

Some Aspects of Poverty, Deprivation, and Social Exclusion in Australia

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Abstract

Conventionally, a universal measurement of poverty is to see how many people pass through those 'poverty lines' - finding the number of people above and those below to conclusively suggest that those who live beneath the unacceptably low-income level are certainly poor. In Australia, the Henderson poverty line, established during the Henderson inquiry into poverty in the 1970s, is still in vogue, though more recently, yet another method of measuring poverty has come into play. This method began by looking at what essential items people are missing out on as a result of lack of sufficient income, for instance, paying more for rented accommodation, electricity, and gas bills as opposed to food. This phenomenon is known as 'deprivation'.

In this paper, I present issues for welfare planning, and problems generated by poverty, deprivation, and social exclusion, tagging them as 'quasi-problems' and the tendency of some of these problems are to be normalized in Australian society. Affected individuals and groups seem to wear 'normalisation' and seem to cope and strive towards resilience in a welfare-deprived environment. It is some of these absurdities that I wish to tease out and explain as I explore the principles of social justice that aim to bring about change in those vulnerable, disadvantaged, or marginalised sections of Australian society. A debate always ensues when people ask this question: Is Australia a land of 'fair go' or a land of 'far between'?

Keywords: Disadvantage, Social exclusion, Poverty, Deprivation, Welfare, Marginalised, Social change

Introduction

The level of well-being and the living standard of people in the community are subjects of a heated and ongoing conversation that is frequently undertaken across the world. The majority of measures undertaken to alleviate poverty reveal different ways people and families living in different locations and under varying circumstances fare and compare with each other in terms of standards and expenditures in their day-to-day lives. These people and families may live under varying conditions. Poverty measurements unquestionably assist in locating those who are currently poor or who may soon fall into that category. At a time when many national economies have avoided the major impacts of a global recession, it is concerning that a large number of Australians continue to experience a variety of social incapacities such as financial difficulty, housing stress, and income inequality. It has been reported that almost one in six Australians of working age is dependent on income support that is offered by the government (Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS) Report, 2021). This is even though opportunities are available in such a prosperous country. Poverty continues to exist in Australia despite these opportunities.

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Between twenty and thirty percent of the Australian population aged 15 years or older is experiencing marginality or worse levels of exclusion at any given point in time (Scutella, Wilkins, & Kostenko, 2009). It seems, though, that we may still require a better measure of the extent of poverty in Australia. The focus ought to be on measures that capture participation in society or the ability to participate rather than the already established causal relationship between poverty, deprivation, and social exclusion. Thus, the crux of this discussion is to suggest an exploration of a measure of social exclusion that recognises its multidimensionality at the level of the individual. This, I believe, will help understand a measure of social exclusion that captures a total level or levels of deprivation in society that is greater than what pure income poverty is capable of manifesting. As stated in Access reports year after year, a nearly a third of Australia experiences poverty. This phenomenon suggests that having paid work does not protect people from poverty. The following theoretical background assists the discussion and will be helpful in understanding the principles of social justice that aim to bring about change in vulnerable, disadvantaged, or marginalised sections of Australian society and in reviewing the question, Is Australia a land of 'fair go' or a land of 'far between'?

Deprivation and exclusion framework

While the unmet needs drive welfare planning to locate or create interventions and/or services. (Kerson, et al. 2012). Welfare policies and social work are guided by humanitarian ethics. A consideration of assisting people in need and mobilizing against social injustices, seems to be the reason for social work's commitment to human rights (Mungai, Pulla, 2015). By the same token, supporting, and empowering the marginalised contributes to building resilience for the community to demand human rights and a dividend in economic growth (Mungai, Pulla, 2015). The social condition and welfare of individuals can best be described by a range of concepts, including poverty, social inclusion and/or exclusion, social capital, disability, capability, well-being, satisfaction, and happiness. These concepts form quasi-welfare problems, with one prompting the possible causation of the other. For instance, 'disability' might lead to diminished 'capability' while 'well-being' is considered a determinant of 'happiness'. Every day, people instinctively find ways to cope with deprivation by adopting various techniques. Nonetheless, this ought not to mask the social condition and welfare of individuals. Often, there is a tendency to see that people living in poverty might have immense reserves of energy and drive to make a decent living for themselves, and their households seldom realise that this might not be possible without the right chances and incentives. The application of the deprivation and exclusion framework to help us gain a better understanding of poverty, as well as the presentation of a more comprehensive measure that enables us to take a more effective approach to addressing or even eliminating poverty in Australia, are the primary focuses of this paper.

