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Young Australians and economic adversity

By Jennifer Skattebol and Megan Griffiths

The SPRC's *Making a Difference* project explores the perceptions of economically disadvantaged young Australians (aged 11 to 17 years), how they experience economic adversity and may experience exclusion in family, school, neighbourhood and peer domains. Preliminary findings show that many young Australians on low income face significant participation barriers and cannot access activities that others take for granted. For example, Kiuga (all names are changed to ensure confidentiality) – a 14 year old Pacific Islander boy from an area of concentrated disadvantage, told us that the subject he found most engaging (regional sporting events) was not available at his school.

We used to have sport on Wednesdays and verse [local schools in the] region...we had to pay \$100 in the beginning of the year in order to transport by buses to go to schools. But so many kids don't pay their fees that the school stopped it.

It is important to know more about how economic disadvantage constrains participation habits and impacts on the skills and qualifications that support decent living standards – now and in later life. The *Making a Difference*



project is finding that by 15 years of age, some young people's participation habits and learning orientations may already have been adversely affected by repeated experiences of limited access to services, opportunities and supports.

The study is locality based and employs youth-centred methods to investigate young people's experiences of schooling, participation in activities both in and out of school, their money situation, family resources and experiences, neighbourhoods and aspirations. The research is designed to provide an evidence base for more effective policies to support young people by drawing on young people's insights and priorities. It reflects recent developments in poverty research that emphasise the need to capture living standards more directly by engaging with those living at the poverty coalface.

One hundred young Australians in eight metropolitan sites have participated in this study. The sites vary in terms of disadvantage, geography and demography. One

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site is a low-cost housing corridor while others are differently positioned social housing areas or suburbs with high rates of social movement. All participants have been identified as low-income and are either in receipt of income support payments or are from families in low-paid work.

Approximately one-third of the sample are from sole parent families, slightly fewer are single children and one-quarter have three or more siblings. Many of the families have complex family arrangements (see Figure 1). Close to one-half have Anglo heritage, while the others have Aboriginal or Pacifica, Arabic, African and South East Asian heritage.

Complexity of young people's financial contexts

Understanding young people's access to resources and their spheres of inclusion requires more complex data than that offered by household income measures. As Adelman, Middleton and Ashworth (2003: 16) note: 'Income poverty does not tell us what poor children go without that non-poor children do not: how do their lives differ?' We know from UK research that compared to their better-off counterparts, low-income families direct a disproportionate amount of their income towards their children in order to buffer them from deprivation and exclusion (Bennett, 2008). We are finding that Australian families also direct significant resources to children, but that many still cannot meet schooling and other participation costs.

There are considerable differences in the way families structure their finances with respect to young people. Some of those eligible for Youth Allowance receive a high proportion of the payment from their parents for discretionary spending,

"Strong relationships with teachers are pivotal in the transfer of practical knowledge about life options and building a future."

while others receive money from a tightly controlled communal purse for activities that are prioritised at a family level. Kiuga's mother, for example, carefully manages the budget for their family of 10 and all children are able to afford one extracurricular activity (even though they may not be able to access their first choice). His family's pattern of income and expenditure is similar to that of other first-generation migrant families – one (low) wage supplemented with money from income support payments and a variety of non-government streams. Standard outgoings typically include remittances to extended family to maintain broad family cohesion and tithes to faith-based organisations which provide activities for children at additional but reduced costs.

For other young people, access to money for extra or essential goods and services is subject to difficult family relations and changing household structures. Often this means that income levels are unpredictable, depending on who is in the household and on the relationships between family members. This dynamism often limits young people's capacity to predict and manage the resources that are available to them, to set expectations and develop participation habits.

Generating income

Many young people in the study are economically active. They contribute to family resources

through paid work or through domestic labour and care which allows other family members to work. For example, Joe, 15 years, has significant caring responsibilities for his sister who has a disability. His mother works full-time and studies part-time, and his father works six days a week. Both leave for work before 7.30am, and Joe cares for his sister before and after school. Without this contribution his parents would not be able to work. Joe also wants to work, but his caring responsibilities make it difficult.

Most participants are interested in finding paid employment. However, most who are employed are not living in neighbourhoods of concentrated disadvantage. Young people living in these neighbourhoods typically state that there is no work available locally and they cannot afford the bus fares to neighbouring suburbs. In addition, they show relatively limited knowledge of training and employment pathways.

