

Disrupting attachment and entrenching poverty: the consequences of a dysfunctional safety net

Overview of findings from a survey on the impact of income support policy on single mothers and their children in Victoria

About the survey

The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare (the Centre) surveyed child and family services practitioners working directly with children and families, including single mother families. The findings will help inform a joint presentation by the Centre and FamilyCare at the Australian Social Policy Conference in September.

Some child and family services providers in Victoria have consistently voiced concern about the impacts of income support reforms on single mothers and on the ability of state-funded services to meet their needs; an issue with significant implications for child wellbeing and safety. The survey sought to explore these concerns in more detail.

We received **169 responses** across 15 of the 17 Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) regions, with three from New South Wales.

Findings

Survey respondents

Of those practitioners who responded,

- 96 per cent regularly provide services to single mothers and their children
- 95 per cent reported that 'all' or 'most' of the single mothers they support receive income support payments from Centrelink.

Single mothers' experiences of living on income support

When asked what single mothers have told them about the experience of living on income support, respondents reported the following (in descending order of frequency):

- Financial difficulty and/or difficulty surviving
- Stress, anxiety and a constant struggle and challenge of trying to make ends meet
- Inability to meet family needs
- Housing stress
- Children miss out
- No flexibility to save or meet urgent or unexpected costs
- Difficulty making and managing future plans (due to lack of suitable jobs, balancing caring responsibilities and the situation feeling impossible)
- Difficulty accessing and/or navigating Centrelink
- Challenges are exacerbated by the cost of child care
- Challenges are exacerbated by a lack of child support
- Pressure of meeting compliance requirements
- Cost of living pressures
- Fear of income support suspensions
- Increased difficulty following the switch from Parenting Payment to Newstart
- Living in debt

- Social isolation
- Activity tests interfere with parenting.

It's very difficult to get by. Financial pressures make everything else seem impossible.

Impact of income support suspension on single mothers and their children

Around 63 per cent of respondents indicated that they had worked with one or more single mothers who had experienced an income support payment suspension (30 per cent were unsure).

When asked what single mothers have told them about the impacts of this suspension on their family, respondents reported the following:

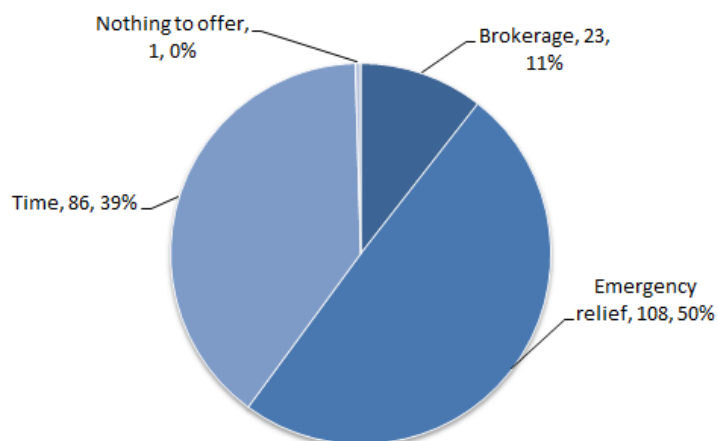
- Increased financial hardship and/or crisis
- Inability to meet the basic needs of the family (such as children going without food)
- Increased stress, distress and/or confusion
- Increased risk of homelessness (such as inability to pay rent)
- Children miss out (on school, activities, etc.)
- Adverse impacts on mental health, coping and self-worth
- Impacts of the additional time needed to resolve the issue
- Increase in debt
- Direct impacts on parenting
- Increased risk of family violence.

They have had to prioritise buying food for the family, cannot pay their rent and other payments, which results in them falling further behind financially. There have been instances of mothers and their children being threatened with homelessness, if they do not pay their rent.

Responding to suspensions

Responses used by service providers to help single mothers manage their family's day-to-day needs while suspended from income support included:

- Emergency relief (including provision of material aid, food and petrol vouchers, payment of rent and referrals to food banks)
- Time (including individual advocacy, emotional support, referrals and financial counselling)
- Use of brokerage and other funds (including use of flexible funds, securing family violence and other funding packages and grants).