Amartya Sen regarded poverty as the 'deprivation of basic capabilities, rather than merely as the lowness of incomes, which is the standard criterion of identification of poverty' (Sen, 1999, p. 87). Certainly, this is not to discard the concept of poverty as the inadequacy of income to provide for means to achieve minimal functioning or basic living. Rather, it is to assert that there is more to poverty than income. Mungai and Pulla (2015) have previously considered the advantages of Sen's concept of Basic Capabilities Index, which identifies poverty not based on income but using indicators like the percentage of children reaching fifth grade, child mortality, and the proportion of births attended by skilled health personnel (Social Watch, 2007). The basic capabilities index is correlated with social development and allows for comparison between countries or within the same country over time. The advantage of this approach is that the indicators are associated with capabilities that all members of a society should have, and that would also mutually interact towards achieving higher levels of individual and collective development, particularly for the youngest members of the society (Mungai, Pulla, 2015)

Poverty and its measures

Poverty is a persistent problem that poses political and moral challenges in all cultures and at all times. The concept of poverty is easily recognisable, and most people have some level of comprehension of it. Nevertheless, the particular meaning that is attached to it is dependent on the fundamental idea of poverty that we all appear to be thinking about. It is possible to conceptualise poverty in a wide range of different ways, each of which results in a distinct, precise definition of poverty, which in turn transcends into diverse approaches and measurements of poverty. The term "poverty" refers to a fundamental lack of the means to survive; those who are considered to be poor are people who, even under normal circumstances, have trouble providing for their own basic needs, such as feeding and clothing themselves. People in a society can be considered to be living in poverty if they are unable to afford the necessities that the majority of people in that society consider to be a given, or poverty can be an absolute state in which basic requirements are not met (ACOSS, 2011). According to Bradshaw and Finch's (2003) definition, "a categorical need" is a requirement that must be fulfilled in order for human beings to be able to function properly (p. 1).

A definition of this straightforward kind is that it is becoming more and more undesirable in Australia, which has reached higher general standards of living. As a result, poverty is defined in relative terms, and a greater emphasis is placed on societal survival, with values placed on quality of life that even the most impoverished members of the community should ideally be able to enjoy.

The widely used measure of poverty is the poverty line. As stated in the ACOSS report update (2021):

- Poverty is often measured using 'poverty lines. Poverty lines measure 'income poverty'; the number of people living below an unacceptably low-income level.
- The Henderson poverty line, established during the Henderson inquiry into poverty in the 1970s, is still often quoted as the poverty line in Australia." (p.1).

On the other hand, other measures have been utilised, such as, more recently, the poverty line established by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which was established at fifty percent of the median disposable income for all Australian households, as well as the Australian measures generated by the National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling in Australia. Both of these measures were utilised in Australia (NATSEM). There is also something called the half-average income line or the half-median income line that people use. It is a prevalent perception that the level of poverty may be measured by the number of people whose income is lower than the poverty line. This line has, over the course of time, been improved to account for elements such as the number of individuals who are dependent on the income as well as the expenses of housing.

When compared to the 34 countries in the OECD with the highest levels of wealth, Australia has the 15th highest rate of people living in poverty. This rate is greater than the rates in the United Kingdom, Germany, and New Zealand; it is also higher than the average rate for the OECD. People who are living in poverty in Australia frequently do not have access to vital necessities like food and a roof over their heads. (Stone, 2023) Children who are raised in low-income households are more likely to miss out on opportunities like school field trips.

