Making It Work – Improving participation support for disadvantaged young Australians

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

This research investigates two issues which affect large numbers of young Australians: unemployment and precarious employment; and the high prevalence of mental health disorders, in particular anxiety and depression. My original contribution to knowledge is the examination of policies pertaining to how these issues are associated, with unemployment contributing to mental health distress, and poor mental health resulting in low rates of participation in employment and education. The research argues that the issues are too frequently represented as failings of individuals, with insufficient attention given to the social determinants of mental health and wellbeing.

The research is informed by my practice experience as a social worker and project manager, working in the Australian income support system and in primary mental health care programs. What I observed was that the unemployment benefits regime, subject to rigorous conditions and activity requirements, pays little heed to individuals' circumstances and wellbeing. Mental health services are heavily focussed on medical models of diagnosis and treatment. The disconnect is that employment and income support services focus on what people are, or should be, doing, but do not consider how they are feeling. Mental health services deal with how people are feeling, but rarely explore what they are doing regarding work, or participation in training or education.

Central tenets of my argument are that we already have much research about young people who are unemployed or in precarious work, and who, as a result, experience poverty and insecurity due to low wages and benefits. We know also that the level of mental health distress is highest in the population cohort aged 16 to 24. Policies and service provision are fragmented. In many cases, this fragmentation reflects the complexities of Australia's Federation. For example, some mental health services are delivered and funded by State and Territory Governments, while other services are delivered by nongovernment agencies and private practitioners and funded by the Commonwealth Government.

This research endeavours to bring a fresh perspective to consideration of current problems and how they might be addressed. Four themes are identified and discussed: mental health; inequality; welfare conditionality; and innovations in policies and support services for young

people. Analysis and further discussion explores past and present policies and service provision, and how these could be done differently.

This thesis has been completed in the 18 months during which the COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly affected Australia and most other nations. Many young people were immediately affected by loss of jobs and interruptions to their education. Some responses by governments were timely and compassionate, including financial support to employers, temporary increases to unemployment benefits, and suspensions of the draconian Mutual Obligation requirement placed on jobseekers. These showed what can be possible in addressing a crisis, but also what could be done to address chronic problems.

Key findings of the research include the need to address income and housing inequality, how mental health services for young people can be improved, and how employment services can be reformed to more effectively help young people into participation. Some proposals will require more government spending, but I argue that others can be funded by redeploying existing provisions. It is also important to consider the long-term financial and emotional scarring of people who experience prolonged unemployment in their younger years. Arguments for reform can therefore be constructed as investment, not merely cost.

DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Signed 

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Thanks also to my dear friend Pamela Jenkins for her meticulous proofreading. I have not engaged a professional editor, so any errors or omissions are entirely mine.

My family have provided love, purpose and inspiration: my life partner Dr Elaine Waddell and our daughters. This thesis imagines a better future. Elle, Katie and Nicola each represent this aspiration, in their daily jobs working to improve the health of South Australians.

LIST OF FIGURES

LIST OF TABLES

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Rationale for the research

This research investigates new approaches to addressing the related problems of unemployment, poor mental health and disadvantage experienced by Australians aged 16 to 24 years. The intention of this project is to explore these three problems jointly, as current policies do not sufficiently consider the associations between issues. I will identify these associations and argue for new perspectives on how mental health, employment and income support services can be improved by better integration of policies and programs.

I propose that this thesis is an original contribution to knowledge, as relatively little research has been undertaken which examines how problems are interrelated, and therefore how they could be better addressed. As discussed in the next chapter, the research is informed by my practice experience in social work and managing various community and mental health programs. I have been fortunate to have had so many opportunities in my working life that have enabled the development of ideas for positive change.

In commencing this research, I had a clear idea of what the problems were, but I was less clear about what the solutions might look like. What I hope to have achieved from this journey is a contribution to how problems are considered. The information and data discussed in this thesis are in the public domain. What I argue is that these need to be thought about congruently. We need to think differently about how problems are constructed and in particular how the characteristics of certain groups, for example young unemployed people, are portrayed.

I believe that this research is equally a contribution to how we examine existing problems and what we know about them. We can then consider how we might think about these problems in different ways, and construct innovative solutions.

I have chosen a narrative approach in the structure of this thesis. This is based on reflexivity, which has informed my own practice in social work, research and teaching. Reflexivity provides a structure for understanding how individuals and groups are

marginalised and how practice and research can address these problems. Citing the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu, Stan Houston outlines the implications of applying reflexivity to social work:

> Bourdieu's ideas can be extrapolated to anti-oppressive social work in three indispensable ways, namely: (i) enhancing professional reflexivity; (ii) being sensitive to clients' experiences of the cultural, social and political fields, the meanings they have produced for them, and their narratives about oppression; and (iii) developing practical strategies for empowering the excluded and marginalised; that is, those individuals whose capital in neoliberal society is very limited, and who struggle in social fields to gain recognition (Houston, 2019, p107)..

How are we to consider young unemployed Australians? Are they a problem because they appear to be visibly idle in shopping malls, skate parks or queues at Centrelink benefits offices? Is the high prevalence of anxiety and depression in adolescents and young adults representative of a precious 'snowflake' generation? Or do we sufficiently consider entrenched inequality, such as that which means these visible young people are far more likely to have grown up in disadvantaged families and have fewer opportunities for education and secure employment. And unlike their more affluent peers in similar circumstances, maybe they have nowhere else to hang out.

Youth unemployment is a global phenomenon, with evidence that in almost all developed countries the rate of unemployment for young people is far higher than for working age adults over 25. In the 21st Century, these already high rates of youth unemployment were greatly exacerbated by the 2007-2008 Global Financial Crisis (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2010).

This research will argue that youth unemployment is not just an economic and social issue, it is also a significant mental health issue. Obtaining gainful employment post-school or post-tertiary education is an essential component in the transition to adulthood and establishing financial and social independence. For adolescents and young adults, long periods of unemployment entrench disadvantage and for many the mental health 'scarring' has a lifelong effect (Strandh et al, 2014).

Over the past few decades policy responses to youth unemployment in Australia have been scarce. This was most recently demonstrated in the 2019 Federal election. The two major

political parties, the Liberal-National Coalition, and the Australian Labor Party, did not commit to any increase in income support payments for unemployed people or support for additional training and job creation programs for young people. Much of the discourse during the election campaign was about the removal of tax concessions that overwhelmingly benefit older and affluent Australians. There were some promises made to address youth mental health and suicide, but these made no reference to the causes of the problems (Karp, 2019).

The lack of contemporary policies addressing the needs of young people occurs despite considerable research into the social and economic factors that contribute to the disadvantage of young people. The evidence from the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) is that more than a quarter of the population aged 16 to 24 are unemployed, underemployed or not in full-time education (COAG, 2013). A similar proportion (one in four) of 16-24 year-olds also experience the significant mental health disorders of anxiety and/or depression, with these disorders having even higher prevalence in the unemployed cohort (Butterworth, Crosier & Rodgers, 2004).

1.2 Support services for unemployed Australians

The Commonwealth Government currently spends approximately $1.5 billion annually on employment services contracts (Department of Employment, 2017). Annual public expenditure on mental health services is more than eight billion dollars (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2016). Although there is strong evidence that unemployment and poor mental health are strongly associated, there has been little in the way of policy and service design that considers integrating services and support for young people.

That being said, one positive initiative has emerged. In the 2015 Federal Budget it was announced that there would be a number of funded trials linking youth mental health and employment services. These trials are based on an evidence-based service model, Individual Placement and Support (IPS). My research indicates that IPS is the only model of service that has been adopted internationally and explicitly integrates mental health and employment support, based on evidence of improvement in individuals' mental health through participation in mainstream employment. IPS programs and the outcomes of the

trials, which have continued through 2020, will be discussed in detail in Chapter 8. Other policy options will also be considered in this chapter.

This PhD research investigates the broad issues which affect unemployed young people, including mental health, social and economic disadvantage, and government policies. The focus of the qualitative components of the research is a critical discourse analysis of policy and related documents, structured around four interrelated themes, which will be outlined in section 1.5 in this chapter. The analysis will examine contemporary and recent policies, for example 'welfare reform', and their actual efficacy in improving the lives of young unemployed Australians.

1.3 The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic

The early draft chapters of this thesis were completed in 2019 and revised in early 2020, at precisely the time that the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) was spreading across the globe and to Australia. Since March 2020 there have been dramatic effects on Australian society, as many sectors of the economy were shut down either temporarily or for indeterminate periods. The sectors most immediately affected were hospitality, tourism/travel, arts/entertainment, and retail, all of which employ a large proportion of young workers (Gilfillan, 2020). Within a few months the rate of youth unemployment had risen to 16.3 per cent, compared to the rate of 5.8 per cent for older workers (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020).

This rise in youth unemployment also reflected the casual nature of young Australians' jobs. In April 2020, the Commonwealth Government introduced a subsidy known as JobKeeper, which enabled employers to retain and pay staff who had been stood down. However, this subsidy only applied to permanent or casual workers who had been with the employer for twelve months or more, and therefore many young workers and people on temporary visas, including international students, were excluded. The precarious nature of many jobs was thus exposed.

Another response was a large increase in unemployment benefits, formerly known as Newstart Allowance or Youth Allowance but renamed JobSeeker in March 2020. A

temporary 'Coronavirus Supplement' of $550 per fortnight was introduced, which effectively doubled the level of payment for most recipients. This supplement was reduced to $250 at the end of September 2020 and was further reduced to $100 in January 2021, in spite of many advocacy groups arguing that retaining the higher levels of support would address poverty and provide economic stimulus. The supplement was discontinued at the end of March 2021, with the payment permanently increased by $50 from that time. The relationship between the amount of this payment and income required to meet a basic standard of living will be discussed in later chapters.

1.4 The research question

What policy changes can be effective in improving the social and economic participation of young Australians experiencing unemployment, underemployment, and mental ill-health?

The research aims to develop new perspectives which will inform policy, practice, and system change. There are many contemporary and recent documents which can be subject to critical analysis. At the official level, there are legislation and policy documents, parliamentary debates and enquiries (notably Senate Committees) which contain submissions from organisations and individuals. There are also many reports prepared by nongovernment agencies and advocacy groups. In addition, there is the 'grey literature' including print, broadcast, and online media. All of these sources provide a wealth of data, including from service users, which are synthesised into this research.

The outcomes for the research project are:

1. Identification of problematic policy issues and scope for change
2. How new approaches to service provision can inform more enlightened policies for young unemployed people, for example, a focus on enabling rather than coercion.
3. Which elements of programs, such as IPS, could be more generally applied in the provision of mental health and employment services.
4. Translation of the research into specific proposals to address improved social and economic participation, and to address issues contributing to social exclusion and inequality.

To add to what has been stated already in this introduction, I contend that Australia lacks coherent and coordinated national policies for its younger citizens who are unemployed or underemployed, and who simultaneously experience poor mental health and other adversities. These issues and the factors contributing to poor policy will be explored and discussed in detail in the following chapters.

1.5 Thesis overview

In the next chapter, I will outline the critical lens for the research and its genesis from my practice experience. The third chapter will outline the theoretical framework for the research. The fourth chapter will describe and discuss the methodology, and how this evolved in the course of conducting the research.

