



PUNISHMENT FOR PROFIT

**How private providers
became the only
winners in Australia's
cruel employment
services system**



Antipoverty Centre

GetUp!

People looking for work need help not harm. This report documents the failures of our welfare compliance regime and the privatised employment services industry, and offers a vision for supportive employment services designed by unemployed people for unemployed people.



Abolish what is slavery by another name... bring some humanity back to what has become a cold and unfeeling, overly punitive system designed to funnel money into the hands of private organisations for the benefit of the rich and not those using their 'services'.

– Lee, New South Wales

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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.

The Antipoverty Centre is an unfunded organisation that relies on community support to cover our operating costs. Visit the website to [contribute](#).

ABOUT GETUP

At its core, GetUp is fuelled by the power of everyday people who, combined with the power of progressive partner organisations and a central team of expert strategists, take action to have impact on the issues that matter.

GetUp members come from every walk of life. We come together around a shared belief in fairness, compassion, and courage to advance progressive public policy in Australia. We harness the power of people to speak truth to power and campaign for progressive social change. Our agenda focuses on the core pillars of: Climate Justice, First Nations Justice, Economic Fairness, Human Rights, and Media & Democracy.

GetUp is an independent, not for profit community campaigning organisation, incorporated as a company limited by guarantee. Our work is driven by our shared values, not party politics. GetUp receives no political party or government funding. Every campaign we run is entirely supported by voluntary donations.

As a people powered movement, GetUp aims to uplift the voices and experiences of people facing broken and arbitrary systems. We speak to our members and commission work directly with impacted communities as a key part of achieving our mission.

Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the original peoples of this unceded continent, who have been custodians of Country for thousands of generations. First Peoples have connections to place, land, waters and community that have been unbroken for 120,000 years. We recognise Indigenous sovereignty and the cultural significance inherent in these connections; historical and contemporary.

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. Read our statement of principles for more.

Content warning

This report includes references to potentially triggering subjects such as suicide, self-harm and sexual violence. We use 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.

You can find information about crisis services via punishmentforprofit.org

Contributors

Throughout this document 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 hundreds of people.

This work incorporates proposals developed for the parliamentary inquiry into the Workforce Australia employment system in collaboration with the following contributors: Phoebe Autumn, Bradley Bannister, Boris Blagojevic, Aeryn Brown, James Bryan-Hancock, Leigh Fawcett, Melissa Fisher, Eve Geyer, Nathan Kearney, Sean Kenny, Josh McGee, Louise Nixon, Greg Page, Alex Paine, Jinghua Qian, Tracey Smallwood, Thomas Studans and Isabelle Truong. Two people have chosen to remain anonymous.

We have also drawn on in-depth surveys conducted by the Antipoverty Centre that received responses from hundreds of people in poverty, and submissions to the Australian Unemployed Workers' Union review app. We thank Amber, Anne-Louise, Deidre, Fern, Grey, Kieran, Lili, Lisa, Luke Filby, Robert, Tenisha Coates for quotes used in this report. We extend deep gratitude to every person who contributed by trusting us to share their opinions and experiences. We urge you to visit punishmentforprofit.org to read detailed responses from dozens of the people who participated in our surveys that reiterate the findings and recommendations in this report.

Thank you to Jeremy Heywood, Sean Kenny and Noah Sutherland for photography.

Terminology

Common welfare policy terms relevant to this report are briefly described here.

Policymakers have sought to soften the perception of certain welfare policies by using euphemistic terminology that invokes benign support programs. We reject this practice. Cases where we use an alternative to standard government terminology are explained below.

First person language is used to avoid reproducing the othering effect in reports produced about the experiences of unemployed and low income people by researchers who don't understand our lives.

In this document, the term **unemployment payment** refers to the two mainstream payments for unemployed people: JobSeeker (and its predecessor, Newstart) and Youth Allowance Other. These payments are **activity tested**, meaning recipients must meet participation requirements each month to continue receiving their payment. Activity testing is commonly referred to as “mutual” obligations. Due to the innate power imbalance between people imposing these requirements and those subjected to them they are not, and never can be, mutual. For this reason we use quotation marks when referring to “**mutual**” obligations.

Compliance with “mutual” obligations is enforced by outsourced **employment services providers**. Currently these providers operate a range of compulsory programs for the government aimed at different cohorts, giving them the power to cut off a person's Centrelink payment. “Mutual” obligations apply to people in the following programs administered by private organisations: Workforce Australia, Disability Employment Services and Transition to Work. Until recently, they also applied to ParentsNext and the Community Development Program. There are many other common terms for providers including **job provider, job agency, job service provider, and job network provider**. Until the privatisation of employment services in the 1990s, employment services were delivered by the **Commonwealth Employment Service**.

The privatisation of formerly public services is generally justified on the basis that competition will produce better outcomes for less money. In theory, replacing direct public sector provision with competing private organisations is intended to give the users of a system choice and improve service quality while reducing costs. But the design of the employment services system has created a **quasi-market** that means providers effectively operate an oligopoly in each region. Government contracts dictate where they operate, how many providers are in the area and people in employment services are allocated a provider, rather than being free to choose.

Parenting Payment, Disability Support Pension, Carer Payment, Youth Allowance Student and Apprentice and a number of other payments are only available to people below retirement age, and are included in the term **working age payment**. These are not unemployment payments, however some recipients are activity tested (eg parents, DSP recipients under 35).

The term **income support** payment refers to all government allowances, including all working age payments and the age pension. This term is used interchangeably with **welfare** and **social security**. The purpose of income support should be to ensure the health and wellbeing of all – this is the meaning of “welfare”, which we use in its positive sense. It should not be ceded

to those who use it as a pejorative and seek to deprive welfare recipients of our basic rights. In this report, **welfare recipient** is used in a narrow sense to mean a person who relies on an income support payment as their primary income or to supplement employment income that does not exceed the eligibility threshold. In this context it does not refer to people who receive other forms of cash welfare, such as Family Tax Benefit, or non-cash welfare programs like the NDIS, Medicare and education.

We draw a distinction between welfare recipients and **unemployed people**. The latter includes anyone who does not have a paid job. Not all people who rely on income support are unemployed, and not all unemployed people are eligible for a welfare payment.

The term **income control** is used to indicate compulsory participation in cashless welfare programs such as the Cashless Debit Card (now Smart Card) and BasicsCard, described by the government as income management programs to invoke benign budgeting or financial counselling. These programs forcibly restrict the items that people subjected to them are able to purchase, and remove participants' agency and control over how bills are paid and who they are paid to. They are racist and target First Nations communities, exerting control over their income in violation of their rights.

A key feature of the welfare system is **conditionality**. This refers to requirements and restrictions on accessing income support payments. It includes activity testing, income control and tight eligibility criteria that exclude many people who need support.

We describe the welfare system as a whole, and the socio-political landscape it exists within, as a **poverty machine**. It is both the complex intersection of government policies that trap us in poverty and the people who have power to design, uphold and create social licence for these policies, including politicians, researchers, bureaucrats, the media, professional advocates, charities and service providers.

Abbreviations

CDP: Community Development Program

The department: Department of Employment and Workplace Relations

DES: Disability Employment Services

DEWR: Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (oversees Workforce Australia, ParentsNext and Transition to Work)

DSP: Disability Support Pension

DSS: Department of Social Services (oversees welfare payments, Disability Employment Services and income control programs)

MOs: "mutual" obligations

NDIS: National Disability Insurance Scheme

NIAA: National Indigenous Australians Agency (oversees Community Development Program)

WfA: Workforce Australia

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

POVERTY A
POLITICAL
CHOICE

04

Executive summary

The past 30 years has seen welfare recipients subjected to punitive rules that are continually ratcheted up and cost billions to administer, engineered to deliver budget savings by cutting people off meagre payments and push us closer to ruin.

This report brings together the expertise and experiences of 600 welfare recipients through primary research conducted by the Antipoverty Centre, government data, media coverage and company reports. They expose systemic problems and harms that are caused by privatised employment services providers and the prejudiced, paternalistic attitudes that underpin “mutual” obligations.

We show that the federal government is spending \$4 billion a year on Workforce Australia and other so-called employment services that do little more than waste time and cause harm to the millions of people forced to use them. For-profit and non-profit providers alike have been rewarded for three decades of failure with ever growing pots of public money.

Meanwhile, a suite of government 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. The public conversation about employment services policy is too often stripped of this context, ignoring the real drivers of unemployment – many of which cannot be addressed by employment services, no matter how well they are designed.

