



Centre for Excellence  
in Child and Family Welfare Inc.

# The impact of social security reforms on single mothers and their children

Presented by David Tennant and Kelly Bowey  
Australian Social Policy Conference - 10 September 2019



# About us



## **The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare**

The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare (the Centre) is the peak body for child and family services in Victoria. The Centre represents over 150 community service organisations, students and individuals throughout Victoria.

## **FamilyCare**

With its head office in Shepparton, FamilyCare is the main provider of child and family services in the Goulburn Valley region of Victoria.

## **About child and family services**

Child and family services work alongside parents to make sure children have the best start to life by promoting and supporting positive family functioning, safety and child development outcomes with a focus on building capacity and resilience for children, families and communities.

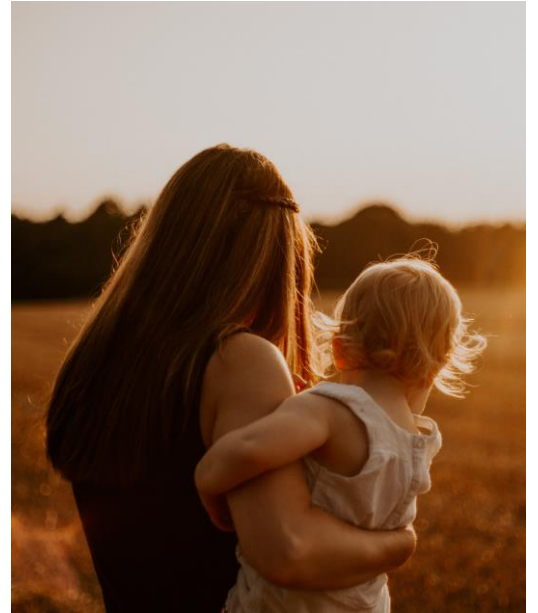
# Treating Families Fairly

Treating Families Fairly is a network of organisations and academics that have come together to advocate for changes to government policies that increase hardship for children, young people and families.



# Context

- 15.8% of family households in Australia are lone parent families.<sup>1</sup>
- The rate of poverty among lone parent households is 32%, rising to 59% where the parent is unemployed.<sup>2</sup>
- There are 739,000 children in poverty in Australia and 39% of them live in a lone parent household.<sup>3</sup>
- The overwhelming majority of lone parent families at 81.8%, are headed by a single mother.<sup>4</sup>



# Single mothers are a key focus of welfare reform

- Single mother households have been disproportionately targeted by reform measures, driven by a focus on women's workforce participation.
- The policy theory is clearly articulated by the government claims: 'The best form of welfare is a job' and 'If you have a go, you get a go'.
- Poverty rates among single mother families increased after Parenting Payment was changed to Newstart when the youngest child turns eight.<sup>5</sup>
- Specific conditionality programs like ParentsNext almost exclusively target single mothers (94.9%).<sup>6</sup>

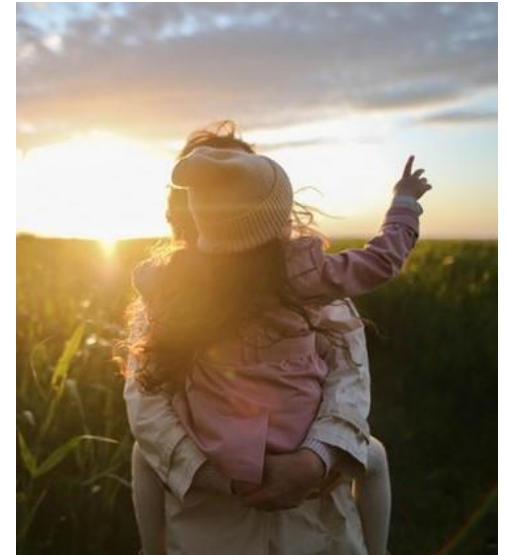


# About the survey

The purpose of the survey was to explore the impact of social security policy on the single mothers and their children accessing child and family services and on the ability of these state-funded services to respond.

It was completed by practitioners working directly with children and families, including single mother families and their children.

We received **169 responses** from practitioners spread across 15 of the 17 Department of Health and Human Services regions.