Chapters 5 to 8 will each focus on a key theme:

Chapter 5 (Theme 1) examines **mental health** issues and mental health services for young people**.** This includes investigation of the high prevalence of anxiety and depression in the adolescent and young adult population, a discussion of possible causes, the evolution of primary mental health and community-based services and analysis of the effectiveness of policies and service development. A key point of discussion and critical analysis is whether medical and psychological responses to mental health issues sufficiently address the interpersonal and social causes of distress.

Chapter 6 (Theme 2) investigates and discusses **inequality** and the 'social gradient' of health and mental health. The focus is on unemployment, social disadvantage, and social exclusion and how these are major contributors to the mental ill-health of young Australians.

Chapter 7 (Theme 3) explores the high level of **conditionality** applied to unemployed young people receiving income support. Receipt of income support is subject to strict conditions and 'obligations' applied by employment services and Centrelink (the national social security agency). The analysis will examine whether this stringent regime is effective in facilitating participation in employment and education, and whether in its current form it causes negative outcomes.

Chapter 8 (Theme 4) examines recent **policy and program innovations** designed to assist young people into participation in employment, education, and training. There will be a key focus on pilot IPS programs which integrate mental health and employment support for young people.

Chapters 9 to 11 are structured around a chronological framework based on 'Utopia as Method', based on the three modes of analysis developed by British sociologist Ruth Levitas (2013). These are described in more detail in Chapter 4. As a brief introduction, **Chapter 9** considers Levitas' 'Archaeological Mode' (history), **Chapter 10** incorporates the 'Ontological Mode' (the nature of existence and being, in the present), and **Chapter 11** incorporates the 'Architectural Mode' (what can be done differently to ensure that people flourish in their society). **Chapter 12** (the conclusion) outlines specific recommendations for changes which can be achieved by redesigning and redeploying current resources.

2. THE CRITICAL LENS FOR THE RESEARCH

2.1 Introduction

This chapter is a narrative based on my experience working in the Australian income support system over nearly three decades. During this period, I worked in a wide variety of social work, training, and management positions in the former Commonwealth Department of Social Security (DSS) and its successor, Centrelink, which was established in 1996. This is by nature a subjective narrative. Detailed description and referencing of the literature is reserved for other parts of this thesis. I have endeavoured to make this a reliable memoir; its purpose is to frame the initial approach to the work and the selection of theoretical and conceptual frameworks.

The nature of this research is political and social, and cannot be separated from its genesis and focus developed from my practice and academic work. As John Cresswell says about contemporary qualitative studies:

> …qualitative researchers today acknowledge that the writing of a qualitative text cannot be separated from the author, how it is received by readers, and how it impacts the participants and sites under study. How we write is a reflection of our own interpretation based on the cultural, social, gender, class and personal politics that we bring to research. All writing is "positioned" and within a stance. All researchers shape the writing that emerges, and qualitative researchers need to accept this interpretation and be open about it in their writings (Cresswell 2013, p.215).

Creswell also states that autoethnography, including personal experience and reflection, is a valid form of qualitative research. I should stress that this thesis is not primarily a work of autoethnography. The overall structure may therefore be described as a layered account:

> *Layered accounts* often focus on the author's experience alongside data, abstract analysis, and relevant literature. This form emphasizes the procedural nature of research. Similar to grounded theory, layered accounts illustrate how "data collection and analysis proceed simultaneously" (CHARMAZ, 1983, p.110) and frame existing research as a "source of *questions* and *comparisons*" rather than a "measure of truth" (p.117). But unlike grounded theory, layered accounts use vignettes, reflexivity, multiple voices, and introspection (ELLIS, 1991) to "invoke" readers to enter into the

> "emergent experience" of doing and writing research (Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2011, p6).

2.2 Five decades of youth unemployment

Donald (Don) Dunstan was the Australian Labor Party Premier (chief minister) of the State of South Australia from 1967 to 1968, and subsequently from 1970 to 1979. The following statement was made during a period that had seen a rapid growth in unemployment in Australia. This was largely caused by global economic forces and had followed three decades of economic growth and general prosperity after World War 2.

> The premier, Mr Dunstan, today released results of a survey by the Youth Unemployment Working Party established earlier this year.
>
> Mr Dunstan said information in the survey was disturbing because it showed that unemployment among young people was more widespread than previously thought and that youth unemployment was most severe in country areas.
>
> Unemployment for young people is a particularly demoralising experience, especially for those who have come straight from school and who cannot get work (Dunstan, 1976).

It can be seen from the above that youth unemployment and underemployment are not new phenomena. Nor are they issues peculiar to South Australia, Australia, or other countries. The two most significant drivers of persistently high rates of unemployment are economic and technological changes. In addition, transnational corporations have been able to move lower-skilled processing and assembly jobs to low wage/low cost developing countries. It is worth considering that at the time the SA Premier made the statement quoted above, two automotive manufacturing companies employed tens of thousands of workers across five plants in Adelaide. By late 2017, following the closure of Holden at Elizabeth in northern Adelaide, no car factories or workers remained.

The demise of the car industry represented a broader decline in manufacturing in Australia since the 1970's. Jobs in this sector provided entry level employment for newly arrived migrants and school leavers, as well as providing skills training in the form of apprenticeships. Alongside the decline in manufacturing, other sectors of employment have grown, notably resources (mining) and services. However, these sectors often do not offer the traditional and secure career paths that were once available to younger Australians. In

the case of resources, the boom of the early 21st Century created high demand for labour, but much of this was time limited to the construction stages of infrastructure. In the service sectors, such as aged and disability care, many new positions are temporary or casual. Other contemporary factors that negatively affect employment opportunities for young people include the high cost of vocational and tertiary education and more limited opportunities for graduates, even those in professional disciplines.

In a prescient book first published in 1982, Barry Jones (soon to become Science Minister in the Hawke Federal Labor government) predicted the decline of traditional industries and the rise of the information and services sector (Jones, 1982). He acknowledged that this would create 'new' jobs, mainly for people with higher-level education. Those left behind would become the 'involuntary leisure class'.

Jones acknowledged that automation was already affecting industrial and clerical employment. What followed in the next few years was the rapid development of the prototype internet, this evolution continues to shape the nature of work, business, and social interaction. I would argue that the majority of those whose opportunities have improved in the 21st Century economy are usually already privileged by education and/or resources. Very few people can become entrepreneurs without financial backing, or at least a very good computer and website. In the new 'sharing' economy of transport and accommodation, one needs to have the resources to own a newish vehicle or purchase real estate.

For those people at the other end of the scale, work is insecure and usually poorly paid. Opportunities in the so-called gig economy are often menial, for example, working in mail-order warehouses or as food delivery couriers. The sociologist, Guy Standing, has described these workers as the 'precariat' - the modern precarious proletariat (Standing, 2011). In a later discussion of the longer-term effects of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis (GFC), Standing identified what he termed the 'precariat charter' – the results of globalisation of capital and labour, austerity policies of governments as tax revenues decline, and growing inequality. For developed (OECD) countries, workers' incomes from wages and salaries have declined as a proportion of national income over more than two decades. Secure and fulltime jobs, especially in manufacturing, have also declined due to production being moved to low-wage

countries. Jobs in services such as aged, child and social care are casualised and poorly paid. Emma Dawson describes these and other service roles as forming the 'foundational economy' of Australia, essential to the effective functioning of the nation, and in most cases requiring good interpersonal skills and organisational abilities which are not adequately remunerated (Dawson, 2020).

As noted in the previous chapter, young Australian workers in 2020 have been disproportionately affected by job losses resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. University of Melbourne labour market economist, Jeff Borland, argues that unemployment experienced by young people results in lifetime 'scarring' in terms of employment, income, and mental wellbeing (Borland, 2020). His analysis of the aftermath of the GFC was that while the Australian economy recovered fairly quickly, youth unemployment has remained high. Borland predicts that this will also be the case if and when economic conditions improve post-pandemic.

This is a brief overview of the recent and contemporary context of youth unemployment. I will return to this topic later in this chapter when I discuss how income and employment support services have failed to address changed social and economic conditions.

2.3 The 'dole' - from benefit to allowance

In 1945, the Commonwealth (Labour Party) Government introduced a range of income support payments under the auspices of the (then) Department of Social Services. These payments included Age, Widow, and Invalid Pensions; payments for dependent children (Child Endowment) and Unemployment and Sickness Benefits. The latter benefits were available to claimants from the age of 16 years. A Special Benefit was available to 15-year-olds in exceptional circumstances, this reflected that the school leaving age was as low as 14 in some jurisdictions (Ey, 2012).

As an interesting aside, the then Liberal Party Opposition Leader, Robert Menzies, shortly to become Prime Minister, opposed the means testing of Unemployment Benefits and argued for a universal social insurance scheme:

> The moment we establish, or perpetuate, the principle that the citizen, in order to get something he needs, or wants, and to which he has looked forward, must prove his

> poverty, we convert him into a suppliant to the State for benevolence. That position is inconsistent with the proper dignity of the citizen in a democratic country. People should be able to obtain these benefits as a matter of right, with no more loss of their own standards of self-respect than would be involved in collecting from an insurance company the proceeds of an endowment policy on which they have been paying premiums for years (Menzies, 1944, as cited in Arthur, 2019).

I have quoted Menzies here, as he remains an icon to many modern-day conservatives. These people might do well to consider the current regime imposed on unemployed Australians, and how they are indeed suppliants for 'benevolence' from the state and its agents.

From its inception in 1945, the Unemployment Benefit was set at a lower level than the Age, Widow and Invalid Pensions, based on the assumption at the time that most recipients would be on the payment for short periods of time between jobs. The conditions for receiving the fortnightly payment were maintaining registration with the Commonwealth Employment Service (CES), lodging a fortnightly form recording availability for and efforts to find work, and declaring any casual work and earnings.

I recall applying for the payment in 1982 after returning from a year overseas. I received a first cheque within a fortnight. The CES had a professional employment service for graduates, and I was advised just to keep checking with potential social work employers. During the few weeks in which I received the benefit, confirmation that I was maintaining contact with this CES was enough to satisfy.

In the early 1980s, the national unemployment rate was close to 11 per cent. The term 'dole bludger' had entered the Australian vernacular during the 1970s. However, the prevailing attitudes in the CES and DSS bureaucracies represented a benign tolerance to unemployed people struggling with the adverse labour market. I knew many people in Adelaide who remained on the benefit for months and even years while pursuing alternative lifestyles, volunteer work and part-time studies, although it helped to have a kindly landlord or support from friends and family.

In case this seem like rose-coloured nostalgia, it's important to consider that the Social Security legislation had many features that had become moribund. Students leaving school in Years 8 or 9 could go straight onto benefits, yet there was little or no financial support for

them or their families to enable completion of school or higher education. Young women over the age of sexual consent could partner with men and be considered as dependent spouses for the purposes of receiving unconditional DSS payments. There were periods when applications for the Invalid Pension were encouraged as a means of reducing the number of older men in long-term receipt of Unemployment Benefits.

Significant reforms to social security began to occur in the 1980s, initiated by an extensive review (*The Cass Review 1986-88*) commissioned by the Social Security Minister, Brian Howe. From this time on, subsequent reviews and enquiries have emphasised 'active' policies affecting unemployed people with greatly increased emphasis on compliance (Regan, 2014). This compliance is undertaken by privatised employment services, the CES having been entirely replaced by these by 1996.