According to the estimates provided by the OECD, the overall poverty rate in Australia now stands at 12.6%. (Compared to the prediction provided by ACOSS for 2019-20, which is 13.4 percent), As a consequence of this, the rate of poverty in Australia is the fifteenth highest of the 38 countries that are included in the OECD. In its capacity as a signatory nation, Australia has demonstrated its commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals established by the United Nations. The first of these ambitions is a slogan that simply states, "No poverty." On the other hand, the statistics from 2022 indicate that there are 3.3 million people in Australia who are living below the poverty line, which is defined as having an income that is less than fifty percent of the median income. This amount accounts

for 761 thousand children (16.6 percent). In terms of cash, the amount that defines the poverty line for a person living alone and without children is \$489 per week, while the amount that defines the poverty line for a married couple with two children is \$1,027 per week.

The "poverty gap," also known as the difference between the incomes of those living in poverty in different types of families and the poverty line, is an average of \$304 per week. This number is referred to as the "poverty gap." This indicates that a significant number of people whose lives have been altered are surviving in conditions of abject destitution.

The constraints imposed by COVID-19 contributed to the fact that the poverty rate reached 14.6% during the March quarter of the year 2020 (Naidoo, et al 2022).

However, in the third quarter of the year 2020, as a result of increased payments for income support, it plummeted to 12 percent, which is the lowest it has been in the previous 17 years.

A total of 646,000 people, or 2.6 percent of the overall population, were able to lift themselves out of poverty as a direct result of the higher benefits.

According to the most recent statistics that are available, the percentage of children who are living in poverty has climbed from 16.2 percent in the third quarter of 2019 to 19 percent.

As a direct result of the additional income support that was provided by COVID-19, the poverty gap eventually decreased to \$310 a week in June 2020 from its previous level of \$323 a week in March 2020. Prior to this point, the poverty gap had been steadily increasing from \$168 a week in 1999 to \$323 a week in March 2020 (Naidoo, et al 2022).

Social security benefits for adults who are unemployed and do not get any other sort of income have increased from being \$134 below the poverty level to being \$146 above it as a result of increases in income support. The difference between their income and the poverty line increased from \$119 below the poverty level to \$176 over the poverty line for single parents with two children. Couples who did not have any children saw their income rise from \$152 below the poverty line to \$411 above it, whereas couples who did have two children saw their income rise from \$187 below the poverty line to \$361 above it. Couples who did not have any children saw their income rise from \$411 below the poverty line to \$411 above it (Naidoo, et al 2022).

The implication of this is that the number of people living in poverty may simply be inferred from the number of people residing below the poverty line, as this is the measurement that is generally used for poverty lines. This traditional method of determining poverty compares the per-person income of a household to a poverty line that is generated from a nutrition-based estimate of the required minimum income. In 2016, one in six Australian children aged 0-14 years were living in poverty, but many children experienced disadvantage on multiple fronts, lacking the opportunities and family resources to be socially connected and to be able to participate fully in their local communities, according to yet another report on poverty, social exclusion, and disadvantage that was submitted by the National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling (NATSEM) in the year 2018. This report was published in 2018. The degree to which a child suffers from social disadvantage can be measured in a variety of different ways. Child social exclusion highlights the multi-dimensional character of disadvantage suffered by many of Australia's children, expanding the perspective on disadvantage beyond that of child poverty, which is derived only from a household's level of money. (Miranti, et. Al, 2018).

Deprivation and Social Exclusion

Defining poverty in terms of income thus fails to capture the multidimensionality of poverty, as low income becomes one and the same with poverty (Saunders, 2006). This heightens our interest in empirical approaches based on much more broad concepts of disadvantage than narrow income-based measures. One such approach is the social exclusion approach which was recently adopted by the Australian government. An individual is socially excluded if he or she does not participate in key