# Key survey findings



- 96 per cent of respondents 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
- 79 per cent indicated that single mothers **seek support from their service because of financial need** ‘all the time’ or ‘regularly’
- 63 per cent indicated that they had worked with one or more single mothers who had **experienced an income support payment suspension**
- 15 per cent 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.

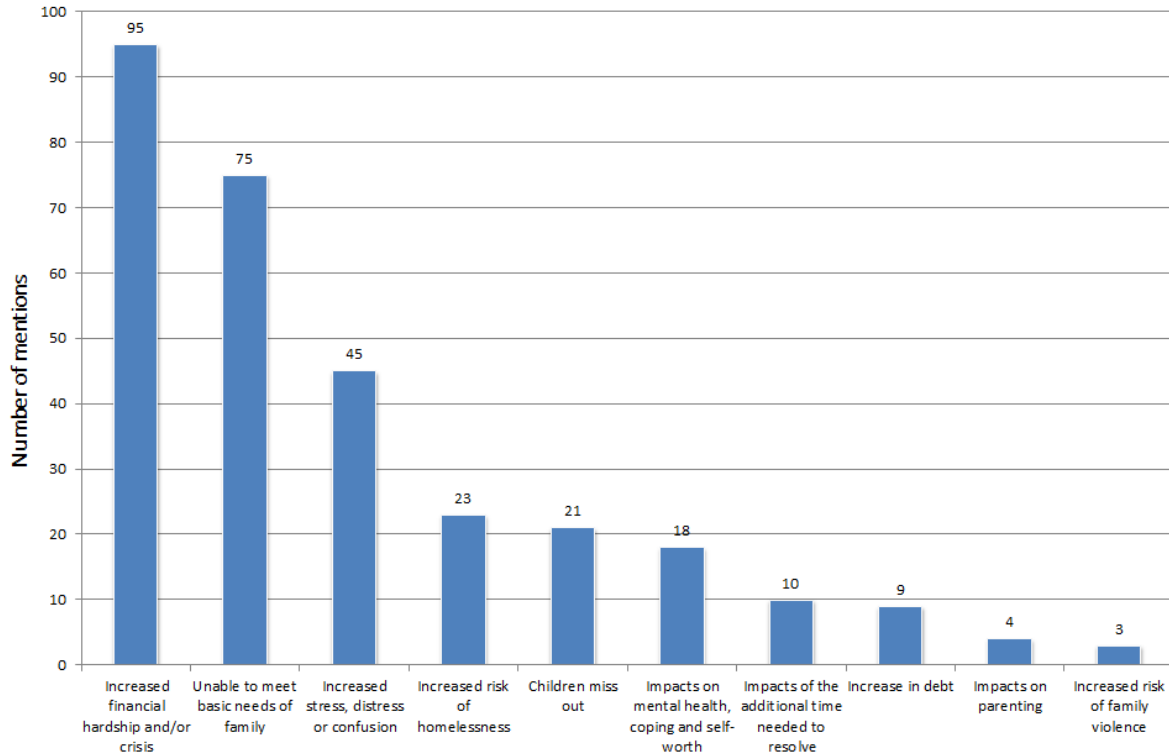
# Survey findings – experiences living on income support



Fear of suspensions	Financial difficulty	Unable to meet needs
Stress and anxiety	Housing stress	Social isolation
Hard to make future plans	Constant struggle	Hard to survive
Situation feels impossible	Debt	Children miss out
Unable to save	Centrelink is a nightmare	Harder to parent
No flexibility for the unexpected	Pressure from compliance requirements	Challenging trying to make ends meet