This history and related issues will be further covered in subsequent chapters, particularly the factors which have driven policy changes, and whether 'reforms' have been efficacious in improving the circumstances of unemployed young Australians. What I want to emphasise here is how the language and discourse about unemployment and income support has changed. Thus, in the title of this section, the term 'benefit' signifies a degree of entitlement as an element of a social compact, whereas an 'allowance' implies something that is granted, but with a high degree of discretion and conditionality. This very much represents the evolution of payments for unemployed people.

It is of note that the term 'social security' is retained in Commonwealth legislation, but the department of that name ceased to exist at the same time as the CES. The term 'welfare' is almost always used to describe income support, except the Age Pension. This again implies that these payments are handouts from a (grudgingly) benevolent state, rather than provided as a means of security for all citizens that need them.2.4 Conditionality and compliance

For more than two decades, unemployment payments have been subject to increased restrictions. There are three main areas of restrictions which can significantly affect the financial viability and survival of unemployed Australians. The first of these is the actual level of payments of JobSeeker Payment and Youth Allowance, the second is the various preclusions for payment according to individual or family financial circumstances, and the

third is the compliance regime with significant penalties of reduction or cancellation of payments.

Each of these areas will be discussed in more detail in the thematic discussion and analysis of the literature and documents. In this section, I will make some personal reflections and observations which are relevant to the development of my ideas and priorities for research:

Adequacy of payments: as mentioned, unemployment payments were historically lower than pensions as the benefits were considered as short-term assistance for people between jobs. This was not an unreasonable argument in the post-World War 2 decades of full employment and high demand for labour, however, since the 1970s the proportion of people out of work for 12 months or more has steadily increased. In the mid-1990s, increases in unemployment payments in line with inflation were limited to the consumer price index (CPI), whereas pension payments were indexed to a more generous calculation based on average wages/earnings. The most recent report from the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS) on poverty states that, for Australian households relying on Newstart Allowance as their main source of income, there was an average gap of $136 between weekly income and the poverty line (Davidson, Saunders, Bradbury & Wong, 2018). Even if the reduced Coronavirus Supplement of $250 per fortnight continues into 2021, the income of JobSeeker and Parenting Payment recipients will still be below the poverty line.

Preclusions for payments: in Australia, almost all income support payments are subject to means testing, with individual and family income and assets affecting eligibility. However, the tests for unemployed people are more stringent and complex, for example, the 'liquid assets waiting period' which can preclude any payment for up to three months if an individual has access to cash above a modest amount. Other waiting and preclusion periods apply to people who have been paid out leave entitlements or who do contract and seasonal work. There is a plethora of rules affecting people deemed to have become voluntarily unemployed or who have moved to regions with lower employment prospects.

The result of these restrictions is that many unemployed people are afforded limited financial security and resources. Along with receiving income support well below the poverty line (especially if single), they are far more likely to have difficulty in meeting

housing and utility costs or have money to deal with unexpected circumstances such as illness or repair costs of cars or appliances. Constantly struggling to manage financial issues is unlikely to improve a person's prospects of seeking or obtaining work.

The compliance regime: unemployed Australians are subjected to stringent conditions if they wish to receive income support. Failure to comply with these will result in 'breach' penalties which reduce, suspend, or entirely cancel payments. Obligations on jobseekers had become stricter from the late 1980s under the regime of the CES and DSS, with increased use of sanctions and financial penalties which reduced or cancelled income support payments.

By the late 1990s, the penalty regime administered by the privatised employment services agencies and Centrelink had become controversial. Although the major political parties, media and popular opinion supported the broad notion that unemployed people should be subject to strict obligations, there was much evidence that disadvantaged jobseekers – people with existing complex personal issues - were most commonly sanctioned. Two cumulative breaches would reduce payments for up to six months, whilst a third breach within a two-year period would result in complete cancellation of payments for eight weeks. These penalties resulted in people becoming or remaining homeless and relying upon emergency relief from family and charities.

Welfare advocacy groups and charities were highly critical of this regime, the proportionality of the sanctions and their effect on people who were already poor and marginalised. Nongovernment agencies commissioned an independent panel to review the breach penalties (Pearce, Disney & Ridout, 2002).

2.5 My practice experience and the genesis for this research

At the time that the breach policies were implemented, I was employed as a Centrelink senior social worker. Following the publication of the review of breaches, the Government declined to change policies or the penalties; but agreed that Centrelink would offer a social work interview and assessment for any individual facing the implementation of a third breach (McDonald & Marston, 2006).

Over the next few years, I and my staff interviewed scores of clients. We would nearly always ensure that the penalty was not imposed, with referrals made within the agency or to other services. The rare exceptions where we did not recommend the removal of the sanction were where there was documented evidence of misrepresentation, such as undeclared work or false addresses.

These brief assessments and interventions identified many common issues experienced by this client group. Almost all were male, usually aged from late teens to early 30s, and had come from fractured or blended families, with poor current relationships with parents and siblings. There was a low level of formal education, such as completion of Year 12. All had been unemployed for more than a year, some for several years. Where the person had been employed at some stage, work was usually low paid and insecure. Questions about general health indicated indifferent physical health, poor diet, and sleep. Discussions about health frequently elicited a history of alcohol and/or illicit drug use. The most common drug used was cannabis, with habitual or daily use beginning in adolescence.

From the experience of conducting these interviews, I formed a view that nearly every one of these clients was experiencing high levels of mental health distress. The mental health issues were strongly associated with long-term unemployment, poverty, and disadvantage. These issues, combined with substance use/self-medication, were significant barriers to participation in employment and education.

I left Centrelink in 2006 and subsequently worked in a range of mental health development and training programs. During this period there was considerable expansion in primary mental health care programs, involving an increased role for general practitioners and allied health workers in providing assessment and treatment. The headspace youth mental health services began to be established in metropolitan and rural areas. These local centres were specifically set up to provide mental health and counselling services to young people aged between 12 and 25 years.

This expansion in mental health services acknowledged the high prevalence of mental health disorders (anxiety and depression) that had been identified in the National Mental

Health and Wellbeing Surveys conducted in 1997 and 2007. The prevalence of these issues for younger Australians aged 16-24 years is one in four (25 per cent). I believed that the recognition of the need to address these issues was to be applauded, however, there was little consideration of the causes of mental health distress as I had observed with my unemployed clients. This was the genesis of my MA research project completed in 2016. Some of the ideas and concepts contained in that research will be revisited in this thesis.

2.6 Are supports for young unemployed Australians fit for purpose in the 21st Century?

In 18th and 19th Century Britain, one method to deal with the unemployed and poor was to establish workhouses. Some of these institutions lasted well into the 20th Century and their purpose was as much moral as practical. The inmates were removed from street begging and obvious idleness. In return for menial and barely productive work they received basic accommodation and sustenance. They were reminded that they were of a different order to the decent working class, even though many were in fact former workers affected by industrial change or injuries arising from workplace accidents or military service (Crowther, 1981).

The experience of working in the social security systems that I have described led me to believe that little has changed in the prevailing social attitudes to unemployed people, especially the young. Technically, Australia has had relatively full employment, with an average unemployment rate of around 5 per cent prior to 2020. However, this headline figure does not describe the many facets of unemployment, including which age groups and regions are most affected and the long duration of worklessness for many people. These will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 5. In this section, I will briefly explore the current policies and ideologies which affect unemployed young people.

As I have outlined earlier in this introduction, since the 1980s there has been a constant increase in the so-called mutual obligations expected of jobseekers. This has translated into a regime of compliance that at present appears almost entirely focussed on applying penalties for even the slightest failure to adhere to the conditions for receiving income support, rather than rewarding effort and initiative. The title of amendments to social security legislation proposed in 2017 may give some idea of the government's intentions:

'Targeted Compliance Framework for Participation Payments' (Parliament of Australia, 2017).

The amendments which were passed in 2018 run to several pages of minutiae which describe in prescriptive detail the requirements placed on jobseekers. Employment agency staff can suspend payments immediately if a client fails to attend an interview or appointment. Demerit points are accrued for these and other infractions, which can include a range of actions and behaviours deemed as inappropriate. Accruing demerit points will prompt review, reassessment, and financial penalties (reduction or cancellation of payments).

There is no longer even a shred of pretence about obligation being mutual. There is nothing about the responsibilities of the employment services to support or enable the wellbeing of their clients. Most significantly, decisions about the financial penalties are made by the privatised agencies, not the Commonwealth Government agency, Services Australia (Centrelink). This means that decision-making on benefits provided by government has been outsourced. These decisions are therefore not subject to the review and appeals processes that have historically applied to social security matters.

These changes that took effect in July 2018 do not appear to have provoked much public discussion. Two reports were commissioned which have incorporated the experiences of jobseekers in the current regime (ACOSS 2018; Per Capita 2018). These report contained personal accounts for unemployed people of diverse ages and backgrounds. While it might be expected that the reports are more likely to contain the views of people who are not happy with the regime, they are nevertheless unsettling reading. What emerges is a picture of a system that is inflexible and primarily focussed on compliance; whether programs or activities benefit individuals is secondary to prescribing behaviour and punishment.

The current policies have reinforced for me the importance of conducting research about young unemployed people experiencing mental health issues and other adversities. If the system can grind down the resilience of the older, experienced, and articulate citizens who are represented in the two reports, then perhaps we must be even more concerned for those who are even more vulnerable, with limited experience in challenging authority.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS FOR THE RESEARCH

3.1 Research themes and key theories

This research primarily focusses on contemporary policy, between the years 2010 to 2020. Earlier literature and documents have been included, where they provide history and context. The issues of unemployment, poor mental health and associated social exclusion represent a classic, complex 'wicked problem', with multiple causal factors and no simple solution.

As outlined in the preceding chapters, this research covers broad areas, including health and social policies, the current characteristics of employment and unemployment, mental health issues, and the design and provision of services. The four themes outlined in Chapter 1 (1.5) require some additional description and discussion to inform and justify the theoretical perspectives which are employed:

Theme 1 - mental health issues and mental health services for young people: Following the first national survey of mental health in 1997, Australian governments have introduced initiatives in primary mental health care to address high prevalence mental health conditions, such as anxiety and depression. This has coincided with a greater recognition of the social determinants of mental health and well-being. However, the focus of mental health services and practice is almost entirely on individual treatment or therapy, rather than addressing the **social and economic causes** of mental health distress (Rosenberg & Hickie, 2019).

Theme 2 - inequality: Cohort studies conducted in Australia and overseas indicate that young people who grow up in the most disadvantaged families and communities are far more likely to experience adversities well into adulthood (Poulton, Moffitt & Silva, 2015; Fergusson, Boden & Horwood, 2015; Tiller, Hall, Hicking, Di Nicola & Liyanarachchi, 2021). These include unemployment, poverty, poorer physical and mental health and social exclusion. The research examines how alternative policies could improve young peoples'

participation in education and how employment could contribute to improved social mobility.

Theme 3: conditionality of government income support: Younger Australians who are unemployed or studying are subject to many stringent and complex rules if they wish to obtain income support/social security (Davidson, 2019; Bennett, Dawson, Lewis, O'Halloran & Smith, 2018). Youth and Jobseeker Allowances are conditional on family income and earnings and, even when paid at the maximum possible rate, are widely considered to be inadequate for maintaining even a basic standard of living. Unemployed people are required to register with privatised employment services and are subject to harsh penalties for non-compliance with job search requirements (Parliament of Australia, 2019a).