Knowledge about employment processes and access to employment is brokered by family, school and peers. Working families generally have specific knowledge about the steps needed to access paid employment. Some young people, (typically boys) have relatives that actively support financial literacy and other work-based habits, and broker pathways to employment. One Arabic boy (15 years) from a lone-mother household stated:

My uncle, I see him every day, he comes knocking and has a little chat with me, "What are you going to do when you are grown?" I told him I want to become a mechanic, and he told me, "Okay I'll put you in as a mechanic but you have to be working Saturdays and Sundays." I get paid \$40 for working with my uncle at the markets.

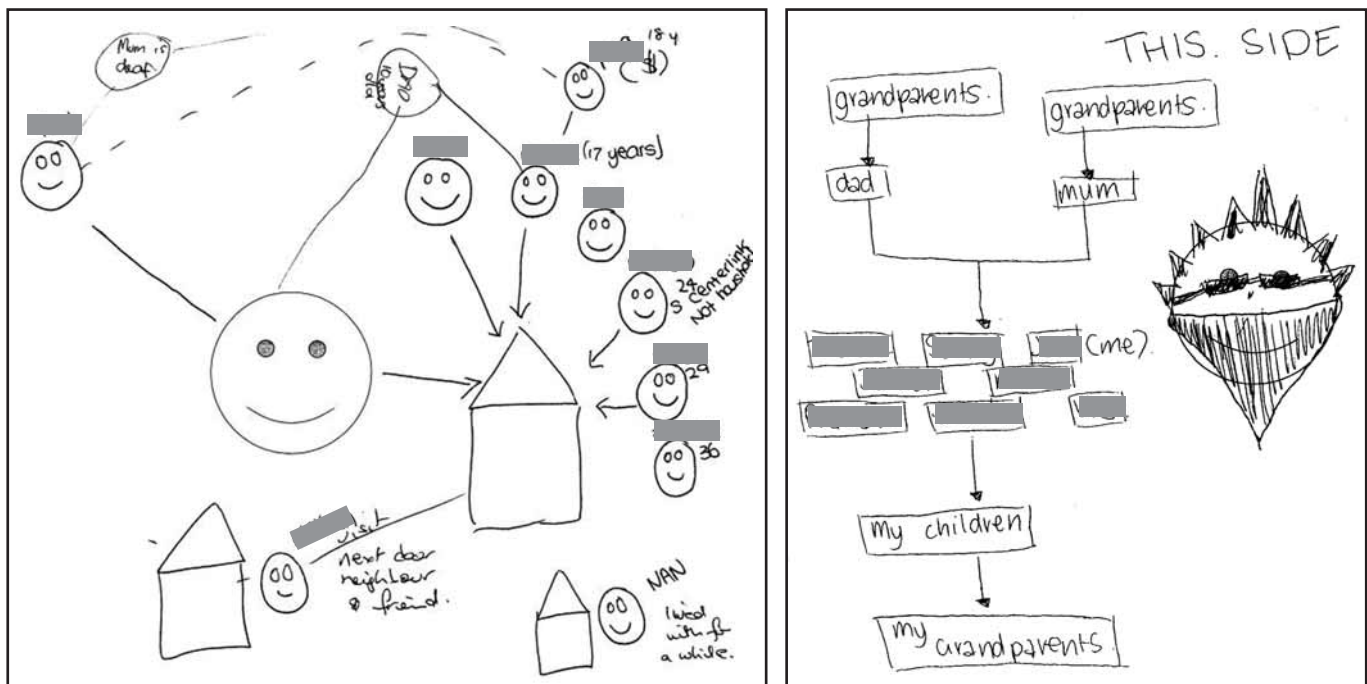


Figure 1: Young people participating in the research were encouraged to draw their social networks, to support discussion on family structures and economic functioning. Bella's (aged 16, Anglo-Australian) drawing shows fragmentation of the nuclear and extended family. Some family members with no lines connecting them are ostracised (left). In contrast, Kiuga's family (right) is depicted in a way that indicates strong cohesion and obligation across generations. Names are blocked out to ensure confidentiality.