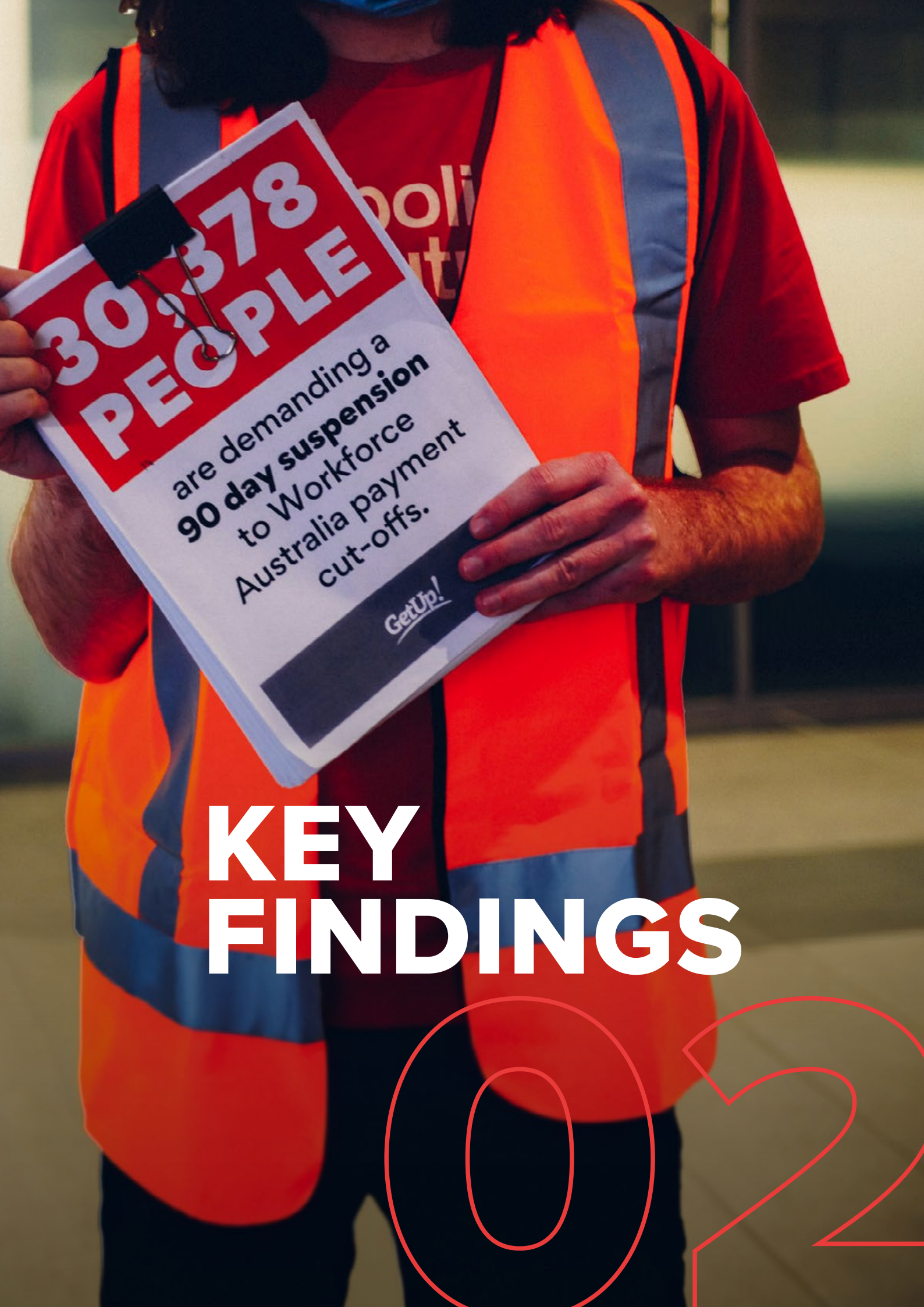
An employment service cannot be an end in and of itself, a hamster wheel on which welfare recipients prove our worthiness, but should serve the aim of supporting people who want assistance getting a job – and only people who want assistance.

Unemployed people have told us that technocratic changes will not “fix” Workforce Australia. We know there is no reforming this system. Employment supports must be transformed, reoriented away from punishment and provider profits towards meeting the needs of all who want assistance to find paid work.

The experiences of welfare recipients show that it is time for an income-first approach to employment services. Ensuring no one is in poverty is the fastest and most important thing the government can do to help people who want a job. That is the foundation of a community-centred employment services system redesigned from the ground up to ensure every person who wants help finding paid work can get appropriate, quality support.

No one should be held back by political choices. The community cannot allow governments to continue policies that harm unemployed and underemployed people, trap us in poverty, and worsen our job and life prospects.

Through demonstrating that people in poverty are the experts in our own lives, we aim to change public perceptions and equip allies to support us in the fight to abolish “mutual” obligations, get the unemployment cops off the beat, and return employment services to public control.



KEY FINDINGS

02

Key findings

Our analysis of government and company information shows the providers unemployed people say are failing them the most have been increasing their publicly-funded revenue streams. These organisations are morphing into substitute public institutions through a process we describe as “vertically integrating” human services. Increasingly, employment services providers are involved in healthcare, training, disability services, foodbanks, disability support coordination, housing and have even branched into high schools.¹

This has created a feedback loop whereby it seems to us that providers are now deemed too big to fail by government.² They have influence over the policies that guarantee their income streams without meaningful pushback from the politicians who legislate the programs. Even non-profit organisations effectively run a for-profit model in employment services.

The current mutual obligations system, coupled with payment rates, is trapping people in long-term unemployment.³ This has seen a large increase in the average time on JobSeeker, from about 2 years in 2014 to more than 5.5 years now.⁴

“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 people experiencing bullying and abuse in employment services can feel that suicide or self-harm are their only option.

The below findings are based on more than 600 responses to two Antipoverty Centre surveys, in-depth workshops and conversations with 20 report contributors, and research laid out in this report.

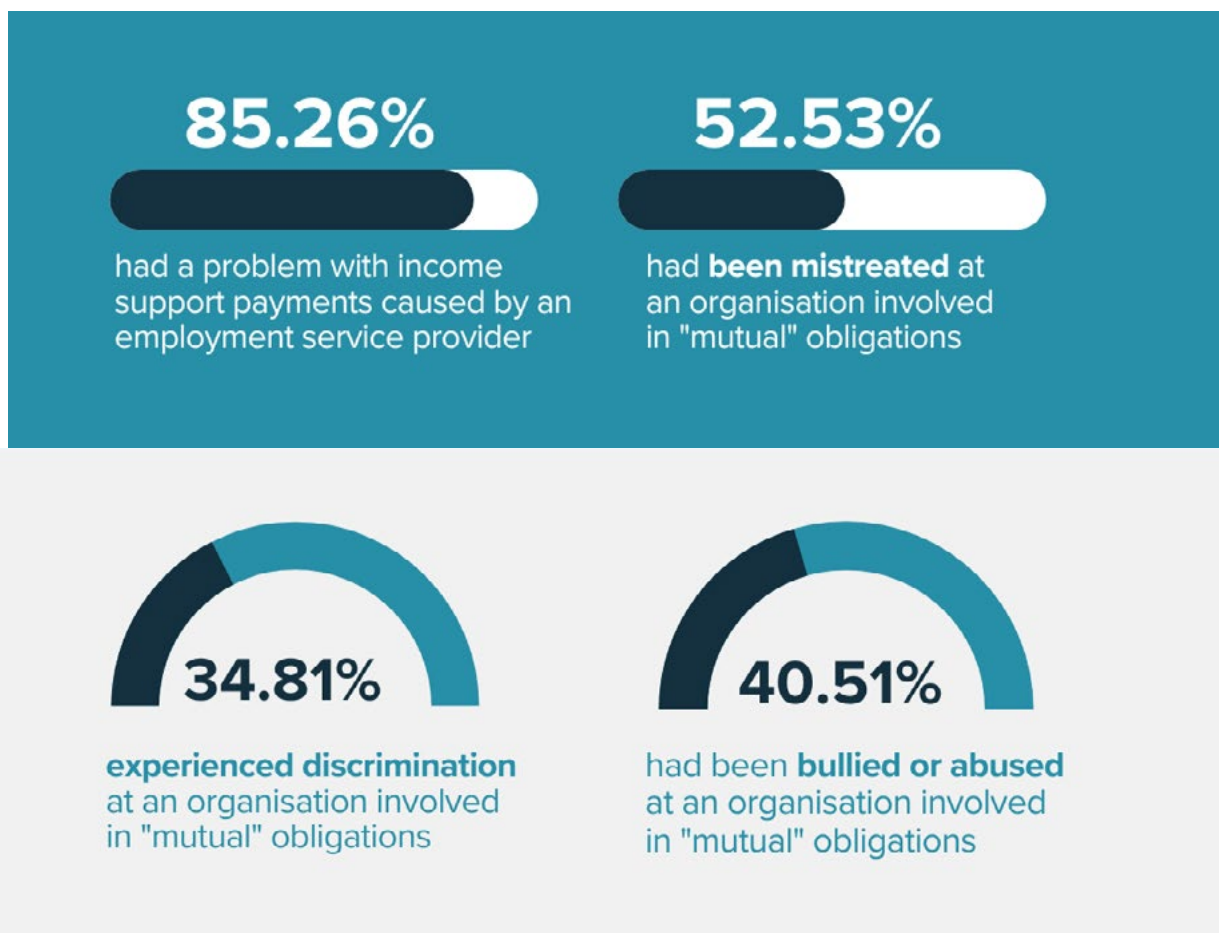
Of 475 people receiving a Centrelink payment at the time when they completed the survey, 18.95% were employed. Of 158 people in paid work, 90 were still on a payment (56.96%). Eight of 111 people said their job agency had helped them get a job (7.2%).