Theme 4: policy innovation: The research identifies opportunities for improvement, including new initiatives addressing the complexity of problems experienced by many young people. Examples will include the trials of IPS programs and other, existing or proposed, community-based initiatives which combine employment and social support.

Given the complexity inherent in each of these themes and their interrelationship to each other, I have developed a framework combining theoretical approaches, which I believe can best support the research. These are **Governmentality**, the **What's the Problem Represented to Be? (WPR)** approach to policy analysis, and a theory of **Institutions** and the roles that they can play in influencing outcomes for clients and policy change. I see these approaches as complementary to each other.

The following table illustrates how the theories are relevant to the themes, including some brief comments.

Table 3.1: Theories and themes

Theories and relationships between theories	Application to themes
Governmentality (McKee, 2009; Henman, 2013)	Applies most strongly to theme of conditionality, but also relevant to considerations of social determinants, inequality and 'welfare reform'. There is a growing body of literature exploring 'e-governmentality' of citizens – how information technology is used in surveillance and control of individuals.
WPR – Analysing Policy: What's the problem represented to be? (Bacchi,2009) This approach includes some elements of governmentality theory	This is a framework for analysis of social and economic 'problems', from a critical perspective of how they are represented – particularly by the dominant powers and agencies. This is relevant to all themes, but especially how young people are frequently 'problematised' about issues that they have little or no control over.
Micro-Institutionalist Theory of Policy Implementation (Rice, 2012) This is in part developed from the original literature on Street-Level Bureaucrats (Lipsky, 2010)	This provides a framework for understanding the dynamics of the welfare state and the interactions between government, institutions (agencies) and practitioners. This is relevant to analysis of contemporary literature on Australian income and employment support services. It is also relevant to interpretation of literature/documents that evaluate and critique policy.

3.2 Governmentality

In introducing this concept, I have chosen to use Kim McKee's interpretation of Michel Foucault's original writings on governmentality. She has developed a framework of 'post-Foucauldian governmentality' which can be applied to critical analysis of social policy, with a simple description of what can sometimes be dense and arcane concepts in Foucault's original work:

> …Foucault highlights the emergence of a particular rationality of rule in early modern Europe, in which the activity of government became separated from the self-preservation of the sovereign and redirected towards optimizing the well-being of the population, hence making this population potentially more 'docile' and 'productive' …Crucially, he introduces the term 'biopolitics' to draw attention to a mode of power, which operates through the administration of life itself – meaning bodies (both individually and collectively), their health, sanitation, procreation, mental and physical capacities and so forth…In doing so, Foucault illuminates an 'art of governing' that involves sets of practices and calculated strategies that are both plural and immanent in the state. In addition, he articulates a mode of political government more concerned with the management of the population than the management of a territory per se (McKee, 2009, p466).

This description acknowledges that governmentality can be rational and justified as providing benefits to 'the population', for example in the introduction of public health measures such as clean water and sewerage. With its complex political system of federal, state/territory and local governments, Australia may well be an example of a very high level of governmentality and regulation of its citizens. However, I suggest the majority of the population would support regulations that are seen to be in the public interest, for example rules applying to owning and driving a motor vehicle or building construction standards. In 2020, we have seen in Australia a high level of acceptance (if not universal) of restrictions on behaviour and activities as a means of containing the spread of the COVID-19 virus. What are more contestable are rules applying to personal or private behaviours, such as (past) criminal penalties for sexual relationships between men, or current sanctions for possessing and consuming small amounts of illicit drugs.

I have mentioned at the beginning of this chapter that one of the four major themes that I will be exploring and discussing is the conditionality of income support payments or 'welfare'. What I wish to identify here is that this conditionality is a manifestation of governmentality that mandates the behaviour and conduct of particular groups of citizens, i.e. recipients of income support, while these rules do not apply to others.

These developments in welfare policy and practice are supported by the increasing prevalence and sophistication of information technology, which Greg Marston has described as 'e-government' and 'screen-level bureaucracy' (Marston, 2006). Paul Henman has identified the rapid development in the early 21st Century of what he describes as Web 2.0 technologies. These are the internet-based applications, such as social media, which are

highly interactive and allow user-generated content. As almost everyone who uses applications such as Google or Facebook will be aware, data are mined from interactions. These are used to direct advertising and select particular websites and services, based on user preferences and activities identified by algorithms. Henman describes government agencies' evolving use of these technologies as the 'Governmentalities of Gov 2.0' (Henman, 2013). Unemployed citizens, in particular, are required more and more to interact by computer and the internet with government agencies, employment service providers and potential employers. These interactions can be tracked, and data shared between parties, as indeed happens to monitor individuals' compliance or otherwise. This enables the monitoring of behaviour and the rapid application of sanctions, including, since 2018, the ability of employment agencies to instantly suspend unemployment benefits.

3.3 Governmentality and 'welfare reform'

In the latter decades of the 20th Century, many developed countries embarked on reform of government services. 'Welfare reform' was frequently pre-eminent as a target for policy change and savings, particularly as expenditures grew with higher levels of unemployment from the 1970s onwards, initiatives to tackle child and family poverty, and increased life expectancy leading to higher numbers of aged/retired pensioners.

In Australia, the USA and the United Kingdom, the major focus of welfare reform has been on unemployed people and sole parents. In the second chapter, I described some of the changes in Australia from a personal perspective. In later chapters I will discuss policies, such as conditionality, in detail. Here I will briefly describe aspects of the contemporary welfare state and selected literature about how governmentality is manifested in the regulation of the lives and behaviour of many citizens.

Edgar Carson and Lorraine Kerr describe the contemporary Australian welfare state as representing concepts of mutual support and dependency, as well as promoting self-sufficiency. These authors note that in the 21st Century, the latter concept has come to dominate policy:

> The role of the nation state and its responsibility for welfare shifted from those of a *protective state*, recognising that structural issues impact disproportionately on individuals, to that of an *enabling state*, whereby individuals are assumed to be

> deficient and must be pressed to enter the labour market and hence become 'included' through the economy (Carson & Kerr, 2014, p.68).

Some of the more obvious manifestations of governmentality in Australian policy are the iterations of 'welfare to work' since 2006. These introduced various obligations for recipients of unemployment benefits and parenting payments, involving activities such part-time paid or 'voluntary' work, study, and training. In researching the effects of these policies on single parents, Michelle Brady has noted that implementation frequently involved what Foucault termed 'the conduct of conduct'. Policies are designed to modify the behaviour of individuals regardless of any actual outcomes in employment or education participation (Brady, 2011). A qualitative study of single mothers by Good Shepherd Australia found that employment service providers focussed on compliance at the expense of outcomes and, in some cases, to the detriment of good parenting, and voluntary and paid work that was already being done (McLaren, Maury & Squire, 2018)

Kemran Mestan has identified paternalism as an additional facet of governmentality in Australian 'welfare to work' policies (Mestan, 2014). As Mestan describes these policies, recipients of income support are compelled to engage in job search activities and other activities to address their 'dependency' on welfare, regardless of their own efforts, and sometimes regardless of their actual ability or capacity to work. So, not only does governmentality mandate specific actions and requirements for unemployed people, it also implies that 'we know what's best for you and you don't'. This will be an important point for consideration later in this thesis, in the examination of what policies actually work for young people experiencing more complex adversities, including poor mental health.

Governmentality will be discussed as theory and practice, as it relates to each of the four themes, and I shall endeavour to identify when it can be a force for good. As noted by Kim McKee, quoted earlier in this chapter, some elements of governmentality can contribute to positive social determinants of public health and wellbeing.

3.4 WPR – the representation of problems

Carol Bacchi's 'What's the Problem Represented to be' (WPR) framework is summarised as:

1. What is the 'problem' represented to be in a specific policy?

2. What presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the problem?
3. How has this representation of the 'problem' come about?
4. What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the 'problem' be thought about differently?
5. What effects are produced by this representation of the problem?
6. How/where is this representation of the problem produced, disseminated and defended? How could it be questioned, disrupted and replaced? (Bacchi, 2009)

This framework is explicitly sceptical – even the 'problem' in inverted commas suggests that it is not to be taken as a given fact. Bacchi draws heavily on the work of Foucault and others, to argue that many contemporary issues and specific populations are conceived as problems to suit political and economic agendas (for example, 'welfare reform' as discussed in the previous section).

Bacchi dissects the issues of welfare, youth and unemployment, using as examples the Work for the Dole program, the language of 'welfare reform' and the contemporary ideologies that influence policy. A discussion by Paul Henman on the 'myths' of welfare reform (Henman, 2002), provides a useful example of how the WPR approach can be employed to analyse a problem and propose solutions.

Henman argues that the myths driving the imperative for reform were that the system was broken, with too many claimants dependant on public funds, and that previous policy regimes did not require any obligation of job seekers. The problem then becomes defined as resulting from individual behaviours and failings, and therefore the policy focus is on recipients of income support as the problem. In the Australian context, this representation of 'welfare dependency' and 'dole bludgers' is frequently reinforced by commercial newspaper, radio and television coverage. The 'silences', as Bacchi defines them, include the persistently high levels of unemployment and underemployment, exacerbated in 2020 by the effects of the COVID-19 virus. Another silence identified by Henman is the relative lack of any discussion on social and economic policies for job creation.

I suggest that WPR is both a theoretical approach and a methodology. It can be used equally effectively to analyse policies, programs and initiatives in administration and service delivery. It can also provide for analysis of qualitative and quantitative data. The next

chapter on methodology will describe in more detail the application of WPR to this research and to critical discourse analysis.

3.5 Dorothy Rice - A Micro-Institutionalist Theory of Policy Implementation

In this theoretical model, Dorothy Rice (Rice, 2012) attempts to address and explain the increasing complexities of modern welfare service delivery, particularly the trend towards 'activation' of service users to become less dependent on government support. This theory complements the theories of governmentality and WPR outlined above and provides a framework for understanding the dynamics and interactions in complex systems.

Rice draws upon the original work of Michael Lipsky on Street-Level Bureaucrats, which examined the behaviour of workers in public service organisations. Among the categories of workers Lipsky included in his description are police, public school teachers, legal aid lawyers, and social services/welfare workers.

> Street-level bureaucrats dominate political controversies over public services for two general reasons. First, debates about the proper scope and focus of governmental services are essentially debates over the scope and unction of these public employees. Second, street-level bureaucrats have considerable impact on peoples' lives. This impact may be of several kinds. They socialize citizens to expectations of government services and a place in the political community. They determine the eligibility of citizens for government benefits and sanctions. They oversee the treatment (the service) citizens receive in those programs. Thus, in a sense street-level bureaucrats implicitly mediate aspects of the constitutional relationship of citizens to the state. In short, they hold the keys to a dimension of citizenship (Lipsky, 2010, p.4).

I believe that this assertion by Lipsky holds true today. However, 40 years on, I will make two observations on how circumstances have changed. The first is that social security (now 'welfare') is far more conditional and focussed on compliance. This will be discussed in detail in Chapter 7 of this thesis. The second major change is the privatisation of social services, including employment services. In discussing this development, I will explore whether it has led to more rigorous and less discretionary implementation of the rules, or more flexibility, depending on the type of agencies and the staff they employ.

In summarising Lipksy's earlier work, Rice describes the behaviour of bureaucrats as being influenced by two factors – the organisational context and individual cognitive-emotional actions which:

> …in interplay with the organizational context, will determine whether street-level bureaucrats rigorously apply, creatively adapt, or undermine formal policy goals in their interaction with clients and client groups (Rice, 2012, p.1039).