activities in the society in which he or she lives. (Burchardt, Le Grand and Piachaud, 2002). One of the key advantages of adopting such an approach is that it identifies the multidimensional nature of disadvantage (Scutella, Wilkins, Kostenko, 2013). Although poverty can be narrowed down to the poor state of welfare of people, there are a number of other significant factors that drive poverty, dictate deprivation, and pave the way to social exclusion. Research has established the link that exists between poverty and other welfare problems and allows us to interpret poverty in terms of social exclusion. (Halleröd, & Larsson, 2007; Scutella et al (2009). Scutella et al (2009) also put forward the seven 'life domains' across which poverty and social exclusion can be measured which include material resources, employment, education and skills, health and disability, social, community and personal safety (p.7) in light of this, it would imply that poverty-related issues such as poor health, malnutrition, lack of shelter and other issues that could generate from the seven life domains are in themselves not regarded as poverty but rather as conditions caused by poverty resulting from lack of economic resources, hence making it impossible to acquire the necessary basics of living (Halleröd, et al (2007). The poverty line used to identify who is poor has been criticised for being arbitrary as it doesn't take into account other factors that might contribute to the inadequacy of meeting individual needs.

One more method of determining whether or not a person is poor is to make a list of the essential things that person does not have access to because of a lack of sufficient income or because they are forced to spend a disproportionate amount of their income on certain costs in comparison to other costs (ACOSS, 2011). For example, spending more on accommodation and utilities than food is referred to as "deprivation." One of the most appealing aspects of social exclusion is that it broadens the conventional framework that identifies poverty as a lack of resources relative to demands. This is one of the reasons why social exclusion is one of the most attractive qualities (Saunders, 2013).

Peter Townsend (1979), took a much broader sociological approach to creating an understanding of poverty. According to him, families, and even entire groups of people within a population can be said to be living in poverty if they do not have the financial means to obtain the type of diet, participate in the activities, and have the living conditions and amenities which are customary, or at least widely encouraged, or approved, in the societies to which they belong. Poverty is a social construct that can be applied to individuals, families, and even entire groups within a population when people have to make do with far lower resources than required (Townsend, 1979).

Poverty can therefore be viewed as an exclusion resulting from a lack of resources. Hence, poverty defined in terms of exclusion is characterised by not only by a low level of income but also by a high level of deprivation. One of these measures is deprivation, where people are asked whether they can afford items which most people regard as essentials of life (ACOSS, 2014). Deprivation here is represented by an enforced lack of socially perceived necessities (Sanders et al 2010), The growing concern over the reliability of conventional poverty studies focusing on the need to identify the poor as those actually experiencing hardship necessitated the Social Policy Research Centre to conduct a survey of deprivation across the community, the 'Poverty and Exclusion in Modern Australia' (PEMA) survey. The survey measured the percentage of households who have difficulty in affording items that the majority consider essential. This was a more comprehensive survey of hardship than the financial stress indicators used in the conventional ABS survey. The survey was conducted by asking people whether they have items that a majority of people regard as 'essential', such as 'a decent and secure home', and if not, whether this was because they could not afford it, in a bid to measure people's actual living standards.

In order to give a graphic description of poverty, we will consider 'Average Amanda' a typical Australian mom who has a pile of expenses but who can't make ends meet due to the lack of a modest job. The video was made by the Salvation Army to mark Anti-Poverty Week 2015. This story depicts deprivation in its fullest as Amanda has to gradually sacrifice the basics, including kids' outings and new clothing, in order to afford feeding and shelter. I suggest that this video be watched by the readers, [Average Amanda - Anti-Poverty Week 2015 - YouTube](#).

Australia: A Land of Fair Go' or 'Far Between'?

According to the findings of the 2022 Poverty in Australia Snapshot, there are 3.3 million individuals in Australia (13.4%) living below the poverty line, which is defined as 50 percent of the median income. This number includes 761,000 children (16.6 percent). For a single adult, the cash amount that constitutes the poverty line is \$489 per week, while for a couple with two children, the amount that constitutes the poverty line is \$1,027 per week. 1.3 billion poor (ACOSS, 2021)

Nonetheless, the Australian public continues to be confronted with extremes of inequality and poverty and with seemingly unending gaps in measuring the extent of poverty, especially among the most affected group in Australian society. The variances between poor and rich in Australia remain in most aspects of essential needs, such as housing health and our ability to survive in a crisis. Scientia Professor Carla Treloar, Director of the UNSW Social Policy Research Centre (SPRC) and the Centre for Social Research in Health (CSRH), believes that the wealth in Australia is distributed very unevenly. That Australia has over 130 billionaires yet in the year 2021, while their wealth grew, on average, by \$395 millions, or 12 per cent. This equals the wealth of 2.8 million households in the lowest 30 per cent of the population (UNSW, Media, 2022).