Of 14 people who gave information about a wage subsidised job, 4 found the job with help from their job agency and only 1 of these was an ongoing role. Across more than 200 placements in Work for the Dole, compulsory volunteering, training and similar



activities for which detailed information was provided, only 6.19% of placements led to a job. Only 2.38% were ongoing, with jobs generally being time limited for a period of 3 months or less, or casual hours being reduced over time without explanation.

The survey asked respondents whether they had ever had a positive experience with “mutual” obligations. 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. 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.



Our analysis of submissions to the Workforce Australia inquiry found that of the 47 which expressed a position on making participation in employment services completely voluntary, 38 supported doing so (80.85%).

These findings will not come as a surprise to people who have been forced to comply with rules to receive a welfare payment. They undeniably show the urgency of abolishing “mutual” obligations and the need for high quality, supportive employment services.

Send a message to the government and social services minister Amanda Rishworth

What sort of support would help you get a sustainable, fairly paid job that suits your needs?

Not everyone wants or should have to do paid work, but many people just can't get the right job.

An increase in confidence from being able to participate meaningfully in society.

Workplaces that value our ability to contribute instead of treating us as a liability.

Stop the punishment and harm

BREAK THE POVERTY MACHINE
#BTPM

RECOMMENDATIONS

OF

Recommendations

These recommendations complement a more detailed range of proposals described in the Antipoverty Centre submission to the Workforce Australia inquiry. Our proposals are based on ideas developed through a series of workshops to co-author submissions to the parliamentary inquiry. You can read those proposals [here](#).



Boost the rate, abolish mutual obligations, have counsellors instead of job coaches. Give people the time and flexibility to work on their motivation rather than just being cut off completely. Don't have bullies and unempathetic people working in Centrelink. Abolish work for the dole and have volunteering instead that isn't forced and brings some positive inspiration and motivation.

– Luke Filby, New South Wales

Poverty is a barrier to paid work. Services alone cannot provide people with what we need to get positive outcomes from employment supports. We must abandon punitive policies that cause people to fear the social safety net. It is time to heed the lessons of 2020: payments at the poverty line and removal of “mutual” obligations saw long-term unemployed people reporting they felt better equipped than ever to find and keep a suitable job, and to do the unpaid work that keeps our families and communities running.

It is vital that we take an income-first approach to employment, removing poverty as a barrier to paid work and valuing other forms of work and contribution. It is only in this context that employment services can be genuinely supportive and effective.

- 1.** Raise all income support payments above the Henderson poverty line and then work with people on low incomes to develop a more sophisticated poverty measure.⁵
- 2.** Invest in quality public homes towards universal access, and support co-operative housing, to ensure the right to safe and secure shelter is upheld for all of us.⁶
- 3.** An end to all subminimum wage work and a guaranteed job at fair pay for everyone who wants one.*

* Subminimum wages includes Australian Disability Enterprises, prison labour and junior pay rates. For more see the Antipoverty Centre submission to the equal pay bill inquiry: punishmentforprofit.org/submissions/equal-pay



Raise the rate to above the poverty line. 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

Our conception of employment services must be reimagined to something that is both helpful and desirable to people who want a job.

- 4. End compulsory “mutual” obligations activities.** There can be no trust in a compulsory system, and trust is essential for a system that works. Coercion is no better than compulsion and also has no place in a system intended to support people. Coercion includes offering a top-up payment for people who participate.* High quality employment supports should be available to anyone who wants to use them, regardless of whether they receive a Centrelink payment.
- 5. Community-led employment programs for the public good.** A new approach to social and employment services design based on a framework for locally controlled processes led by unemployed people with the involvement of the broader community, service providers,[†] local government and others to identify gaps in supports and design new programs.
- 6. Employment assistance integrated with other social supports.[‡]** We all have different strengths, circumstances and needs. Employment services should not be a one-stop-shop, but part of an ecosystem including health, legal, housing, unions and related supports. We must have the freedom to choose for ourselves what we need and easily access information about what is available through local community centres.
- 7. Democratic control and oversight of services.** Ongoing accountability for service providers and a responsive system achieved through local oversight groups led by people accessing supports. Employment services should be monitored by the people who use them to ensure they work effectively and in concert with related social supports.

* Top up payments for those who complete non-work activities create two classes of unemployed people, discriminating and imposing deeper poverty on those who do not need or want support, or cannot get suitable support. All work experience and other work-like activities should be paid at or above the national minimum wage.

[†] For example health, drug and alcohol, financial counselling and other localised providers of community services.

[‡] The concept of service integration is used as an alternative to “wraparound” or “place-based” services. Past approaches have often been prescriptive, with limited agency for the person accessing support. We are managed and placed at the centre of a system that problematises us. Integration is about providing assistance and resources so that we are able to choose for ourselves what we want or need to access, and are able to access it easily.

8. **Return control of services to public hands.** Whether for-profit or non-profit, private organisations do not act in the interests of unemployed people. An ecosystem of supports must have the public sector at its core to provide meaningful assistance. Create sustainable, skilled, public sector jobs at all levels of government to guide the delivery of community-identified services.
9. **Employers responding to our needs and creating jobs that work for us.** Everyone who wants a job can work, but many of us are locked out of paid work due to disability, illness, caring duties or other responsibilities that lead to discrimination. Government and employment services must assist unemployed and underemployed people by tailoring* jobs that fit our ambitions, capacity and support needs and work with unions and employers to develop safe, inclusive, sustainable jobs.



* Tailoring can be done informally, or involve more structured processes such as job carving or job customisation.

Tony Burke

Member for Wat

Talk To Us, Tony

"Mutual obligations should be scrapped in their entirety, ESPECIALLY the fucked force

Talk To Us, Tony

"Why is 'starting a job' only worth 50 points? Isn't this mandatory dehumanising experiment made to help us gain employment? What more do we have to do for you? You treat us poorly and give us scraps. At least treat us like humans! As your citizens!"
@alphatesthepoor

Talk To Us, Tony

"I'm 56 with several chronic medical conditions, so approved to work 15 hours per week. I have a degree & 3 TAFE certs. More training will not help me when employers DO NOT want older employees in poor health. Be humane, end MOs and raise the rate so I can live."
— Helen, AUWU member

Talk To Us, Tony

"The un... endure m... automati... created v... disregard... of the un... At best it... out of inc... malicious... — anony

METHODOLOGY

04

Research methodology

Going beyond “lived experience”

The expertise and needs of people in poverty must be centred in all activities related to developing policies that affect us, with financial assistance and capacity building support provided where necessary to enable full participation.

The Antipoverty Centre has observed that academics, policymakers, politicians, professional advocates and even employment services providers are increasingly paying lip service to the value of “lived experience”.

This approach to “lived experience” is generally a box ticking exercise used to legitimise policies and processes underpinned by false notions of “welfare dependency”.

The term others and diminishes people in poverty. It dehumanises us by presenting us as one-dimensional. The shift to “lived experience” has seen an increase in people being asked to perform their poverty without being given leadership roles, the opportunity to provide meaningful input, or compensation for expertise in relation to policies that affect us.



Welfare policy is not rocket science, we should stop treating it that way.

– Tom Studans, New South Wales

Our methodology is designed to:

- demonstrate an alternative approach to policymaking that is led by unemployed and low-income people;
- start from first principles by considering the basis on which past and current programs were founded before exploring new questions and generating proposals; and
- identify straightforward solutions where they exist and devise novel programs and approaches to thinking about and providing supports for those who want them.

It is through this work that we are breaking down the hierarchy of the researcher and the researched.

Building trust

Organisations led by people in poverty are breaking ground and helping uncover the intrinsic challenges and opportunities in policymaking. We are able to do this because of relationships and trust built through years of organising work, mutual aid, ensuring individual stories are heard, countering harmful media narratives and providing individual advocacy and support for people experiencing the harms described in this report.

The Antipoverty Centre is grateful to organisations like the Australian Unemployed Workers' Union, the Anti-Poverty Network SA and others who do this work alongside us.

Surveys

This report draws on results from two surveys conducted by the Antipoverty Centre in 2021 and 2022. The first, on disabled people's experiences of the welfare system, was sent directly to members of People with Disability Australia and shared on social media. Respondents who indicated they were or had previously been required to do "mutual" obligations were invited to participate in a dedicated survey on this topic, which was also sent to members of the Australian Unemployed Workers' Union and shared on social media. In total, 591 individuals contributed to one or both surveys.

56.38% of participants in the "mutual" obligations survey reported having a disability and 17.68% identified as trans. Although these cohorts are over-represented, this reflects the significant employment barriers and discrimination experienced by long-term unemployed people in these groups.

Workshops

Proposals in this report are informed by a series of workshops facilitated by the Antipoverty Centre with the support of GetUp. Five workshops were held in three cities (Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney) as part of a co-authoring process for Workforce Australia inquiry [submissions](#). Contributors who participated include people from five states. Outputs from an online workshop coordinated with the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations have also been incorporated.