Schools play an important role. Many young people look to teachers for guidance, particularly when their families and peer cohorts have little current knowledge about job markets and processes. Strong relationships with teachers are pivotal in the transfer of practical knowledge about life options and building a future. Across the study sites, however, schools vary enormously in the efficacy of support offered to young people. Some study participants appear to have few opportunities for work experience. Others describe rigorous work experience and pastoral care programs that help them to negotiate logistics, develop networks and work habits. Stacey, 16, Anglo-Australian said:

Well I've been looking for a job for a while but I couldn't really find anything and then we had work experience and afterwards, because I was really good, she asked if I'd like a job so I said yes because I needed more money.

Spending

A significant proportion of young people in this study report that they receive regular pocket money. Unlike their better-off counterparts, however, many participants spend their money on necessities such as food, clothing and shoes, rent, bills, school and career development. For example, Rig Master (16, Anglo-Australian girl) has extensively and realistically mapped out her future career, and spends her money on elective subjects that support her goals:

Girls' Health and PE costs a bit, because of having to pay for the contraception [samples] and things to have a look at them, and the PE side of it. We had the [professional football team] come up to our school and we're getting these robotic babies. I mean, they cost a bit. Like, [I can afford it because] I've got a job and Centrelink helps out as well.

Locational disadvantage is apparent in the spending opportunities available. Young

people in neighbourhoods of concentrated disadvantage (like Kiuga) have limited opportunities to spend money on activities, while others in less isolated neighbourhoods could access goods and services, but only if they can afford them. Perhaps most importantly, it is clear that where young people did take up sporting and other neighbourhood-based activities, these activities lead to employment or other forms of participation.

Stigma and economic adversity

The data from the project also shows a locational component to the stigma of being poor. Some young people report being bullied because they do not have items with status in their peer cultures. For example, Bella, 16, Anglo-Australian, said:

You have to have a certain pair of shoes or say, wearing make-up and hair, and just the way they wear their clothes ... or they pick on you.

Youth and poverty

Money allows young people to belong to their generational group (and particular communities within it) through shared consumption patterns. The inability of young people to have the goods to convincingly 'perform' certain looks and social identities means that those with no money often take up outsider positions. While self-exclusion allows them to exercise agency, it can also reinforce a sense of isolation and sediment identities with narrow participation habits. Young people who cannot afford to participate in activities accessible to their peers have often told us they don't *want* to join in. Stacey (15, Anglo-Australian) stated:

I think it's pretty easy [for my family to meet school costs] 'cos I don't pick very expensive subjects. Not the ones I pick, anyway. There's ones that are higher-priced. The sport ones, they're pretty expensive. You go away, and, like year 12 sport – that's pretty expensive. Yeah, and plus I don't go on camps because I don't like them, so that's saved my parents, like, \$1000.

In contrast, many young people in neighbourhoods of concentrated disadvantage reported that there is no goods-related stigma among their peers. Some do, however, talk about stigma of place:

No, you have to stay in your own area, like they say, like, ... where you from ... what the hell are you doing here? And stuff like that. We're all the same [here], all housies, all the same. (Mayfay, 15, Pacific-Islander girl)

Many young people living in concentrated disadvantage have little sense of what is available beyond the (perceived) borders of their neighborhood. As Mayfay described, there are active exclusion processes at work that shore up the opportunity constraints

experienced by those in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Young people who have moved between neighbourhoods of concentrated disadvantage and those that are more mixed, are more aware of the opportunities that exist but also of their own disadvantages.

Conclusion

While child poverty may be declining in Australia when measured according to standard household income, the preliminary results of this project show that a significant number of young Australians are experiencing economic adversity and reduced opportunities. Conventional comparisons of household income are simply incapable of capturing the diverse experiences and multiple factors that shape the social and relational dynamics of young people's lives.

For young people, schools are a key site where exclusion or inclusion can take place. Where there are strong relationships between teachers and students, schools can provide educational guidance and programs that support young people's transition to work or develop their financial literacy. When supported in this way, young people generally held realistic aspirations and were taking effective steps towards work and/or civic engagement. However, these opportunities are not available to all young people, and the capacity of schools to deliver these types of programs in their local areas varies. Further, there seems to be an important role for local government to increase accessibility and provide more affordable participation opportunities for young people.

It is clear that neighbourhood is a key variable, and the focus on locational disadvantage taken by the Federal Government's Social

Inclusion Unit is a hopeful sign that Australian social policy makers are beginning to think about the complex connections between family histories, mobility, neighborhood effects and the process dynamics that create social exclusion. The project will continue in 2010, when analysis will focus on the connections between schools, neighbourhoods and family relationships.

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