The roles played by organisations and their staff do not occur in a vacuum, they represent structured situations and practices which generally represent broadly accepted norms and culture:

> For example, marriage is an institution because it elicits a wide range of standard behaviors such as wearing a wedding ring, referring to one's spouse as "my husband" or "my wife," and not marrying B while being still married to A. In the world of social politics, unemployment benefits are an institution because all recipients of unemployment benefits will display certain behavioral patterns such as appearing at the Public Employment Service (PES) at regular intervals, not working in (regular) jobs while receiving unemployment benefits, and writing job applications to meet the benefit requirements (Rice, 2012, pp 1040-1041).

In this research I will consider which institutions implicitly and explicitly structure the lives of young people. These can include notions of citizenship as evidenced by participation, for example being employed or studying; and being mentally and socially 'normal', for example behaving appropriately, obeying laws and not being intoxicated by alcohol or other drugs.

In Rice's framework, institutions are not actual entities, rather they are the 'ideational blueprints' that mediate between societal systems and individuals. The three levels of societal systems are **cultural**, **economic,** and **political**; these do not represent actual human and social interactions but ideas and ideologies (Rice, 2012, p1042). Concepts such as 'activation' and conditionality can be articulated into one or other of the levels described by Rice. This conceptualisation can then provide a dynamic model for interpreting organisational characteristics and individual behaviour in the provision of social services.

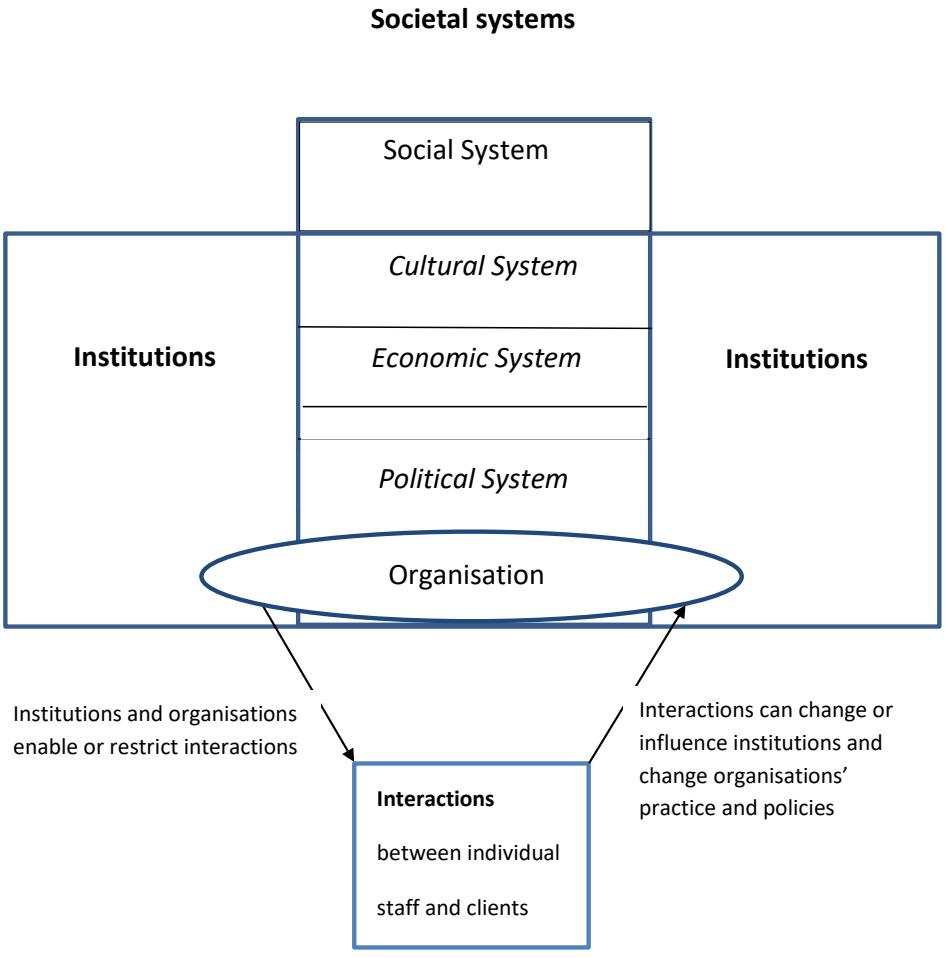
The level of **cultural** systems includes beliefs and norms. For the purposes of this research, ideas and theories about social inclusion and participation can be incorporated here, as well as the social determinants of health/mental health.

At the level of **economic** systems, the concepts that promote equality or inequality can be incorporated and considered. Also included are the foundational ideas of the welfare state, which intend to alleviate poverty and disadvantage by some measure of redistribution of

resources. Some aspects of neoliberal ideologies can also be considered, particularly as they have influenced and altered the design and provision of social services.

The **political** systems incorporate the ideological beliefs that produce policy and the design and provision of services. This is not simply about party or parliamentary politics. Rather, the beliefs encompass the (at times abstract) ideologies that underpin the practice of politics. The theories of governmentality will be considered in conjunction with the ideology of conditionality – that receipt of government support for young people out of work will be contingent on a regime of strict compliance.

Figure 3.1: A simplified version of micro-institutionalist theory as represented by Dorothy Rice:



Adapted from Rice (2012)

Several relationships and dynamics are portrayed here. We can see that organisations exist under or within societal systems, but also form part of institutional frameworks. Using the example of Centrelink as Australia's national social security provider, the organisation exists under the three systems. It represents, at least to some degree, a cultural norm that the state should make material provision for its citizens, especially those less able to provide for themselves. It also represents aspects of the economic system, i.e. the distribution of public monies according to perceived need and basic living standards. It represents most certainly the face of the government and political system as experienced by millions of citizens, every benefit or service having been established by legislation or regulation.

Rice has identified that the welfare state is by no means the only societal institution that is influenced by the relationships between organisations/staff and their clients. With her focus on the paradigm of activation of clients of the 'welfare state', she notes that these relationships incorporate the institutions of work and 'collective solidarity'. Centrelink's business is deeply integrated into the institution of work, both as the agency providing benefits to unemployed people and activating them into jobs. It is also a significant, albeit at times begrudging, manifestation of what remains of the original social security consensus established in the 1940s.

The other significant dynamic represented in the diagram is that between caseworkers and clients within organisations. As I have just noted, welfare and social agencies, such as employment service providers, exist within institutions and under political (legislative) systems. These define the activities of staff and can include enabling (helping) or restricting (sanctioning). In turn, the interactions between the staff (street-level bureaucrats) and clients can and sometimes do influence the nature of institutions and systems.

Centrelink can again be used as an example with which to illustrate this dynamic. A key function is enabling, through provision of payments and support services and personnel, including social workers and psychologists. At the same time, for unemployed people and others subject to participation requirements, such as parents of school-age children, sanctions are imposed if clients do not comply with activities including looking for work, doing part-time or voluntary work, or engaging in education or training.

These activities and interactions in turn can influence the nature of institutions and organisational imperatives. Again, we can see this occurring in organisations such as Centrelink where enormous amounts of data are gathered which can be used to 'prove', or at the very least, reinforce assumptions about client groups. So, for example, the number of sanctions imposed on non-compliant unemployed people is used to support an increasingly strict regime of activation and motivation. As Rice observes, micro-institutional theory can interpret and explain

> …the social mechanisms by which the welfare state as an institution frames and shapes the caseworker-client interaction, thereby also welfare outcomes for clients and eventually, in an aggregated way, societal structures (Rice, 2012, p.1056).

This framework seems robust and relevant, even when there have been structural changes such as the privatisation of employment services. In Australia, there is no longer a public employment service. It is certainly pertinent in considering why increased compliance and conditionality have become normalised. It is also relevant to the theme of policy innovation. There is a body of contemporary literature on social service provision which discusses the ways that agencies and staff can positively influence policy and outcomes for service users (McDonald, 2013; Considine, Lewis, O'Sullivan & Sol, 2015). The theory will also be a useful tool in analysing the outcomes of new programs such as IPS, which will be discussed in Chapter 8.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 Introduction - how this project has evolved

As I have said in the introduction to this thesis, this research was inspired by my practice experience in social work and project management in mental health programs. Having arrived at some definitions of the problems and the research question, the challenge has been to select theories and a methodology that best support the research, and which can lead to coherent proposals for changes to Australian policies and public services. This project is about practice contributing to the development of ideas and theories, much more than it is about theories explaining practice and policy.

This project has changed and evolved as research has been undertaken. This seems to be an experience shared by many of my academic colleagues. I had originally considered basing the research on interviews with young unemployed people and their lived experience. On reflection, I considered that many logistical and ethical problems would arise in this approach. Additionally, I questioned whether, in the present social climate, the voices of powerless citizens would carry much influence.

In the second iteration of the research, I proposed conducting interviews with service managers and practitioners implementing IPS programs. There were promising initial discussions with some agencies which eventually proved fruitless, in one instance provoking outright hostility. Having been a practitioner and program manager, I appreciate that, for people in the field, facilitating research projects in addition to managing busy workloads may not be feasible. I have speculated that this project also has political elements that might not sit well with some programs dependent on government funding.

I therefore decided on what I considered to be a more efficacious research methodology. This third iteration is a critical analysis of policy and service provision. This provides for critiquing and challenging current policies and proposing alternatives that can provide improved support for young unemployed people experiencing poor mental health. The theoretical approaches outlined in the previous chapter provide a sound foundation for this

approach, which will include a discussion of historical context such as the evolution, and partial diminution, of the Australian welfare state. I see these theoretical frameworks as robust, in that they continue to apply as politics and policies evolve, especially in response to events such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

A challenge in the initial stages of the research was managing a potentially large and complex topic. The upside of this challenge has been that the breadth of the topic allows for incorporating quantitative and qualitative data, both of which are abundant. The quantitative data are historical and contemporary, and provide a sound context for identifying and understanding issues. The qualitative data complement the quantitative data by interpreting and explaining what these facts and 'realities' mean for individuals and communities. The scope of the research has allowed for a wealth of literature and data to be drawn upon. Many documents, including parliamentary inquires and reports from nongovernment agencies, incorporate the lived experience of practitioners and unemployed people.

In retrospect, I do not think my original proposals could have added much to what is already in the public discourse. What I have aimed to do is to gather as much relevant material as possible, that is already available, and synthesise this into new ideas and proposals for change.

The drafting of the final iteration of this thesis commenced in late 2019, based on work already completed in the literature review. The thematic structure was developed in early 2020 and the first drafts of the four thematic chapters were completed. During this period of writing the COVID-19 pandemic affected most of the world. In Australia a National Cabinet of first ministers was created which replaced the Council of Australian Governments (COAG). COAG had usually met every three months; the National Cabinet group has met more frequently to formulate national and state/territory responses to the pandemic. Immediate responses included 'lockdown' and the suspension of many businesses and social activities. The initial national lockdown caused a rapid increase in unemployment and the beginnings of what was anticipated to be a long-term economic recession. By late 2020, it appeared that the Australian economy, as measured by consumption and employment, had nearly returned to pre-pandemic metrics. However, at the time of writing in 2021, new

varieties of the COVID-19 virus have emerged in Australia. Local outbreaks of infection have resulted in additional lockdowns imposed by State and Territory Governments. These lockdowns continue to affect casual and temporary workers, and the long-term economic consequences are yet to be seen.