Preparation for the workshops involved reviewing survey submissions to identify participants with a diversity of backgrounds, ages, experiences and perspectives. Everyone involved in this policy work is directly affected by unemployment, underemployment, economic exclusion and labour market discrimination. First Nations people, trans people, parents, migrants, refugees and disabled people were included in the group of contributors. Participants included people accessing Youth Allowance, JobSeeker, Parenting Payment, Austudy and the Disability Support Pension. All had currently or previously been subjected to "mutual" obligations, including in the current Workforce Australia, ParentsNext, Transition to Work and Disability Employment Services programs.

Our approach to facilitation reflects principles incorporated in narrative therapy work as described in *What is narrative therapy? An easy-to-read introduction* by Alice Morgan. From the book:

['Narrative therapy' refers to] certain ways of understanding problems and their effects on people's lives... particular ways of talking with people about their lives and problems they may be experiencing... Narrative therapy seeks to be a respectful, non-blaming approach to counselling and community work, which centres people as the experts in their own lives. It views problems as separate from people and assumes people have many skills, competencies, beliefs, values, commitments and abilities that will assist them to reduce the influence of problems in their lives. There are various principles which inform narrative ways of working, but in my opinion, two are particularly significant: always maintaining a stance of curiosity, and always asking questions to which you genuinely do not know the answers.⁷

The primary goal that underpins our approach is to foster a sense of trust and safety both in the facilitators and among contributors. Creating a supportive environment relies on appropriate pre- and post-care, in addition to the tone and setting of the workshop itself. It is a process that encourages contributors to exercise agency and one of ongoing consent-seeking for the overall project, and for the specifics of how it is conducted.

The workshops were conducted flexibly and adapted in response to the direction of conversation, covering the following:

- sharing of context, expertise and experiences;
- goals and aspirations as carers, community members, in education and in paid work;
- structural and individual barriers to achieving goals and aspirations;
- identifying things that would help to remove or overcome barriers;
- reflection on past experiences, including successes achieving goals or overcoming barriers outside the employment services system and experiences of “mutual” obligations programs, including how these have positively or negatively contributed to achieving goals or overcoming barriers;
- identifying gaps between existing programs, supports and approaches compared to the range of identified barriers, and discussing options and new proposals for filling these gaps;
- exploring how proposals may affect people in a diverse range of circumstances and from different backgrounds, and adjusting to incorporate these perspectives; and
- approaches to oversight and accountability for service providers.

Each workshop followed a similar structure and explored the same set of questions, but produced ambitious, creative and diverse proposals. Where ideas were in contradiction, each group was able to work through and synthesise various needs and aims to create refined solutions. Each group had the opportunity to discuss and develop their own proposals, and was presented with options from previous workshops to explore, compare and build upon.

This resulted in a rich, varied and complementary range of ideas that gave people a greater sense of agency, optimism and confidence. The outputs of these workshops have since been presented in a briefing to the Select Committee on Workforce Australia Employment Services and will be published by the Antipoverty Centre.

VALUING CONTRIBUTIONS AND EXPERTISE

It is essential that people living in poverty are not asked to provide free or undervalued labour to further the work of researchers, especially those who profit from the work through their income, grant or contracts.

The Antipoverty Centre, despite being an unfunded organisation, refuses to replicate the system we seek to dismantle in our research, and challenges other researchers to do away with practices such as “payment” in the form of low value vouchers.

By seeking support through crowdfunding, and small grants from CoPower and other organisations, we have been able to pay people for their expertise. This includes writing, and participation in meetings, government consultations and parliamentary processes from the day we were established. We cover not only time, but the cost of participation, such as internet access, phone credit, travel, COVID tests, masks and food. We pay for written pieces at a similar scale to mainstream news outlets, and small pieces of one-off work at a rate reflective of paid consultants. For ongoing casual work we pay significantly above the rate of the minimum wage.

With the support of GetUp, we were able to do this on a much larger scale in this project, enabling us to significantly expand the number of people who participated in the work of developing policy proposals.



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, Northern Territory



Having to constantly prove I had a disability was humiliating. Finding out that the job provider was withholding practical assistance from me was the icing on the shit cake. At the time I was being force-fed domestic violence, paired with a side dish of complex PTSD. My “job provider” was aware of this, but lied by omission to keep me in the dark about what help was available, meaning I didn’t even know what I could ask for. They also lied about what my apparent “mutual” obligations were in order to benefit themselves. [There should be] no privatising of job providers – this service should have fully stayed in the hands of the commonwealth government.

– Fern, South Australia

Selection of featured employment services providers

Throughout this report are profiles highlighting four employment services providers: AimBig, APM, Salvos Employment Plus and Sarina Russo Job Access.

There are many others we could have included – these are by no means the only organisations that demonstrate the wide-scale harm and poverty profiteering that exists in the system. They were selected to provide a representative sample of a breadth of issues, from vertical integration of outsourced government services, to the billions of dollars in public money propping up private organisations, to the entrenched harmful practices and culpability of organisations that claim to prioritise ethics over profit.





CONTEXT

05

Context

Poverty is a systemic, intersectional issue that creates barriers to employment. It creates and exacerbates disabilities.

Income support payments that were inadequate in the Howard era only got worse in the decade before COVID hit. They are now patently unliveable and increasingly inaccessible due to restrictive eligibility and participation requirements.

When COVID hit, former prime minister Scott Morrison recognised the thoroughly degraded state of welfare as a major threat. He lifted JobSeeker to the poverty line and suspended work tests overnight.



Give people money and they will make a life for themselves. Keep people in poverty and they will ... have more barriers to work. And you'll have all the excuse you need to spend more on cops and jails. None of what you are doing has any efficacy so why did Labor make halving the waiting time for work for the dole their first change to the system? Why punish people for systemic failures of neoliberalism? Your policy is insane and you should feel bad for perpetuating it.

– Kieran, Victoria

Three years on, all policies that helped unemployed people in 2020 have been abandoned, while spiralling living costs and unemployment by design are further turning the screws.

We're told by our government it would be irresponsible to ensure people on low incomes can afford to eat and pay our bills by lifting welfare payments to the poverty line. That it's unacceptable to let unemployed people self determine their priorities and needs, and have the freedom to pursue them, regardless of a total lack of evidence to support imposing compulsory requirements.



1977

Parliamentary committee finds that any "work for the dole" program would stigmatise unemployed people and make it harder to get a job.

1989

Hawke Government introduces idea of "mutual obligations".



1994

Keating Government recommends introducing competition to the employment services system; first round of privatisation begins.

1997

Howard Government formalises the term "mutual obligation", develops the "work for the dole" program, and begins fully privatising the employment services sector.



2016

Turnbull Government introduces ParentsNext, a "pre-employment program" for parents with young children.

2004

'Welfare-to-Work' policy that dictates government policies to this day begins.

2018

Senate inquiry into employment services reveals sweeping harms caused to unemployed people.



2020

COVID lockdowns see the suspension of mutual obligations, with employment services becoming voluntary.

2022

Albanese Government elected. Workforce Australia begins with limited policy changes.



2023

Parliamentary committee recommends replacing the ParentsNext program while retaining "mutual" obligations for parents.

Origins of the system

The current and long-standing “welfare-to-work” ideology that underpins current social security policy was concentrated under the Howard government in the mid 2000s. It was built from the market reforms of the 1980s and 1990s and underpins government and department decision-making to this day.

The first instance of employment services privatisation was introduced under the Keating government’s ‘Working Nation’ report that sought to break up union control and deregulate parts of government services.* This allowed for-profit and not-for-profit groups to compete for licenses alongside the Commonwealth Employment Service.

Complete privatisation of the CES occurred under the Howard government, and the introduction of “mutual” obligations were developed at the same time, which established more onerous expectations on unemployed people.

Over the life of the fully privatised system, it has become an oligopoly, with licensing increasingly concentrated with large and growing organisations and few new market entrants. Other policies to determine licenses and quality of services, the deeply flawed and now-canned star rating system, allowed this to occur.

The system as it stands

Australia is a world leader in punishing unemployed people.⁸ One form this punishment takes is the stringent regime of “mutual” obligations activities. Compulsory requirements are part of a complex poverty machine.

For people on the JobSeeker payment, Parenting Payment and Disability Support Pension subjected to these activities, one small misstep can result in waking up on the day our poverty payment is due with no money having arrived in the bank.

Employment services have a long history of failing unemployed people, funnelling billions in public money to poverty-profiteering organisations that make cash by enforcing cruel government policies. Evidence shows “mutual” obligations don’t help people. Instead they create a barrier to work.⁹

Punitive compulsion has become a hallmark feature of our social security system since the 1990s, with the most perverse harm being caused by “mutual” obligations – activities 900,000 people must undertake to receive their poverty payment.¹⁰

* The Keating government believed the senior management of the Commonwealth Employment Service was under the influence of an “activist union” and that market pressure would balance the control. O’Sullivan S, McGann M and Considine M, 2021, *Buying and Selling the Poor: Inside Australia’s Privatised Welfare-to-Work Market*, pp 7–8, Sydney University Press.



