, currently $88 a day - and not just Jobseeker either. Youth Allowance, Austudy, Abstudy, pensions - all of it. Abolish the "mutual" obligations that don't help us into work. Relax the criteria governing the DSP. **Show us that you give a damn.**

Thank you for your time.

Regards,

Aeryn Brown

AC Team <team@antipovertycentre.org>

Message for protest/Minister Rishworth

James Bryan-Hancock [redacted] 10 October 2022 at 18:39
To: team@antipovertycentre.org

Hi antipoverty centre peeps, this is extremely long and I have ended up using this more as a way to arrange my own thoughts instead of anything that can really be used as an effective part of the upcoming action. I hope at least this can serve as a bit of an introduction as I would really like to get involved in helping in any way I can. I have some experience through uni of researching and understanding policy and I really resonate with your slogan of breaking the poverty machine.

(CW suicide, abuse, and mental health problems)

My name is James Bryan-Hancock and I am a 34yo disability support pensioner from the suburb of Pasadena in Adelaide on unceded Kaurna land. I qualified for the DSP in 2014 after 2 and a half years on the then newstart allowance. Before that I worked for just under 4 years at a large supermarket chain but left after having my hours cut to the point that I could no longer afford to pay rent and experiencing abuse and indifference from management and the SDA union.

My experience of newstart was even worse, hounded by my DES provider and centrelink for appointments and forms I could not attend or complete due to severe agoraphobia, loneliness, and depression. This resulted in my payments being cut off and a suicide attempt I kept secret for years after. I resorted to stealing small amounts of food and money to get by. However, I was lucky enough to be able to receive weekly care by a social worker who helped with my centrelink issues and ended up being the only person (apart from my dad and a psychologist who told me she couldn't help me) that I spoke to for over year.

Despite being told by my social worker, father, and new mental health nurse I had begun seeing that I wouldn't qualify, I decided to apply for the DSP - I had nothing to lose, except the last of my hope. My social worker helped me with the application process and I saw a GP who referred me to a public psychiatrist for assesment that I could include in my application. Two months after submitting my application and another secret suicide attempt, I was approved for the DSP.

It was the first time in years I could get my head above water and breathe. The difference was life changing, I built confidence for the first time in years and felt I finally had a small amount of control over my life. My physical and mental health improved, I actually made a friend (!) and was able to go out to movies, the pub, and buy clothes I felt comfortable being outside in.

All the social workers, psychologists, employment providers and programs paled in comparison to the effect having enough money to live on had on my ability to participate in society in a small but meaningful way.

This change slowly gathered more momentum, finally allowing me to go back to uni and enrol in a Bachelor of Social Work. I experienced academic success and began to see my strengths and develop interests and ideas about the world. I met a guy I liked, fell in love and moved with him to Melbourne after he was offered a job. I was continuing my degree at RMIT and living what felt like a real life after being shut away, consumed with anxiety and depression for so long.

However, now I was in a relationship and living with a partner who worked and was no longer eligible to receive the DSP. Quickly the need to be financially dependant on my partner caused issues, the relationship became abusive and I was trapped interstate with a 12 month lease I couldn't break and a reluctance to admit things were going wrong. I became suicidal again and dropped out of uni.

Despite being consumed with shame and a sense of failure I reached out to my dad and arranged to move back to Adelaide when the lease expired. I was able to move into a room in one of my uni friend's rental and planned to finish my degree back at Flinders uni in Adelaide.

But I had a new understanding (through my experiences and study at RMIT) of the role of social work and the poverty machine. I was frustrated with the focus on individualised solutions social work relied on and the tokenistic lip service given to structural causes of poverty and mental health problems at flinders.

Covid was also kicking off around this time and it's disruption of my social work placement was the last straw that caused me to once again drop out of uni. My friendship with my housemate also began to break down and I was forced into finding a place to live on my own.

Now the, all to familiar, financial issues is rearing its head again and I feel myself slipping back into loneliness and despair. My new perspective on the structural issues at play have begun to make them feel overwhelming and sinister.

The new Labor govt shows no interest in addressing these issues, instead letting them continue to compound and exert the violence of poverty and hopelessness on it's victim-survivors. I cannot imagine what it is like for those on jobseeker and subjected to mutual obligations. My heart breaks for those who do not have the small comfort of the DSP.

The government has an obligation to end this violence, to provide the unemployed and disabled with the means they need to function and participate in society. To have dignity and control over their lives. To breathe and have hope for a life worth living.

Minister Rishworth has the power to do that today. The minister must announce an increase in the rate of all welfare payments to at least the poverty line and to end the dehumanising and cruel system of compliance that only serves to crush our spirits and extinguish our hope.

I am ready to fight for a better life for myself and others. I do not have a choice.

PS. Thanks so much to the auwu and antipoverty centre. Your work and narratives around poverty, work, and the way Australia's systems of govt and industry interact and enforce its violence, has given me the ability to make sense of what is going on and how it could be changed.

and apologies again for this stream of consciousness, unedited mess lol

So much love, power, and solidarity
James Bryan-Hancock

AC Team <team@antipovertycentre.org>

My story.

Jarrad [redacted] 10 October 2022 at 23:38
To: "team@antipovertycentre.org" <team@antipovertycentre.org>

Dear Amanda,

I've been a hard worker my entire adult life (I'm now 38) and a few years ago i had an extremely bad series of incidents at my work which ruined my physical and mental health and drove me to attempt suicide and since then I've been in decline.

I have had to struggle with rising costs in living, rent, bills, medications and specialists all on the insufficient funds provided by the government.

Due to the renting crisis all i have left after my payment is less than $60 for a fortnight and I'm somehow expected to live on this? Without any additional help from friends and family i would have long since been homeless or dead.

I have fought against daily thoughts of suicide and my depression and anxiety has become dangerous because of this constant struggle and stress, I'm living day to day and i often don't know how I'm going to get through the next week and pay for what i need to pay.

I am now disabled but not disabled enough to get on DSP and the entire process is a mammoth task with impossible hurdles. i am constantly fighting against your system and getting medical exemptions where i can because i cannot work but all of the systems in place tell me i can, that i have to or I'll lose my payment yet i can barely get out of bed each day, I have to get family and friends to help me do even the most basic of tasks but sure according to my provider I can do many hours a week of work.

Please, please for everyone that is struggling, please raise the rate.

End mutual obligations, end the privatisation of these systems.

Make DSP more accessible.

I don't want to die.