Fifteen per cent of respondents were aware of a family or families who had **opted out of the income support system** without securing another means of income due to administrative barriers or compliance requirements.

Seventy-nine per cent of respondents indicated that single mothers **seek support from their service because of financial need** 'all the time' or 'regularly'.

Changes over time experienced by single mothers

When asked about changes over time in relation to the challenges or complexities experienced by single mothers, respondents reported:

- Higher costs of living, especially rent, while income support payments have stayed the same
- Increased complexity of challenges
- Increased difficulty meeting the needs of themselves and their children
- Increased pressure to find work and lack of flexible/suitable jobs available
- Increased difficulty accessing and affording child care
- Increased demands around reporting and compliance requirements
- Increased incidents of and presentations to services relating to family violence (including adolescent family violence), homelessness and mental health
- Impacts of the shift from Parenting Payment Single to Newstart and the decrease in the age of children before parents are required to find work
- Higher levels of stress
- Increased difficulty accessing, navigating and securing support from Centrelink
- Services are overwhelmed, lack of service availability or lack of sustained interventions
- Increased debt and barriers created by debt
- Discrimination in relation to applying for housing and employment
- Increased expectations around technological and language competence to access support
- Increased education-related costs (e.g. need for home internet)
- There are more single mothers
- Devaluing of the caring role and parents being blamed for social issues
- Cultural challenges
- Parents have a welfare mentality.

I think the degree of challenges and complexity has increased. Given increase cost of living/housing, it is easier to become trapped in the income support payments.

Ability of service providers to meet need

Forty-five per cent of respondents reported **noticeable changes** in the ability of their service to meet the needs of single mothers and their children. Sixty respondents provided details about the nature of these changes, with responses including:

- Funding challenges/shortages
- Unable to meet the material needs of families
- Operating at or above capacity, or in a crisis-driven environment
- Time-limited supports
- Connected services unable to offer support due to capacity
- Difficulty in working holistically when families don't have the basic resources they need to survive; inability to offer long term solutions
- Flexible funding packages and increased brokerage for some services has enabled them to provide more support
- Increased use of emergency relief
- Lack of referral options

- Proactive service delivery that adapts to meet changing needs
- 'Bureaucratisation' of family services, limiting meaningful interaction
- Lack of service flexibility
- Increased expectations of services
- Need for family services referrals to come from ChildFIRST
- Use of brokerage is a band aid solution but families can become dependent on it.

The services access to support services for a family is time limited and inadequately funded. This results in mothers and their children only receiving minimal services and support that does not meet their need, and it is not adequate enough to ensure positive changes in the family's situation.

Adequacy of the income support system

When asked **to what extent the income support system is sufficient** to meet needs and provide an adequate standard of living for single mothers and their children, 62 per cent of the 153 respondents who answered this question believe it to be insufficient, and 16 per cent believe it to be barely sufficient. It was noted by some that income support must be consistently and reliably provided in order to maintain any standard of living that it offers. A small minority (4 per cent) believe that the income support system is sufficient.

Conclusion

The results show widespread concern about the impacts of income support policy on single mothers and their children and on the ability of state-funded services to meet their needs. Deeply concerning is the finding that for some single mothers it is necessary to stay with or re-connect with a violent partner rather than struggle alone to meet family needs with minimal and highly conditional financial support.

State governments commit significant funds to child and family services to support families to care for and support the wellbeing and development of children to prevent harm and improve life circumstances. The survey results show that child and family services are being drawn away from their core purpose by the need to respond to crisis and provide emergency relief. The work of our sector is made more difficult when income support policies trap families in a cycle of poverty and disadvantage and place pressure on mother-child relationships.

While the state government has taken some steps to alleviate the impact of poverty on Victorian families, the survey findings suggest we need a stronger and more concerted effort by state Premiers and Ministers and sector leaders to lobby the Commonwealth government for urgent income support reform.