I spend far too much time engaged in the medical system, engaged in all of these different things. I don't make anywhere near enough money to make any of these a bit easier. I sold an article yesterday and I made \$80. I felt more accomplished about that than my bullshit job. I'd love to just have the glimmer of possibility that this was something I could pursue but I can't afford to go to uni. I have disabilities where it's going to be incredibly unrealistic for me to work and study... Every day I question is this worth it? After tax, after the Centrelink taper rate, after the Medicare levy, I make \$8 an hour. That's what I want to get out of. I want to actually be able to do something where I'm going, "I like this, I feel proud of my work." There's no way out of that situation right now.

– Eve, Victoria

THE WORKFORCE AUSTRALIA ERA

Labor voted for, and then inherited, the Coalition government's attempted revamp of the mainstream employment services program now known as Workforce Australia.

Workforce Australia replaced jobactive on 1 July 2022. Despite calls from unemployed advocates, unions, parts of the community sector, academics and some politicians to replace it with something voluntary and genuinely helpful, the incoming Labor government pushed ahead. At the time, the government claimed it couldn't remove "mutual" obligations.¹¹ In reality, the employment minister has full powers to suspend "mutual" obligations requirements indefinitely at any time, as Michaelia Cash did in 2020. Doing so again would effectively make the system voluntary, placing the onus on providers to deliver a quality service.

Since the Workforce Australia rollout there has been steady media coverage of system failures, perverse outcomes, unfair rules and rule-breaking by providers.

The program reproduces and intensifies the harmful practices of its predecessors, but with an added panopticon layer. Activity monitoring was further outsourced – previously the sole responsibility of the private providers paid billions a year to deliver the system, the added digital services model means people trapped in it are now helping police themselves. People in poverty are forced to navigate a complex, badly-designed and often broken online system to collect and log enough points to get a meagre welfare payment.



This is a Kafka novel that we're in. It's a reality show. Who listens? You can't actually contact any of the powers that be. They have inquiries and whatever and just keep ["mutual" obligations] for some magical reason. I think the most galling thing is you get rung up [by the job agency] for your payslips. You know there's money sloshing around in the system, it's just not going to you. It's despicable.

– Greg Page, New South Wales

The system marks the shift to a more digital-oriented service for employment services in Australia, causing problems for people in internet poverty, those without access to devices, people who are not confident with online systems, and disabled people who have barriers to using technologies.

It was designed to shift people deemed more employable online to self-manage their "mutual" obligations. This was to relieve overburdened and undertrained job agency caseworkers, who ostensibly now dedicate their time to providing more intensive face-to-face "support" to people with higher barriers to employment. In practice, the reports we receive from people in the system indicate they have experienced no change in the transition from jobactive to Workforce Australia – appointments continue to be just a few minutes in many cases and there are people still forced to come into a job agency to be surveilled while they conduct pointless job search activities.

All of these activities waste our time and energy and come with costs we cannot afford.



The appointments are super humiliating. I've had to wait in line for 85 mins for a two minute appointment. Job agencies are a complete waste of time.

– anonymous contributor 224, Western Australia

The other major change introduced in Workforce Australia was supposed to create flexibility, replacing rigid and redundant ‘job plans’ with a Points-Based Activation System, commonly referred to as PBAS.¹²

Under jobactive, a person had a ‘job plan’ that was not a plan, but merely a contract listing activities a person was expected to complete each month in return for a Centrelink payment. The system generally meant the default activity was lodging evidence of 20 job applications a month whilst also completing other activities like paid work, education, training and Work for the Dole.

Workforce Australia gamifies the system, with a person required to collect points for these same activities. Regardless of the number of points logged through paid employment, Work for the Dole, training and other activities, it is still a minimum requirement to apply for at least four jobs per month.

The points a person receives vary. For example, a job application scores five points, as does five hours paid employment. Even completing 100 hours of free labour per month in Work for the Dole does not meet the points target, earning only 80 points out of the standard 100-point requirement.

People who have a paid job or are studying full-time are still required to attend appointments and apply for jobs. Many people have reported to the Antipoverty Centre that their full-time study, which employment minister Tony Burke said should mean they don’t have to apply for jobs to meet monthly activity requirements,¹³ is not being counted at all.

In the first 7 months of operation, with more than 500,000 people* on the Workforce Australia caseload since the program began in July 2022, providers recorded 1,670 outcomes where a person had been in work or study for 6 months (as of 31 January 2023).¹⁴ Providers can claim outcomes even if they did not assist someone in finding their job.

...ending the punitive regime would affect the profitability of the \$7.1 billion network of private providers, the government says. – The Saturday Paper¹⁵

“MUTUAL” OBLIGATIONS

First conceived under a different name by the Hawke government in the late 1980s, “mutual” obligations began with the introduction of mandatory training programs for people after they had received a welfare payment for a certain period.

They have evolved to become 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. The rules that govern these requirements are embedded in legislation, legislative instruments, opaque departmental policies and agreements between providers and the department that are not open to scrutiny.

* Excludes people self-managing in Workforce Australia online services.

Through our work advocating for individuals in this system, and the peer support done by the Australian Unemployed Workers' Union through their helpline, we know this complexity and secrecy means it is extremely difficult for people to advocate for themselves when treated unfairly or harmfully. The result is that individuals are beholden to unqualified caseworkers who change frequently and are known to punish people they deem not pliable or submissive enough.

Many people are unaware that they have any rights, limited as those are. The system so thoroughly disempowers and demoralises people that they often do not see any point in reaching out to advocacy organisations or community legal centres for support. Because people do not see any point in lodging a complaint, the department's figures significantly under-report the scale of problems in the system. Those who do complain are automatically referred back to their provider, to initiate a complaint process with their abuser, as a matter of protocol. After trying to resolve the issue with a provider and then successfully lodging a complaint with the department, you do not receive any report or outcome of action taken – complaints are put in a black box, with the lack of transparency further contributing to demoralisation.

Job applications without purpose

The most common “mutual” obligations activity is applying for jobs. For those who Centrelink decides have no barriers to work, the requirement equates to about 20 jobs a month. For those with primary caring responsibilities and disabilities, it can be lower. However, people in the system generally have to fight for their right to a lower requirement.

Limitless in-person meetings without purpose

Most people are forced to attend one in-person appointment with a job agency caseworker each month, even if they have disabilities or other reasons why it is difficult or unsafe for them to leave the house. The rules allow providers to conduct these appointments over the phone, however they also have complete power to reject a person's request for phone appointments.



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.

– Grey, Victoria

There is no rule to limit the number of times a provider can force someone to attend their premises – they have discretion and there is no recourse for people to stop this abuse. Workforce Australia is much more flexible than its predecessor, but more for the providers, less for the people compelled to participate in it.

Pressured into Work for the Dole without consideration of other responsibilities

After six months with a provider, people must complete a 'Six Month Activation Requirement' (SMAR). Work for the Dole is the default mandatory activity, however training, paid work or study may also be accepted by the provider. Under jobactive, the Work for the Dole phase began after 12 months and lasted 6 months. Under Workforce Australia, this time was reduced to 6 months and 2 months of work, churning people through the system more quickly.

Penalties for non-compliance

The penalty system is divided into three phases; 'green zone' with no recorded demerits, 'warning zone' between one and three demerits, and the 'penalty zone' with a 50% reduction in your payment for the fourth demerit and 100% for the fifth – a further penalty you receive is a non-payment period of 4 weeks, during which you cannot reapply for a payment with Centrelink.

To have your demerit removed, you must challenge the decision of the job agency who imposed it on you, largely leaving it up to their discretion to keep it or remove it. If you disagree with their decision, you can challenge it with the department, but it isn't



I have had to push myself harder with my job than was helpful partly as a result of the pressure to meet my work requirement. I have injured myself more than once as a result. If I work under 15 hours, I'm afraid of the consequences from Centrelink and especially the punishing mutual obligations. 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

clear how often this occurs or the success rate, because the department's policy is to deflect complaints to the job agencies.*

Data to March 2023 shows 20% of people (18,815) in online services had a demerit compared to 39% of people (110,130) in face-to-face services. Of 1,480 people in the penalty zone, 490 are First Nations, 325 have a disability and 150 are parents.¹⁶

Tweaking around the edges will not solve the problem

“Mutual” obligations should not be conflated with employment services, although they are currently enforced by the privatised providers who run the system. It makes no difference to a person struggling to live in poverty whether the unemployment cop who holds the power to cut off our income is employed by these providers or a public servant. Compulsory activities are the root of all harms caused by the employment services system.

There is no version of “mutual” obligations that isn’t degrading. There is no version of “mutual” obligations that isn’t intrusive. There is no version of “mutual” obligations that isn’t controlling. There is no version of “mutual” obligations that doesn’t threaten starvation.



To summarise: 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. I used to work full time. Thanks to mutual obligations, I might never work again. Centrelink is a system designed from the ground up to create slaves without calling it slavery.