Some Commonwealth Government responses to COVID-19, such as the temporary increases to unemployment payments, have been particularly relevant to the topic of this thesis. Therefore, work already completed has been revised as much as possible to consider contemporary and potential future events. As well as this revision, the pandemic has resulted in me reconsidering my methodology. The evolution of this methodology will be discussed and explained in the next section of this chapter.

4.2 How the methodology was developed.

The theoretical perspectives of governmentality, the WPR approach to policy analysis, and Dorothy Rice's 'micro-institutionalist' policy implementation were described in the previous chapter. They were chosen in the early stages of working on this PhD research. Carol Bacchi's WPR approach is also a methodology, and indeed was central to my Masters degree research completed in 2016. Although these perspectives and approaches can be considered as quite separate, there are common elements that have been helpful in exploring the facets and themes contained in this research. Bacchi discusses governmentality as influencing social policies, similarly I think Rice's schema of 'institutions' also represents governmentality. Governmentality is used, for example, in Chapter 7, which explores the theme of 'welfare' conditionality. Rice and Lipsky's conceptualisation of street level bureaucrats informs the consideration of how policies might be improved by service providers themselves (Chapters 8 and 11).

In the previous iteration of this research project, I spent much time considering what theoretical and methodological approaches would be most appropriate to research with young people with lived experience, practitioners and service providers. The most appropriate approach applicable to lived experience seemed to be institutional ethnography, as exemplified by Michelle Brady's research with single mothers discussed in the previous chapter (Brady, 2011). I also had to consider how to address problems of policies and politics and determined that Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) would be an

appropriate methodology to apply to these. How CDA has been ultimately used as a perspective will be discussed in the next section of this chapter.

While I will employ CDA as a tool for discussion and analysis of texts, I had concerns about the limitations in focussing on criticism/critique without proposing ideas for change and improvement, as the topic of this thesis suggests. A solution was found in an article by the sociologist Ruth Levitas, which discusses the 'austerity' policies being implemented by the Conservative and Liberal Coalition Government in the UK, which was elected in 2010 (Levitas, 2012). In this article, Levitas pointed out the contradictions in the government's aspirations for the so-called inclusive 'Big Society', and the reality of wide-ranging cuts to social benefits and programs. In seeking to promote positive alternatives to these policies, she described how alternatives could be imagined as 'Utopia as method':

> Utopia as method has three modes. The first is an archaeological mode, piecing together the images of the good society that are embedded in political programmes and social and economic policies, and may involve both a hermeneutics of suspicion and a hermeneutics of faith. The second is an ontological mode which addresses the question of what kind of *people* particular societies develop and encourage. What is understood as human flourishing, what capabilities are valued, encouraged and genuinely enabled, or blocked and suppressed by specific existing or potential social arrangements: we are concerned here with the historical and social determination of human nature. The third is an architectural mode – that is, the imagination of potential alternative scenarios for the future, acknowledging the assumptions about and consequences for the people who might inhabit them. These in turn must be subject to archaeological critique, addressing the silences and inconsistencies all such images must contain, as well as the political steps forward that they imply (Levitas, 2012, p336).

Following this article, Levitas published a book which expanded upon this theme (Levitas, 2013). This introduces the history of ideas of Utopia as ideal societies, and the extent to which these ideas have influenced political thought and philosophy since the term was coined by Sir Thomas More in 1516. Levitas details the history of sociology as representing the desire to analyse and improve society. For a reader such as myself (not an expert sociologist) there is an extensive overview of the representation and influence of utopian ideas on the arts and social discourse. She also describes the evolution of sociology in the early 20th Century, and how it was encouraged as a distinct academic discipline in British universities. This had been supported with the support of many prominent social commentators, such as the writer H.G. Wells.

As I have stated in the introduction to this thesis, the motivation to undertake a PhD has been strongly grounded in my professional practice experience. In discovering Ruth Levitas, I saw a resonance between practice in the helping professions and perspectives that can foment social change. For practitioners in social work and health care, the tenets of practice with individuals and families will include taking a history, including both positive and negative life events, ascertaining what does the person want to change or achieve, and planning how this might occur. The conversation will often include identifying optimism and hope, or perhaps, as Levitas would say, imagining a reconstitution of the situation.

Levitas' method will be used extensively in the final two chapters of this thesis. As foreshadowed in the discussion in this section, it provides for identification and postulation of new ideas to address longstanding problems experienced by younger Australians. Some of these problems, in particular unemployment, have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and will require new thinking and solutions. In the spirit of optimism, I will end this section with a quote from the Indian writer and social activist, Arundhati Roy:

> Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next.
>
> We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it (Roy, 2020).

4.3 Historical and sociological perspectives

Before introducing CDA, it is relevant to consider the broad context of this research. As I have stated above, the topic is broad, and the literature/documents are sourced from academic scholarship and a range of policy documents, research, and commentary. The academic literature is drawn from many fields, including sociology, health, economics, and social work.

A 'policy vacuum' is a pejorative term, sometimes applied to Australian politicians and political parties, to illustrate a lack of consideration of a particular issue or problem. Policy itself does not occur in a vacuum. It results from deliberate decisions by governments and their agents, even if at times these decisions are not terribly well-informed. The

developments of welfare, social and mental health programs and services have been evolutionary and iterative. They also result from a multitude of dynamic forces and ideologies.

One author that I have found particularly helpful in describing and explaining the development of the welfare state in the 20th Century is the British historian, Eric Hobsbawm. He describes the 'Golden Age' of public provision of welfare and health services in most developed countries following World War 2. In his account, this epoch of 25-30 years resulted not only from a degree of political consensus about reducing poverty and inequality, but from social movements, the rise of trade unionism, technological change and increasing availability, and demand for, consumer goods (Hobsbawm 1994). It is important to note that Hobsbawm was quite particular in identifying that the developments in this era mostly applied to western capitalist economies, including Australia.

Hobsbawm was a friend and admirer of the French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, and saw Bourdieu as both a sociologist and historian who was able to intelligently analyse the dynamics of social change without succumbing to a rigid ideological stance:

> He is a thinker whose work largely converges with that of historians, which was not the case with Foucault—who trawled history for illustrations to serve a pre-constructed narrative...More than many social theorists, Bourdieu was constantly aware of three essential points. First, it is impossible to reduce the vast territory in which humans act upon nature and themselves—whether or not they know what they are doing—to a series of little gardens, run by a formal system of rules. Second, it is equally impossible *not* to systematize human relations, both in social practice and in the theory which analyses it. Third, 'it's always possible to show that things could have been otherwise, that it happened differently elsewhere, under other conditions'—and, I would add, in the spirit of Bourdieu, I trust—that they did happen differently in the past and will be different again in the future; and we will analyse things differently, too (Hobsbawm, 2016, p46).

For me, the above quote symbolises what I hope to achieve with this research – to make sense not just of 'what' has happened, but 'why' and 'how', and what are the possibilities of what could happen next. The works of Hobsbawm and Bourdieu reflect a depth of scholarship which draws upon conflicts, cultural history, economic and industrial development, politics, and social movements. They are invaluable in providing a historical

and international context for this research, and the trans-disciplinary nature of Critical Discourse Analysis as described by Norman Fairclough (Fairclough 2012).

4.4 Introducing Critical Discourse Analysis

This section will describe how some elements of CDA can provide perspective in description and analysis of the research themes. This definition by Teun van Dijk seems to fit well with the purpose of the research, which scrutinises existing policies and programs:

> Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context. With such dissident research, critical discourse analysts take explicit position, and thus want to understand, expose, and ultimately resist social inequality (van Dijk, 2001, p352).

As discussed in the previous chapter, this research will focus on four themes that have been identified as most relevant to the topic. As van Dijk has stated, CDA is concerned with the analysis of texts and other communications. This research will therefore not include a standalone literature review. The literature will be incorporated in each of the four themes. To provide for consistency in the discussion of the themes, this introduction will also define some key concepts and terms.

For the purposes of this research, I will paraphrase CDA as a critical examination of documents. Initially the texts are described - what is said and by whom? The context and authors are then outlined. The next stage is an examination of the language – how is the issue or 'problem' described and represented, what might lie behind this description and what may be the motivation for representing matters in a particular way? This then leads to analysis of how the issues could be represented differently (cf. Bacchi's WPR approach as described previously), and, consequently, what alternative ideas and strategies can be employed to 'resist social inequality'.

Norman Fairclough argues that CDA can provide an essential underpinning to analysis of institutions, ideologies, and social relations:

> Critical social analysis can be understood as normative and explanatory critique. It is normative critique in that does not simply describe existing realities but also evaluates them, assesses the extent to which they match up to various values, which are taken (more or less contentiously) to be fundamental for just or decent societies (e.g. certain

> standards – material but also political and cultural – of human well-being). It is explanatory critique in that it does not simply describe existing realities but seeks to explain them, for instance by showing them to be effects of structures or mechanisms or forces that the analyst postulates and whose reality s/he seeks to test out (e.g. inequalities in wealth, income and access to various social goods might be explained as an effect of mechanisms and forces associated with 'capitalism') (Fairclough, 2012, p9).

Fairclough then describes how this framework can be used to describe the dynamics of 'social process'. Social process is described as the interplay between three levels of 'social reality' – structures, practices, and events (Fairclough 2012, p11). The 'trans-disciplinary' methodology is then employed. This allows for the analysis and interpretation of these social realities from the perspectives of different disciplines, or different actors and agencies ('discourses'). Fairclough provides an example relevant to this research:

> For instance, the lives of poor people are construed not only through different discourses associated with different social practices (in politics, medicine, social welfare, academic sociology), but through different discourses in each, which correspond to differences of position and perspective. I use 'construe' in preference to 'represent' in order to emphasize an active and often difficult process of 'grasping' the world from a particular perspective (Fairclough, 2012, p11).

4.5 How the literature has been sought and categorised for this research

In the previous chapter, I identified the four themes this research will examine: mental health issues and mental health services for young people, inequality, conditionality of government income support, and policy innovation. These themes represent a range of domains and disciplines with many facets – hence the need to consider the trans-disciplinary methodology. In considering the potentially vast body of academic literature, I have focussed as much as possible on that which considers associations, for example those between unemployment, poverty, and mental health distress.

For the purposes of analysis of policies and programs (and consistent with the CDA methodology) the literature will include:

> **Policies:** These are a broad range of primary sources, including legislation, regulations, parliamentary proceedings, departmental reports, evaluations, and survey data.

Commentary and interpretation: These include scholarly articles and books as well as reports and inquiries conducted by peak bodies and other nongovernment agencies. Also included are parliamentary committee proceedings and related individual submissions. With these documents, and with policies, I have endeavoured to use contemporary material, from the past decade (2010 to 2020-2021). Older material has been used where required to provide background and historical perspective.

Media: media releases, transcripts, and articles, including selected social media/websites. As the COVID-19 pandemic rapidly changed conditions in Australia and most of the rest of the world during 2020, contemporary and potential future events are considered in this final version of the thesis. This will include, to paraphrase Ruth Levitas, an imagining of what a reconstituted and better post-pandemic society could be.

Much relevant information has been sourced from Australian government websites. These include the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) and departmental/agency data and reports. The Australian Parliamentary Library is a rich source of information, containing not only records of proceedings (Hansard) but also a range of background articles explaining policy developments over time.

