

Not left behind, but held back

Antipoverty Centre statement to the Canberra hearing of the Senate Community Affairs References Committee inquiry into the extent and nature of poverty | 27 February 2023

We acknowledge the Ngunnawal and Ngambri people, and pay respect to Elders past and present across the continent. We stand with all First Peoples in the quest for justice and seek an end to colonial violence, including that inflicted through the welfare system and carceral system.

Poor people in this country are not being left behind. We are being actively held back.

We want to begin by thanking the hundreds of people who, despite the strain of living in poverty, have contributed their expertise to the many proposals included in our submission to this inquiry.

The purpose of this inquiry is to understand the extent and nature of poverty. But fact finding doesn't help us eat or make rent, now or into the future.

We need a new, sophisticated measure of poverty for the 21st century, developed with unemployed advocates and other people on low incomes.

We need an independent body tasked with revising the poverty line.

We need Centrelink payments rates tied to it.

But we cannot wait for action. Immediate relief is desperately needed.

We urgently need income support payments lifted to at least the Henderson poverty line, like they were overnight, in 2020.

Poverty disproportionately harms First Nations people, trans folks, single-parent families, disabled people, older people and migrants. And we have heard enough from people who speak over and for us.

Our recommendations are simple, clear and provide a phased approach to the poverty crisis that does not leave us languishing in deep poverty while wealthy people pontificate about a patchwork of programs that aspire to shift the dial in one, or maybe two, generations.



This government has had a lot to say about its values but done little to back up the rhetoric. Yes, people need health, housing, education, training and employment supports. But these supports mean little, and don't succeed, when we can't afford to live.

The Albanese government says it cares about people who are struggling but ignores the blindingly obvious policy choice that would do the most for us.

There's no such thing as a silver bullet for addressing "disadvantage", but there's something that comes pretty close.

Poverty and "mutual" obligations are barriers to paid work. You want to help people find and keep a sustainable job? Abolish "mutual" obligations and raise the rate.

In the past four years there was a 27% increase in people seeking help at homelessness services. You want to help people get and keep a roof over their head? Raise the rate.

More than 60,000 women aged 15-24 years old who experienced violence in 2019 were in financial hardship. You want to help people leave and stay out violent homes? Raise the rate.

People on poverty-level payments long-term die by suicide at roughly twice the rate of the general population. You want to reduce the number of people experiencing mental ill health and relieve pressure on the mental health system? Raise the rate.

The welfare system kills people.

More than 3 million people – more than one in ten of us – are living in poverty. You want to leave nobody behind? Poverty is a political choice. Don't make it yours. Raise the rate.