– anonymous contributor 314, Victoria

* Despite the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations saying people should provide feedback and complaints directly to DEWR, the protocol is to refer complaints back to the job agency in the first instance. Deed arrangements require providers to have policies in place to support this function. In cases of bullying, people are to lodge a complaint directly with their bully. See: DEWR [Workforce Australia Guidelines – Part B, Workforce Australia Services](#); and ‘Chapter 9: Complaints and appeals’ in the [Jobactive: failing those it is intended to serve](#) senate inquiry report.



[My provider was] absolute dogshit, they were entirely just using me as a money making tool and to check boxes for how many people are being put through Work For the Dole. I was rendered burnt out by the work for the dole program and had no support available. It made me feel crushed knowing that I'm working full time hours for less than 10 dollars per hour. We can afford to feed anyone who can't afford it, why are you making people do indentured servitude? At least up their pay to minimum wage.

– Lili, Western Australia

PRIVATISED EMPLOYMENT SERVICES

Employment services should not be conflated with the network of providers currently paid billions in public money to deliver little of value. We aspire to dismantle this system, but we do not want a void in its place. While many people who are forced to engage with employment services to comply with “mutual” obligations do not need any assistance getting a job, there are others who want genuine support. Our vision is for a fully voluntary, high quality, publicly delivered employment service that responds to the needs of the people who use it.

Employment services providers are the current overseers of our torment, theoretically providing services to support people, but ultimately driven by the perverse incentives of a confected quasi-market and compulsory engagement.* Private providers as they exist now and their harmful effects are the inevitable result of a system that has no reason to exist other than a desire to control and punish people who rely on the welfare system for support.

Decades of contracts have delivered tens of billions of dollars to politically connected organisations. The market is getting smaller and is now enriching providers to the tune of \$4 billion a year in public funds.¹⁷ They are so dependent on public money that if the funding were to cease, many would collapse entirely or dramatically shrink. The desire for provider viability seems to have greater influence on politicians than the evidence or the views of people forced to use these services.

Workforce Australia providers often also operate in the Disability Employment Services program. DES is an alternative to the mainstream program and 77.5% of people in it receive an unemployment payment – only 10.8% are on the Disability Support Pension. According to Department of Employment and Workplace Relations data, more than 183,000 disabled people are in the mainstream program.¹⁸ Many are moved between the two systems without explanation.

DES is supposed to provide more specialised support for people with disability, however, in practice it can be even more exploitative, and most people in DES have basically the same experience as in Workforce Australia.

* A quasi-market is created when a government outsources public services. In theory, replacing direct public sector provision with competing private organisations is intended to give the users of a system choice and improve service quality while reducing costs.

SPOTLIGHT ON AIMBIG

Like APM, AimBig has been rewarded with Workforce Australia contracts despite a track record of harm in Disability Employment Services.²⁶

2 out of 5	AimBig score from ratings submitted to the AUWU app by people in employment services
\$49.9 million	Value of current published employment services contracts ²⁷
\$0–100 million	The company does not publish annual reports, but CEO Marcella Romero won a CEO Magazine award in this turnover category ²⁸
\$1.3 million	Value of public funds received by AimBig for the one-year Busy Beans program. There were 205 people in the program in total. ²⁹

AimBig stands out as the only employment services provider to be put under the microscope by the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability (DRC), which held 3 days of hearings into parent company Arriba Group in February 2022. The hearing focused on the abuse experienced by a participant in the “Busy Beans” program, and how Arriba Group’s corporate structure and employment programs were carefully calibrated to extract maximum profit from people on the AimBig caseload.

The Busy Beans program took advantage of employment services outcome payments, rules that allow providers to employ people on their caseload and refer them to programs in related entities, government wage subsidies, grants and labour hire practices to generate \$1.3 million in income to provide unaccredited “training” to 205 people on inappropriate equipment in an unsafe environment.³⁰

Mzia told the royal commission the experience had left her with a “broken heart” and a “broken life”³¹

Two months after the devastating DRC evidence exposed AimBig’s mistreatment, exploitation and profiteering from disabled people, they were awarded a \$21.7 million Workforce Australia contract.³²

Visit punishmentforprofit.org for more information and stories about people’s experiences with AimBig.



AimBig bribed me into leaving my DES provider at the time by advertising jobs on SEEK, which I applied for, and then contacting me and claiming I would get the job if I switched over to them as my DES provider. I was reluctant, but I really wanted the job as it was ideal for my skill set and worked well with my disability and circumstances. Once the switch was made I didn’t get the job (or even make it to an interview). Things rapidly declined from there... every 2 weeks they’d ignore or forget my medical needs, then falsely claim I had missed an appointment, and threaten to cancel my payment.

– anonymous contributor 314, Victoria



It's so easy to give up, every time I think about the maze I'm trapped in I get depressed 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]. Increase the benefit... Payments are hard but I'm lucky as I own my own home.

– Deidre, South Australia

WORK FOR THE DOLE

Work for the Dole, a program that forces unemployed people living in poverty to provide free labour to government and non-profit organisations to receive their welfare payment, was trialled and introduced under the Howard government in 1997.

In 2016, the program killed Josh-Park Fing, an 18-year-old from Toowoomba.* It continues unchanged since his death.

The standard requirement is 25 hours of work per week. The work can include physical labour like maintenance work at graveyards and showgrounds, through to pointless busywork like sweeping floors at op shop warehouses or threading beads onto string to be sent to low income countries and sold to tourists to benefit charities. For 25 hours, participants receive a \$10 a week travel allowance – a figure that has not increased since the program was introduced in the 90s.

Originally established for people between the ages of 18-34 years who were unemployed for a year, Work for the Dole was expanded to people up to 39 years of age and voluntary for people aged 40-45 – the increase of the age limit conveniently timed with the 2000 Sydney Olympics, an event that relies on “volunteers”. The program has a parallel for people in older age brackets, that is not called Work for the Dole, but operates in a similar way. There is a lower requirement of 15 hours per week and the work is less likely to be physical labour.

While funding for Work for the Dole decreased and the program was not relied on under the Rudd and Gillard governments, in the wake of the Global Financial Crisis the program was expanded again under Tony Abbott. It remains a staple program to this day, with large charities like the Salvation Army, who also runs employment services, being the biggest users of Work for the Dole.¹⁹

* Read more about Josh and his death at awftd.org.



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.

– Amber, Queensland

THE UNDER-REPORTED HUMAN COST

A huge number of responses to our survey and workshops detailed the harm suffered by individuals as a result of the way the system operates. While the activities people are forced to do vary from person to person, the current employment services system incentivises providers to take a one-size-fits-all approach, despite the department's claims that the system is “flexible” and takes into account people's circumstances, background and education.²⁰

In reality, employment services are rarely the reason people leave the welfare system. The vast majority of people with “mutual” obligations find their own job.* Reports of people dropping out of the income support system, or not entering it at all, are v common and no one knows exactly why: whether they have paid work, money or have simply given up, because it is not researched or recorded.²¹



My experience with them was okay but I think it was because the woman I had was nice. Once she left it started going rapidly downhill and I was pressured to apply and made to feel guilty to try and get higher paying work. They told me to take my Masters out of my CV because it 'intimidated' people. [At Work for the Dole] we were told to do 'market research' and what really happened is we sat in a room and browsed facebook sites uselessly all day. They made me come in even when sick. I was told I didn't attend appointments before the appointment was even meant to go on. Absolute debacle.

– anonymous contributor 27, Victoria

* When surveyed, 92.8% of 111 employed people reported to Antipoverty Centre they had found their own job. A government-commissioned report found in 2018 only 4% of employers used employment services, down from 18% in 2007. See: Department of Jobs and Small Business *“I want to work”, Employment Services 2020 Report.*

SPOTLIGHT ON SALVOS EMPLOYMENT PLUS



Have to start work for the dole soon, and their only option is to work at Salvos shops. They're the Salvos agency, so seems suss as fuck.

- anonymous contributor 147, Victoria

In addition to employment services, the billion-dollar organisation provides aged care, disability and homelessness services on behalf of the government. It funds charitable work while earning income from programs that inflict harm on people living in poverty.³³

The Salvation Army has been a beneficiary of governments devolving responsibility for the welfare of people in poverty to third parties. It is one of the largest non-profits running human services programs, with operations spanning aged care, disability, housing, education, training and disaster response.

Salvos was formed in the industrial revolution to evangelise the poor through relief programs.³⁴

Today, as advocates we receive regular reports of people experiencing discrimination because of their gender, sexuality or disability when forced to engage with Salvos and other religious organisations to fulfil "mutual" obligations. And of course, there are countless examples of the more common forms of bullying and abuse experienced by people at the hands of employment services providers.³⁵

Employment services have been a valuable cash cow for the charity, which has the fourth largest Workforce Australia caseload of around 50,000 people a year.³⁶



348 Salvos stores locations
throughout Australia.

Generated back **\$18 million+ profit**
from Salvos stores into the
Salvation Army programs

They are the only large job agency that also operates a large number of Work for the Dole sites – 25% of all sites are operated by Salvos.³⁷ By our calculations, without the forced unpaid labour of thousands of people in poverty Salvos stores would run at a loss.³⁸

2.03 out of 5	Salvos score from ratings submitted to the AUWU app by people in employment services
57%	Proportion of Salvos revenue from government sources. ³⁹
\$212 million	Value of current published employment services contracts. ⁴⁰
\$974 million	FY22 revenue. ⁴¹
\$18 million	FY22 profit from 348 Salvos stores. As of January 2022, 287 Salvos sites were using forced unpaid labour through Work for the Dole. ⁴²

Visit punishmentforprofit.org for more information and stories about people's experiences with Salvos Employment Plus.