Regarding books and journal articles, a search strategy has been employed using various combinations and permutations of terminologies related to the themes. There is a focus on Australian, United Kingdom, United States and New Zealand 'welfare-to-work' literature, as, at different stages, policies in one nation have influenced those of another. The majority of articles are contemporary (the period from 2010 to 2020), but older articles have been used where they provide history and context to current issues. The research reflects a systematic approach to reviewing the literature regarding the research question and the key themes outlined in the next part of this chapter.

The most useful database has been SAGE, followed by Informit. Manual searches have been undertaken of relevant journals, including Social Science and Medicine, Critical Policy Studies and the International Journal of Social Psychiatry. It is notable that the latter publication, while containing some excellent studies on social and cultural aspects of mental

health, had almost no coverage of employment and unemployment, despite these issues affecting a significant proportion of adolescents and young people.

4.6 The literature and the themes

This section highlights the selection of literature most relevant to each of the four themes that will be discussed in subsequent chapters. Some qualifiers and exclusion criteria are noted.

Mental health issues and mental health services for young people: Mental health issues for Australians aged 16-24 years, including survey data, peer-reviewed publications and empirical data - for example Australian Bureau of Statistics, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. The primary focus will be on high prevalence mental health disorders of anxiety and/or depression. These disorders are estimated to affect approximately one in four people in this cohort.

The history of the social determinants of health, and the relatively recent application of these to mental health, will be discussed. This discussion will include the literature covering the associations between unemployment and other adversities, and poorer physical and mental health. Historical literature such as longitudinal and cohort studies are included. The development and efficacy of youth-specific mental health programs will be examined.

Inequality: Literature from Australia and comparative countries (OECD nations) is included. Some historic data and literature will be considered to provide context. Data on employment and underemployment and policies on income support are included. As the unemployment rate is volatile, a high priority will be given to contemporary literature (<10 years old). Social inequality literature will include data and commentary on health and mental health, complementary to issues of SDH already covered.

Conditionality: the primary focus will be on current Australian policies and services as they affect young people. The literature will include legislation and rules, with peer-reviewed and scholarly publications providing critical analysis. As above, international literature will also be included, particularly where it illustrates global trends in policy.

Grey (i.e. non peer -reviewed) literature will be employed to explain events and policy development. This includes government and NGO initiatives and reports, submissions, and commentary in traditional and online media.

Policy and policy innovation: This will include literature on evidence-based mental health and employment support programs and their efficacy. A primary focus will be on the Individual Placement and Support (IPS) programs. Literature on similar or related programs will be included, but not other mental health programs which are not focussed on employment, education or training.

4.7 Terminology

At this point it is useful to define the major concepts that are explored in the research project:

Unemployment/underemployment: Australia's official definition for the rate of unemployment is the percentage of the surveyed population who are available and looking for work, and who have worked for less than one hour in the month prior to being surveyed. This is consistent with measurement in member countries of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2017). Underemployment refers to the situation of people who are employed in casual/part-time jobs but wish to work more hours. Many individuals in this situation may be combining work with other activities such as studying, parenting or caring. It is important to consider that there can be an overlap in these populations; individuals can move between the two categories (of unemployment/underemployment) at any time, depending on local and seasonal employment opportunities. It is also important to consider that these combined populations are not equivalent to the population receiving unemployment benefits (Newstart or Youth Allowance). Many people are precluded from receiving these payments due to family circumstances. Some will be receiving payments and working part-time, while others may be looking for work or an increase in hours while receiving other income support such as Parenting Payment.

Participation: in the outline for this research, I have used the term 'social and economic participation'. This is deliberately broad in order to focus on activities other

than just employment, for example, education and training, or voluntary community work.

Mental health/illness: I have chosen to use the broad terms of mental health disorder and /or mental health distress, as these better encapsulate the high prevalence conditions of anxiety and/or depression, as evidenced in the National Surveys of Mental Health and Wellbeing (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1997;2007) . These may or may not be formally (medically) diagnosed and should be distinguished from the more serious psychotic disorders which affect a relatively small proportion (1-2 per cent) of the population aged 16-24 years.

Social determinants of health/mental health: the concept of the 'social gradient' of health, as first identified in the 1967 Whitehall Study of English civil servants, provides a useful context for the research (Ferrie, Shipley, Davey Smith, Stansfield & Marmot, 2002). This aligns with issues of inequality, both social and economic inequality and intergenerational inequality, where young people are particularly excluded or disadvantaged because of their age status.

Generations and intergenerational issues: the research focusses on young people aged 16 to 24 years. Commonly used terms describing this cohort (born after 1996) are Generation Z, Gen Z or post-Millennials (Parker, Graf, & Igielnink, 2019). Any precise demarcation between generations can be of limited value, however it is worthwhile to consider the differences in externalities that may affect this population compared to their predecessors.

Neoliberalism: the research requires consideration of this economic ideology which is based on deregulation of trade and financial markets and espouses a smaller role for the state (Ostry, Loungani, & Furceri, 2016). Neoliberalism has significantly influenced Australian social policy over the past four decades, especially in how governments provide health, housing, income support and employment services.

Welfare reform: The Australian Macquarie Dictionary defines reform in the social context as 'the improvement or amendment of what is wrong, corrupt, etc.' The term Welfare Reform, as used in the late 20th and 21st Centuries, has usually represented

neoliberal agendas, most commonly 'welfare-to-work', 'workfare' and highly conditional financial support. Implicit in these arguments is that features of post-World War 2 welfare states represent wrongs of some kind. As I will argue in Chapter 7, it is debatable whether changes such as conditionality and sanctions have improved the circumstances of young unemployed people.

4.8 A Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework

This section will lay out the structure for analysis of the texts/literature and, as mentioned in the introduction, this will use the framework developed by Norman Fairclough. As may be seen from the previous paragraph on welfare reform, language and terminology can be powerful ideological tools, and therefore quite misleading or euphemistic.

Fairclough has outlined four stages in conducting a CDA which can be applied to the themes for this research. Each stage can be paraphrased thus, with an example of how that stage will relate to some of the themes (Fairclough, 2012):

1. **Focus on a social wrong, in its semiotic aspects** – an example is mental ill-health. What does this mean – how is it socially constructed? Fairclough identifies the second step in this stage as 'constructing objects of research' for the topic(s) and 'theorising them in a trans-disciplinary way'. In examining the social determinants of mental health, the research relies on social and economic data. Theories and practices are scrutinised, for example the medical model of mental disorders which supposes a deficiency in mental health with biological causes and treatment, versus population health models which seek to explain the social and environmental causes of mental distress.
2. **Identifying obstacles to addressing the social wrong** – examples are the themes of inequality and welfare conditionality as outlined in Chapter 3. If we consider these to be 'wrong', or at the very least detrimental to many poorer young Australians, then what is happening that results in both inequality and conditionality increasing over time?
3. **Consider whether the social order 'needs' the social wrong** – as above, what purpose is served by perpetuating inequality and conditionality? Do these represent a genuine attempt to motivate young people into employment or are they part of another, more punitive agenda?
4. **Identify possible ways past the obstacles** – the theme of policy innovation attempts to address this issue. If policies need to change, then credible alternatives need to be canvassed and justified.

An exemplar of this approach is Norman Fairclough's analysis of welfare reform in the United Kingdom as espoused by the New Labour government which was elected in 1997 (Fairclough, 2000). Although this article might be considered somewhat dated, it is relevant to similar 'reforms' occurring in Australia at the same time, and which continue to resonate in contemporary proposals for policy change.

Fairclough examines how the political discourse was changed by new 'social practices' and terminology. A result was the recasting of the government's role in social provision and how this role is presented:

> In broad terms, New Labour has accentuated the longer-term shift towards achieving the effects of government through managerial rather than political means. This means that, in terms of the textual moment, the political discourse of New Labour is a promotional discourse, which avoids and excludes political dialogue (Fairclough, 2000, p172).

Other examples from Fairclough's analysis are highly relevant to this research. The UK government had released a 'Green Paper' (a publicly available discussion document) proposing widespread reform of the social security system. During the same time, the Australian government was undertaking similar processes with two discussion papers colloquially known as the McClure reports (Yeend, 2000).

Fairclough describes the carefully chosen language in the Green Paper, for example, the synonymous use of the terms 'we' and 'government'. 'We' is not 'us' – that is, society as a whole. Similarly, the first McClure report made many references to 'welfare dependency', as if people relying on social security were some kind of different species and long-term receipt of income support can be equated to an addiction (Reference Group on Welfare Reform, 1999). The process of reform is constructed as almost entirely occurring between government and welfare claimants/recipients, as Fairclough further comments:

> For instance, the population of the world of welfare in this discourse of social welfare is a sparse one, consisting essentially of the Government and welfare claimants. Welfare staff figure in a very few instances, and a claimant organisation ('lone parent organisations') only once in this chapter - claimant and campaign organisations are rare in the document as a whole. On the other hand, welfare professionals such as doctors are simply absent…The Government acts, claimants are acted upon. Welfare staff rarely act, welfare professionals never, and claimants generally only where their actions are initiated/managed by the Government (Fairclough, 2000, pp179-180).

Another point made by Fairclough is how governments use the media in establishing a chosen narrative. New policy announcements are almost always accompanied by media releases, press conferences, and background briefings of selected journalists. As has been noted, this 'promotional discourse' can dominate the agenda and allow little room for dissenting views. For example, the core arguments in both the Australian and UK discussion papers were about the importance of income support recipients moving into work. However, at a time when secure fulltime jobs were in decline, the nature of precarious work was not addressed at all.

I can add some personal experience here. During 1999 and 2000, I authored two submissions to the welfare reform process on behalf of the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU). The CPSU is the trade union which represents Commonwealth Government employees. The submissions were politely critical of some elements of the proposed reforms and suggested some constructive alternatives. The second (final) McClure report acknowledged CPSU and hundreds of other submissions from individuals and organisations, but none of the documents were included as appendices to the online documents. Perhaps criticisms, however informed, did not fit the preferred narrative of the government.

Table 4.1

The CDA framework for this research, with reference to and integration with the theoretical perspectives outlined in Chapter 3

Literature/texts	**Analysis/tools**
Policy - primary sources Legislation, parliamentary proceedings Regulations Statistical data & reports Evaluations	What issues are identified and how is it proposed that they be addressed? How is the problem represented? (WPR) What specific language is used to represent the issue/problem and does this enable or constrict discussion? (CDA)
Policy – commentary	Interpretation – what is behind what is said, do policies and

Reports, analysis, advocacy from nongovernment agencies & peak bodies Scholarly articles	programs achieve their aims? (CDA) How can/should the problems be represented differently? (WPR) Are there examples where institutions or agencies are influenced by staff? (Rice/Lipsky)
Media commentary Includes mass broadcast, in print or online modes Will also include social media and websites created by advocacy groups etc.	What themes emerge from this? What alternative policies or programs are suggested? (WPR/CDA)

As discussed earlier in this chapter, the perspectives emerging from this process will be formulated into specific proposals for change. These, according to Levitas' method – the 'architecture' – will focus on how ideas could be implemented to help the most disadvantaged young Australian to flourish.