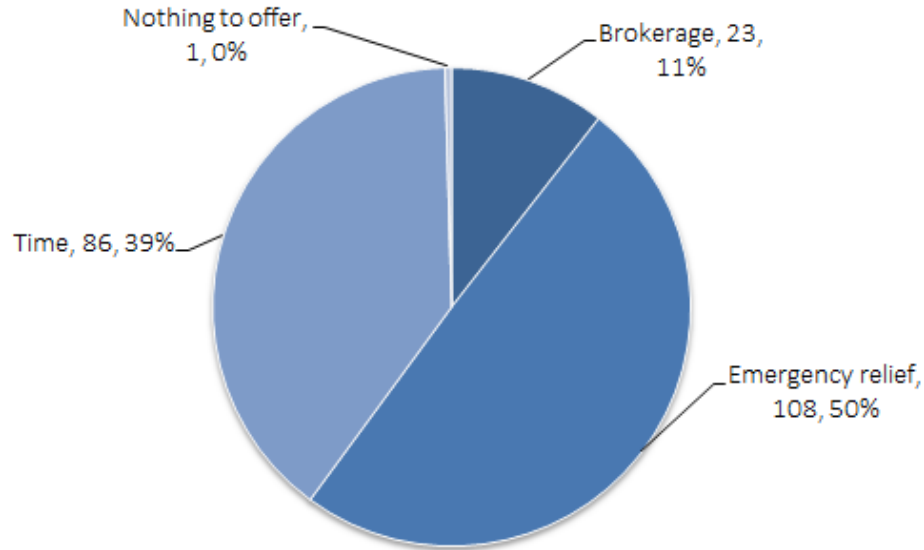


# Survey findings – impacts of income support suspensions



# Survey findings – service provider responses to suspensions

Support offered by child and family services in response to payment suspensions



*Just substituting one source of government money for another really.*

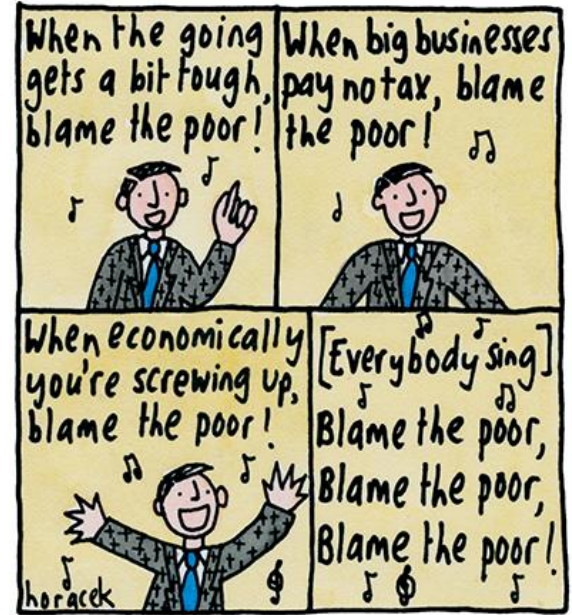
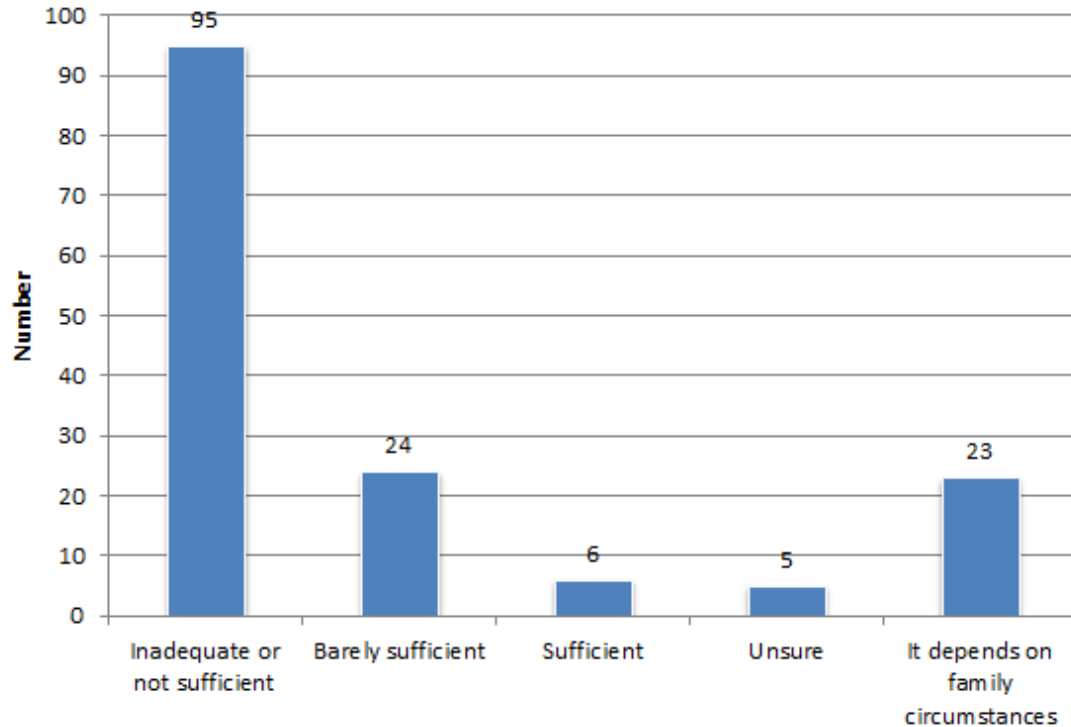
# Survey findings – changes over time