I was told I would be doing “retail” training at Salvation Army. I was actually told to move furniture around. I slipped a disc in my back and have had serious back issues ever since. The job agency I was tied to swept it under the table, it was never logged as an accident with anyone.

– anonymous contributor 227, New South Wales



Australians invented Wifi, refrigeration, power boards, and are the forerunners in quantum computing. Imagine how much better this country would be if you didn't force jobseekers to piss away their time and employers time trying to accomplish the mathematically impossible.

– anonymous contributor 314, Victoria

Legislated review of Workforce Australia

When the bill that enabled Workforce Australia to be established passed parliament, it included a requirement for a parliamentary review of the system. Labor established the House Select Committee on Workforce Australia Employment Services, which is due to report in November 2023.

This is despite a comprehensive senate inquiry that published a report in 2019 exposing the inherent flaws in the “mutual” obligations system, damaging and robbing providers, and perverse rules and incentives that were carried over into Workforce Australia.²²

The current inquiry has published an interim report on ParentsNext, a program born during the Abbott era targeting parents with children under six.²³ The Antipoverty Centre joined other advocates in welcoming the report's call to abolish the program – the culmination of years of work by grassroots activists like Ella Buckland and advocacy groups like Single Mother Families Australia and the Council of Single Mothers and Their Children Victoria. But beneath the recommendation to abolish ParentsNext is worrying fine print. Despite overwhelming evidence of harm, the “first principles” review concludes “mutual” obligations should continue.

The recommendations also say profit motives should be removed, but the report does not explain how this will improve the system, given the large number of non-profit providers already contributing to harm.

Individuals punished for structural problems

Through surveying hundreds of people in employment services, we have found consistent and widespread patterns of abuse and failure, which is supported by countless media reports and the outcomes of multiple parliamentary inquiries.²⁴

As has been the case for decades, it's the people who need help being blamed for our circumstances, despite the many factors over which we have little to no control that dictate our lives.



Australians are deliberately kept on below poverty payments as an economic management strategy. Abolish Mutual Obligations. There is plenty of research to show they obstruct and impede people's ability to find and secure employment. [Have] small hubs attached to Centrelink for people who need support and help to get into the workforce, but these must be voluntary. Raise jobseeker payments to a liveable amount.

– anonymous contributor 52, New South Wales

Government 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 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.

WHO IS ON THE WORKFORCE AUSTRALIA CASELOAD?²⁵

nb: Categories are not mutually exclusive. Some individuals are counted in more than one group. Partial capacity to work is a Centrelink designation based on medical evidence of a person's disability or chronic illness. Data is not collected on the number of people who provide full-time care to adults.

453,725	100%	Total people assigned to a Workforce Australia provider
71,635	15.8%	First Nations people
155,420	34.3%	People with disability
89,285	19.7%	Culturally and linguistically diverse
24,250	5.3%	Refugees
90,685	20.0%	Parents
111,735	25.9%	People with partial capacity to work
124,415	27.4%	People who already have a paid job

SPOTLIGHT ON APM

A for-profit employment services provider, APM is politically connected, with a high profile board, and was richly rewarded with Workforce Australia contracts.

A number of our survey and workshop participants reported instances of abuse and mistreatment when dealing with APM. In our experience, they are one of the providers we have to support people with the most.

In Australia the majority of APM's \$645 million 2022 revenue came from public funds via government human services contracts.⁴³

Emails revealed under freedom of information show APM aggressively lobbied the government for financial support to employment services ahead of 2020 COVID lockdowns.⁴⁴ Employment minister Michaelia Cash handed over an extra \$500 million to the industry in the first year of the pandemic.⁴⁵

APM is now by far the largest employment services provider, having been awarded 17.8% of 129 licenses.⁴⁶ Its current employment services contracts are worth nearly \$800 million and it's one of only two providers whose contracts span eight of 11 employment services programs. APM has now wrung more than \$1 billion out of the poverty industry just through employment services contracts alone since it first began operating in the sector 8 years ago.⁴⁷

1.93 out of 5	APM score from 62 ratings submitted to the AUWU app by people in employment services
\$701,838	Political donations since 2011. The Coalition received \$334,433 and Labor \$385,315. ⁴⁸
\$787 million	Value of current published employment services contracts. ⁴⁹
\$644.9 million	FY22 revenue in Australia. Global revenue was \$1.33 billion. \$940 million was from employment services. ⁵⁰
\$4.53 million	FY22 remuneration of CEO Michael Anghie. APM founder Megan Wynne received a salary of \$750,000 and performance bonus of \$487,500. ⁵¹



The latest harrowing story to appear in the media 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.⁵²

96% of people who listed APM as their provider in a recent Antipoverty Centre survey said they were unable to access support through their job agency that helped to improve their physical or mental health, and 92% said "mutual" obligations made their health worse.

Unsurprisingly, only one person with APM who responded to the survey had found a job with the help of their job agency.

Visit punishmentforprofit.org for more information and stories about people's experiences with APM.



They are truly just awful. They aren't interested in getting you a job at all. It's a humiliating, degrading and I hated every interaction I had with them.

*- anonymous contributor 224,
Western Australia*

Even during times of low unemployment, there are many reasons it's not easy to "just get a job", as we're told to do.

Available jobs don't usually map to the skills, experience and location of people who don't have one. We can't just get a job if there are no jobs where we live. And not only is it practically impossible to cover relocation costs when relying on income support, many people rely on formal and informal supports where they live. Regardless, no one should be compelled to leave their community.

Many people who rely on Centrelink have caring duties, whether for children or for adults. For those carers who do have some time available to work, it is hard to find an employer who will accommodate the hours a person can do. Employer discrimination and inflexible jobs take away opportunities for carers.

"Mutual" obligations are the punishments doled out to many of us who are in a poverty trap as a result of being too poor to eat well, get healthcare, get clothes, have housing, access education, pay for transport and anything else that might help us feel better equipped to get a job.



Poverty is killing me. I can't do it anymore. I've just spent five days on antibiotics to fight another infection. In November I was diagnosed with scurvy and malnutrition. My body can't continually take these infections on the low rate of JobSeeker. Once I buy what I need to treat [my disability] I'm left with maybe \$70 a fortnight for food. That does not cover anything. I'm an artist. I spent from age 12 to 34 caring for my disabled mum. In six years [since then], I've been given no real help. I've just been told, "Come in, tick boxes". My doctors are at a loss. They don't know what to do anymore because they said, "We can tell you what you should be eating but if you can't afford it, there's not much we can do." During the COVID supplement I joined the gym. I was eating properly. I was getting healthy. So I was work ready. Then that stopped and now my health has just collapsed.

– Mel Fisher, South Australia

STARVATION
SUCKS

BARRIERS TO CHANGE



Barriers to change

Myths and ideology

The decimation of the welfare state has been a decades-long project undertaken by the same people who benefited from it. Those reaching adulthood in the 1970s and 1980s had equitable access to education, a more adequate and expanding safety net and were able to enter a housing market on the verge of a revolution that would see their personal fortunes explode.

Those of us who missed the boat are being punished for forces far beyond our control. Failed policies built on vibes and prejudice are now viewed as elemental to the welfare system.

The parliamentary inquiry into Workforce Australia has provided insight into the minds behind employment services policy. “Welfare dependency” has been a recurring theme, exposing how deeply the debunked concept is still embedded in bureaucrats’ decisions and their advice to portfolioholders.

Throughout the 1990s the “dole bludger” – a myth conveying the image of surfers too lazy to get a job – was recast as a “welfare dependent”. This was not an accident.

The concept of “welfare dependency” was created to argue that poverty isn’t a lack of money, but a state of learned helplessness that requires activation policies like “mutual” obligations as a response. It underpins the paternalistic attitudes that justify forced labour programs like Work for the Dole, push single parents and disabled people into unsuitable paid work and myriad punitive policy choices inflicted on people in poverty.

We’re to believe those who peddle the myth of welfare dependency don’t hate the poor, but just want the best for us – and like Victorian-era paupers, we cannot be permitted to sit on our hands. The brutal privatised employment services system we endure today emerged from work tests introduced in the Hawke-Keating era to coincide with the erosion of the Commonwealth Employment Service, which was then fully dismantled by Howard.

By the Rudd-Gillard era “welfare dependency” was embedded in the psyche of policymakers. Dramatic eligibility changes for disability payments have led to hundreds of thousands of disabled people struggling to survive on JobSeeker long-term.

With this level of cruelty baked into the system by the advent of Abbott, it shouldn’t come as a surprise that leaders of today feel secure in continuing it.

The self-designated adults in charge now preach the virtues of social mobility afforded to them by the systems they participated in dismantling. They use their own examples of success as evidence they are competent managers who can be trusted with those difficult decisions about the lives of the poor.