Furthermore, there are inequalities in areas of health and life expectancy owing to in affordability of maintaining the expenses. Aboriginal people can expect to die about 8 to 9 years earlier than non-Aboriginal Australians. On average, Aboriginal males live 71.6 years, 8.6 years less than their non-Aboriginal peers, women live 75.6 years, 7.8 years less. (Korff, 2022). Although people continue to cope with crises– the poorest often have the fewest resources to maintain a crisis situation.

“Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were more likely to experience poverty than other Australians, with 19.3% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living below the poverty line, compared with 12.4% of other Australians...” (ACOSS, 2013, p.44 - 46).

Aboriginal people: short life span

Causes for a low life expectancy include, and not limited to poverty and poor health and nutrition – about 80% of the life expectancy difference is due to preventable chronic conditions, such as heart disease, diabetes, chronic lower respiratory diseases, and lung and related cancers. (Korff, 2022). The other related causes are inadequate and poor housing, dispossession of their traditional lands, low education levels, high unemployment, and hidden racism, (Korff, 2022). Clearly the systemic issues require political will, and Australian politicians and administration together do not boldly tackle these issues.

Therefore, the implication in the context of indigenous people is that, poverty is not just caused by individual circumstances but rather by major inequalities, built into the structure of Australian society. Some of the primary causes of these inequalities, and poverty are access to work and income, education, housing, healthcare, and other services.

When discussing the concept of a "fair go" or equal opportunities in relation to poverty in Australia, it is possible that the issue is not solely the responsibility of the government but also of private and public institutions as well as the entirety of Australian society in general. Poverty is detrimental to social relationships as well as to business and the community as a whole. Being poor is not at all profitable for a company. And most significantly, it is detrimental to the people who are going through it: to their sense of self-worth, to their physical well-being, and most critically, to the generations that will come after them. It is essential to recognise that people who come from disadvantaged backgrounds or, who have disabilities, or who have experienced a crisis that has changed their lives for the worse all continue to dream and have a number of common aspirations. These aspirations include the following: to have access to a decent standard of living, to live a "normal life," to have a secured income, to be respected, and to have a sense of belonging in society.

Implications for Social Policy

Poverty, social inclusion and/or exclusion, social capital, disability, capability, well-being, satisfaction, and happiness are some of the concepts that can be used to describe the social condition and welfare of individuals. Other concepts that can be used include social inclusion and/or exclusion. People in everyday life naturally discover ways to live with deprivation by adopting a variety of strategies, despite the fact that poverty has a catastrophic impact on both health and quality of life. Hallerod and Larsson's research (2007), points out that poverty is linked to a wide variety of social issues; hence, preventing people from falling into poverty should presumably be one of the primary goals of social policy. Due to the fact that this outcome occurred, it is rational to consider the conflict against poverty and the conflict against social exclusion as a contest that is mutually inclusive. The issue that needs to be asked is: why is it so vital to act against poverty and to locate those who are poor? Who else besides the poor and the excluded suffers from starvation, lack of shelter, poor health, exclusion from an ordinary lifestyle in society, etc.? If this is the easy response, then who else suffers from these things? If we were to declare that this kind of circumstance is intolerable, then we could look for answers within the realm of social policy.

Conclusions

In the preceding conversation, an effort was made to take a fresh look at a number of the definitions of poverty and determine whether or not they are applicable to the situation that exists in Australia. According to a review of previously published research, the widely used poverty lines as well as the Henderson Poverty line considered income-based poverty measures and took into account fluctuations in the average income level of Australians. This was determined by analysing the results of previous research. An effort was made to define the phrases "deprivation" and "social exclusion," and it was successful. When the implications of poverty, deprivation, and social exclusion in Australia are examined, it becomes clear that there is a pressing need to continue advocating for innovations that promote change on the one hand and clearly articulate social justice for many segments of Australian society on the other.

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