When asked whether they have noticed changes over time relating to the challenges or complexities single mother families experience, the top six changes identified by practitioners were:

- 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.



# Survey findings – adequacy of income support



# Implications for child wellbeing and safety

- Parents increasingly unable to meet the basic needs of their children
- Compliance requirements affect a parent's emotional and physical availability
- Parental capacity to focus on the child and parenting is reduced
- Attachment and connection can be disrupted
- Poverty limits opportunities for social engagement and learning
- Increased stress of parents increases the stress of children.

*When the main caregiver is under such pressure, it disrupts connection, attachment and the capacity for them to meet a child's holistic needs i.e. time spent on the phone or at appointments for Centrelink are extensive, and take the parent away from their ability to engage the child in learning and play experiences. Increased stress impacts emotional availability.*

# The consequences of a dysfunctional safety net

The survey responses suggest the safety net is failing single mothers and their children in basic ways:

- Emergency relief is increasingly used as a substitute for Centrelink payments
- Parenting capacity is impacted by poverty and compliance requirements
- The safety and wellbeing of children is being compromised
- Financial stress is adversely impacting mental health
- Women are staying in, or returning to, violent relationships because of financial pressure
- There are economic and social costs that the state government in Victoria is being forced to pick up .

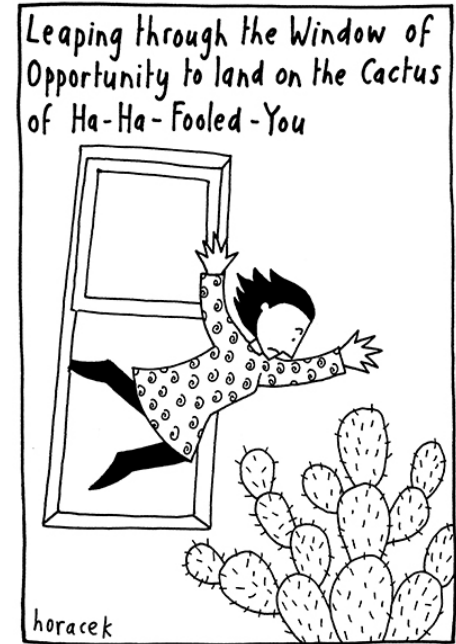


# Conclusion

Single mothers are doing it tough.

Getting a job might be a useful and noble aim.

It does not excuse cruelty when no safe, sustainable or genuinely accessible jobs exist.





## Any questions?

**David Tennant**

Chief Executive Officer

FamilyCare

03 5823 7003

[DTennant@familycare.net.au](mailto:DTennant@familycare.net.au)

<https://familycare.net.au/>

**Kelly Bowey**

Senior Policy and Research Officer

Centre for Excellence in Child & Family Welfare

03 9094 3555

[kelly.bowey@cfecfw.asn.au](mailto:kelly.bowey@cfecfw.asn.au)

<https://www.cfecfw.asn.au/>



# References

- 1 Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2017, 2016 Census QuickStats, viewed 5 September 2019, <[https://quickstats.censusdata.abs.gov.au/census\\_services/getproduct/census/2016/quickstat/036](https://quickstats.censusdata.abs.gov.au/census_services/getproduct/census/2016/quickstat/036)>.
- 2 Davidson, P, Saunders, P, Bradbury, B & Wong, M 2018, *Poverty in Australia 2018*, ACOSS/UNSW Poverty and Inequality Partnership Report No. 2, ACOSS, Sydney.
- 3 Davidson et al. 2018.
- 4 ABS 2017.
- 5 Davidson et al. 2018.
- 6 Department of Jobs and Small Business n.d., *ParentsNext evaluation report*, Department of Jobs and Small Business, Canberra.