SPOTLIGHT ON SARINA RUSSO JOB ACCESS

Like most providers, Sarina Russo Job Access refers people from their employment services caseload to related entities to maximise profits from the perverse payment incentives offered by government.

1.97 out of 5	Sarina Russo Job Access score from ratings submitted to the AUWU app by people in employment services
\$602,648	Political donations since 1999. The Coalition received \$357,660 and Labor \$244,988. ⁵⁸
\$1.07 billion	The amount that Sarina Russo entities have received in government contracts in the last decade. ⁵⁹
\$267 million	Sarina Russo's personal wealth reported in 2022. ⁶⁰

The Founder and Managing Director, Sarina Russo, is probably the most high profile player in employment services and refers to herself as a “jobs queen”.⁶¹ She has active social media accounts where she offers life advice, personal insights, and shares selfies with politicians.⁶² In one video, she encourages unemployed people, from a boat in Cannes, “to dream big” and that she’ll see them “at the top”.⁶³



They push you to take near-worthless Cert 3 courses through their own institute. I had multiple phone calls from SR while mutual obligations were suspended telling me that I’d be breached if I didn’t take one of their courses, when pointing out that I wasn’t obliged to and I’d already done the only relevant one -- oh, well just do one of the other ones then, it doesn’t matter.

– anonymous contributor 297, Queensland

The pointlessness of these courses has always been obvious to the people pushed into them.

Visit punishmentforprofit.org for more information and stories about people’s experiences with Sarina Russo Job Access.

“Too big to fail” – the growing influence of providers

Groups with close political ties are dominating the employment services market and have branched out into other government service contracts where they're able to monopolise the emerging private welfare servicing industry, which has rapidly expanded under the National Disability Insurance Scheme.

...ending the punitive regime would affect the profitability of the \$7.1 billion network of private providers, the government says. – The Saturday Paper ⁵³

Workforce Australia presented the government with many opportunities to remove perverse incentives, and initially the department indicated fees would be structured quite differently to jobactive. They were set to adopt a key proposal from the Antipoverty Centre and other advocates to ban referrals to related entities, but this was dropped in response to pushback from providers.⁵⁴

The new employment services system was intended to address the issue of ‘creaming’ and ‘parking’ that incentivised providers to make money from people they deemed more employable – or in some cases already in employment – and provide bare-minimum services to those considered less employable.⁵⁵ The idea was that providers could better help long-term unemployed people if they had reduced caseloads.

Another last minute change to Workforce Australia included the expansion of criteria that would determine who would be placed in face-to-face services, meaning that a higher number of people than forecast – those who would be otherwise have been designated as needing less support under the criteria proposed at the time – were transferred to employment services providers rather than the online system. These changes, which included the removal of the hybrid model that would see some people use a combination of online and face-to-face services, were lobbied for by the industry but not supported by advocates.⁵⁶ We saw this lobbying most aggressively through our participation in departmental stakeholder briefings in the lead-up to the Workforce Australia implementation.

Employment services players who attend major party events and donate large amounts to political parties have more access and better opportunity to influence than those living in poverty. Politicians engage with providers far more readily than people in employment services and actively exclude grassroots advocacy organisations. The head of the National Employment Services Association was invited to the Jobs and Skills Summit, while organisations representing unemployed people were completely excluded, a gap highlighted by the Australian Council of Social Services.

We need processes that meaningfully include people directly affected – experts by experience – and ensure their voices are at the centre of policy debate and development. – Edwina MacDonald, ACOSS Acting CEO ⁵⁷

A large group of people, mostly wearing face masks, are gathered on a grassy lawn for a protest. They are holding various handmade signs. Some of the visible text on the signs includes: "7 BILLION IN CONTRACTS TO TORTURE THE POOR", "ABOLISH 'MUTUAL' OBLIGATIONS", "BLOOD ON YOUR HANDS AMANDA", "RAISE THE RA", "BLOOD ON YOUR HANDS AMANDA #BTPM", "ABOLISH 'MUTUAL' OBLIGATIONS", "BLOOD ON YOUR HANDS AMANDA", "RAISE THE RA", "BLOOD ON YOUR HANDS AMANDA", "RAISE THE RA", "BLOOD ON YOUR HANDS AMANDA", "RAISE THE RA". A large red outline of the number "07" is overlaid on the bottom right of the image.

Vision for a genuinely supportive employment service

The discussion of policy responses to poverty in contemporary Australia has generally been characterised by a lack of courage and ambition.

This harm and waste has continued too long.

Employment services can only help people who aren't poor. In 2020, when JobSeeker was increased to the Henderson poverty line, people reported being better able to prepare for a job, find a job and keep a job.

"Mutual" obligations must be scrapped and employment services taken out of the hands of private providers.

Our vision is for voluntary, public sector employment services that enable locally determined employment programs and responses to unemployment, along with access to high quality complementary services and programs.

We are working to replace compulsory, punitive employment services with responsive, community-led, voluntary employment programs focused on projects for the public good that operate as part of an integrated ecosystem of social supports underpinned by liveable social security payments.



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. It's only a matter of time before someone will take their Life because of their bullying.

– Luke Filby, New South Wales

Designed by experts

The Antipoverty Centre exists to challenge conventional notions of how to approach policies affecting unemployed and low income people on the basis that those living in poverty are the real experts in our lives. “Nothing about us without us” is the fundamental tenet of our work.

Programs to support people in poverty should be designed by us, as we’re the ones who know what we need. This is in contrast to norms that treat us as objects to be studied rather than people with agency, intelligence and the capacity to lead.

Employment services designed by people who do not use them will never meet our needs.

All activities related to welfare policy development and advocacy must place low income people in a position of leadership. Those worst affected by harmful government welfare policies, including low payment rates, restrictive eligibility criteria, administrative burden and punitive “mutual” obligations, are the most important voices to be heard. The Antipoverty Centre has developed models for putting this into practice that go beyond current approaches to consultation, codesign and the lip service paid to “lived experience”.

There are significant barriers to participating in this work when struggling to survive in poverty and keeping up with “mutual” obligations. These are often cited as reasons the serious business of policy development must be left to our betters – those who make their living talking about and down to us.

We do not accept that there are no alternatives to the status quo. When conventions produce a broken system it is time to break convention. Processes must be accessible and open to all on an equal footing, regardless of income, location, disability or other circumstances. Governments and advocates alike must see it as their responsibility to provide the necessary resources and supports for welfare recipients to be involved in the processes that dictate our lives. Those interested in policy development and advocacy must be given opportunities to build capacity in these areas. Contributions and expertise must be valued and fairly paid.

By putting these principles into practice, including through the development of this report, the Antipoverty Centre has aided people in poverty to gain a deeper appreciation for their own knowledge and expertise, demonstrating our individual and collective potential. We call on policymakers to do the same.

If you treat us like human beings instead of numbers, if you give us enough money to live on, most of us will be able to find suitable employment. We deserve compassion, empathy and understanding.

– Tenisha Coates, Queensland

Help us make the change we need

The community must stand up and tell the government they reject the notion that people who rely on welfare to live must have our lives dictated by compulsory activities. Grassroots groups, charities and social services organisations must reject paternalism and join us in demanding that our dignity and agency be restored.

We put forward this information and these proposals to shift public opinion and provide a compelling resource that will enable supporters to join us in advocating for positive change.

While the Prime Minister has admitted that employment services aren't working and that the system is about ticking boxes rather than providing support, there are still indications of continuing business as usual.⁶⁴ It's vital that the current Labor government takes the opportunity to genuinely listen to people with expertise of the system, and finally implement a public system that supports people, not corporate profit.

Unemployed people for the longest while have been calling for a better, supportive system that centres us and leads to real change. People stuck in employment services who cycle through the system aren't doing so by choice – it's a failure of our economy and society.

Unemployment and poverty are products of government policy and unemployed people are being punished for this policy choice despite it being beyond our control. This punishment is not only unnecessary, it is perverse.

The employment services system is harming both the people subjected to it and the job agency caseworkers who enforce the punitive rules lest they find themselves on the other side of the job agency desk – meanwhile politicians and high paid executives engage in paternalism that enriches the people in charge of the private organisations who hold us to ransom.

The second I was able to leave the system my mental health improved so much... nothing will make you feel so low and unworthy as being forced to apply to jobs you're not suited for to meet the requirements of an agency that just wants to get paid by the government. 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

“Mutual” obligations don’t lead to jobs and people dislike all aspects of it. It is rare to have an understanding and supportive case worker who at least recognises the pointlessness of the activities.

Words mean nothing without action, it is time to let the people who need the support decide the support.

The harm caused to people forced to engage with employment services starts with compulsory “mutual” obligations and ends with privatised providers. By ending it once and for all, and re-establishing a system that actually helps people locked out of work we can cut short the growing political influence of these private organisations and ultimately serve the people the system is supposed to be for instead.

We call for a new vision of employment services, a public service based on the principle that people who want support should be able to get it, and that we have the agency to determine for ourselves whether we need it. We demand that governments, advocates and policy makers centre us and our expertise in designing these systems.



ENDNOTES

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