5. THEME 1:
MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES AND MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

5.1 Young Australians and mental health issues

This chapter will explore and analyse some of the key features of mental health provision to young Australians and some factors that negatively and positively affect the mental wellbeing of this population. The issues of inequality and conditionality, related to unemployment, will be discussed in subsequent chapters, as they have particular effects on the mental health and wellbeing of the population aged 16-24. This introductory section provides background on the prevalence of mental health issues for this group.

Statistics are frequently cited about the high prevalence of 'mental illness' in Australia – that, at any time one in five people are experiencing a mental health disorder and ,over the life course, one in two individuals will experience either a chronic or episodic mental health condition. These figures have been accepted and promoted by mental health services and advocacy organisations such as Beyond Blue (Beyond Blue; Black Dog Institute, n.d.).

The basis for these data was the National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing (SMHWB), conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) in 2007. This is to date the most comprehensive and large-scale survey of the Australian population, and it is worth highlighting some of the survey findings, especially those regarding young people. At this point it is worth commenting that the ABS media release at the time of the publication of the survey was somewhat sensationalist: "One in five Australians have a mental illness: ABS" (ABS, 2008). The actual content of the survey is far more complex and nuanced. It should also be noted that the data from the survey has been influential in the establishment of expanded mental health services, such as headspace youth mental health services and the 'Better Access' services provided by General Practitioners and Allied Health professionals. The evolution of mental health policies and the development of these programs will be described in the next part of this chapter.

The 2007 survey followed a standardised methodology developed by the World Health Organization and the survey has also been conducted in 31 other countries. A key strength in the data is that individuals were interviewed using the World Health Organization's Composite International Diagnostic Interview, version 3.0 (WMH–CIDI 3.0) (ABS, 2007). This enabled a clear focus on the types of mental health distress that respondents were experiencing, as well as information about the circumstances of individuals.

The data for younger Australians are of concern, as they show a much higher (more than 26 per cent) proportion of people aged 16-24 years experiencing mental health disorders or distress than any other age cohort.

Figure 5.1:

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The original document can be located at:

https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/health/mental-health/national-survey-mental-health-and-wellbeing-summary-results/latest-release

The survey found that anxiety disorders had the highest prevalence in all age groups, followed by affective disorders such as depression. As the following table shows, these issues are significant for 16 to 24-year-olds. Substance use disorders (misuse of alcohol and drugs) are also higher than in other age groups.

Figure 5.2:

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The original document can be located at:

https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/health/mental-health/national-survey-mental-health-and-wellbeing-summary-results/latest-release

The survey found many other factors associated with higher rates of mental health distress, including gender, marital status and household type. For the purposes of this research, employment status is a significant factor to consider, so it is unsurprising to see a higher prevalence of mental health disorders in the unemployed population.

Figure 5.3:

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The original document can be located at:

https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/health/mental-health/national-survey-mental-health-and-wellbeing-summary-results/latest-release

It is challenging to definitively explain all the issues that may affect the mental health and wellbeing of adolescent and young adults. The social determinants of mental health and factors that enable successful transitions to adulthood, such as supportive family and social environment, will be discussed later in this chapter. I suggest that the Survey of Mental health and Wellbeing indicates the need to explore the higher prevalence of mental health issues for young people, in particular the possible association of these with unemployment and social circumstances.

A further demonstration of health issues affecting young people is evident in epidemiological data provided by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW). These data examined the burden of disease in 10-year age cohorts. The World Health Organization developed the concept of burden of disease in the 1990s. It is a means of identifying the impacts of diseases, illnesses and injuries and can be applied at a broad (global or national) level or to specific demographics, for example location, age or socioeconomic status:

> Burden of disease analysis is the best measure of the impact of different diseases or injuries on a population. It combines the years of healthy life lost due to living with ill health (non-fatal burden) with the years of life lost due to dying prematurely (fatal burden). Fatal and non-fatal burden combined are referred to as total burden, reported using the disability-adjusted life years (DALYs) measure (AIHW, 2020).

For males in Australia aged 15-24 years, the top five burdens of disease (in descending order) are suicide/self-inflicted injuries, alcohol use disorders, road traffic injuries, depressive disorders and asthma. For females aged 15-24 years, the top five issues are anxiety disorders, depressive disorders, asthma, suicide/self-inflicted injuries and bipolar affective disorder. For the older cohorts, acute and chronic illnesses are the predominant conditions. This would be expected as physical illness and disease occur more frequently with ageing. However, the predominance of mental health issues for 15 to 24-year-olds suggests that greater attention needs to be given to prevention and support for this group (AIHW, 2016).

National surveys of adolescent Australians (aged15-19 years) conducted by Mission Australia and the Black Dog Institute indicate that high levels of distress are experienced by

this group and that the numbers experiencing psychological distress have increased in each of the seven years the survey has been conducted:

> Close to one quarter (24.2%) of young people aged 15-19 years who responded to the ***Youth Survey 2018*** reported experiencing psychological distress (PD). There has been an increase in the proportion of young people with psychological distress over the past seven years (rising from 18.7% in 2012 to 24.2% in 2018)…Nearly one third (31.9%) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people experienced psychological distress, compared to 23.9% of non-Indigenous respondents. The proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people with psychological distress rose by 3.3% from 28.6% in 2012 to 31.9% in 2018. Between 2012 and 2018, the proportions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people experiencing psychological distress were on average 8.5% higher compared with their non-Indigenous peers (Hall, Fildes, Perrens, Plummer, Carlisle, Cackayne, & Werner Seidler, 2019, p.7).

The data for Indigenous young people are concerning but unfortunately not surprising given the high level of trauma and higher rates of suicide in this group. Indigenous people also experience higher rates of unemployment and this factor will be examined in a little more detail later in this chapter.

The surveys support the ABS and AIHW data which suggest a greater burden of disease for females related to psychological issues. This infographic illustrates just how much more these affect young females.

This image has been removed due to copyright restriction

The original document can be located at:

https://www.missionaustralia.com.au

The complete reference is:

Hall, S., Fildes, J., Perrens, B., Plummer, J., Carlisle, E., Cackayne, N. & Werner -Seidler, A. (2019). *Can we talk? Seven year youth mental health report – 2012-2018.* Sydney: Mission Australia.

As might be expected, these gender differences are also reflected in use of services. One indicator is the usage of Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS) mental health services (how the MBS works will be further discussed in the next section). The most used MBS items are for a

mental health treatment plan prepared by a General Practitioner (GP). In the financial year 2018-2019 there were 863,654 GP consultations funded by the most frequently used MBS item (2715). The 15-24-year-olds accounted for 165,422 of these, the second highest proportion after the 25-34-year-old population. For the adolescent and young adult group, females accounted for 105,696, or almost two-thirds (64 per cent) of consultations (Department of Health MBS online, n.d.).

This research will not attempt to explore all of the complexities of these gender differences, however one important issue that arises is the effect of mental health distress for young women's participation in employment and education. Poor mental health may have a particularly deleterious effect for those wishing to work in female-dominated health and social care jobs, where a high degree of resilience is required.

A second issue of concern arising from the Mission Australia surveys is the greater increase over time of mental health distress for females. The authors state:

> This may be associated with increasing family breakdown, school pressures, and western ideals of appearance, all of which have been shown to impact young females (Mission Australia, 2019, p.10).

A literature review conducted in 2014 sought to explore whether mental health problems had increased in this century. While the authors could not find evidence of an overall increase in measured mental health distress, they noted that a number of studies had found an increase in 'internalizing' problems such as anxiety and depression in young females (Bor, Dean, Najman & Hayatbakhsh, 2014).

A further explanation of gender differences is offered by the American psychologist, Jean Twenge. Her research with girls and young women argues that technology (tablets/pads and smartphones) and social media have contributed enormously to poorer mental health and social isolation (Twenge, 2017). Again, while this is not the primary focus of this research, this emerging issue has implications for how contemporary and future mental health services are designed.

5.2 The evolution of primary mental health services in Australia

As Australia is a federation of formerly British colonies, the development of psychiatric/mental health legislation and services in the nineteenth century was the province of state governments. These authorities followed the practice of other western nations – the mentally unwell and 'feeble-minded' were confined to large institutions, often for life. As described by Harvey Whiteford, an Australian public health researcher, reform of this system did not occur until the latter part of the twentieth century:

> These hospitals were the cornerstone of specialist mental health treatment for over 100 years, their relative size remaining constant from around 1900 until the mid-1950s. The introduction of nonhospital treatment for those with severe mental illness was not without controversy despite research demonstrating its benefits (Whiteford, 2017, p1075).

This so-called 'deinstitutionalisation' was the beginning of significant changes to mental health policy and service provision. In 1993, the first National Mental Health Plan was developed by the Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments. This plan, in conjunction with Commonwealth/State health funding agreements, focussed on improving hospital and community mental health services. Subsequent plans have expanded the focus and range of mental health policy and treatment and introduced new services, mainly in primary care settings, such as general practice (Whiteford, 2017). It should be noted at this point that most of these developments have been based on the medical models of assessing and treating mental health conditions.

The first iteration of widespread primary mental health care was the Better Outcomes in Mental Health Care initiative, also known as ATAPS (Access to Allied Psychological Services) introduced in 2001. This was funded by the Commonwealth Government via Divisions of General Practice, which were regionally based support organisations for General Practitioners (GPs). GPs who undertook training in mental health skills could provide therapeutic services as well as referring patients to allied health practitioners (usually psychologists, mental health nurses or social workers) contracted to ATAPS programs.

These types of services were expanded in 2007 by the introduction of the Better Access to Mental Health Care initiative, funded through the Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS). A major feature of Better Access is that any registered GP can provide a Mental Health

Treatment Plan. Another major feature was the expansion of MBS rebates to allied health practitioners – psychologists, social workers and occupational therapists who are accredited by their professional associations and able to obtain Medicare provider status. The two initiatives have since run in parallel, with understandable confusion regarding similarities in both name and some aspects of the programs' operations.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, Better Access can provide an important gateway (via GP Mental Health Treatment Plans) for young people obtaining mental health treatment and therapies. Before discussing this initiative and its impact, it is useful to provide some background to Medicare and the MBS.

Medicare is the Australian national health insurance scheme, introduced by the Hawke Labor government in 1984. It is funded by a levy which is collected as part of the income tax system. The levy is currently 2 per cent of taxable income above a minimum threshold. Generally, only Australian citizens and permanent residents are eligible for Medicare, which provides for free public hospital treatment and rebates for a wide range of medical services (excluding dental treatment). These MBS rebates are set by the government (Commonwealth Department of Health) and based on a percentage, most commonly 85 per cent, of a 'scheduled fee' for a service, also determined by the department (Biggs, 2016).

The scheduled fee is not necessarily the amount charged by GPs, specialists and allied health practitioners. Each practice or practitioner can set fees, resulting in consumers having to make their own contribution. In some cases, these 'gap' payments can be higher than the MBS rebate amount. Practitioners can elect to receive only the MBS rebate without any co-payment, this is known as 'bulk billing'. The decision to bulk bill is at the discretion of the practitioner and is typically applied to -pensioners and concession card holders. The latest data from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare show that approximately half of all Medicare services are bulk billed, but there are significantly higher out-of-pocket expenses for people with chronic conditions and those living in rural and remote areas (AIHW, 2018).

An important issue thus arises about equitable access to these services. Apart from the likely possibility of a gap payment being required there are significant regional variations in usage of services, as reported by AIHW:

> The proportion of the Australian population receiving services varied according to the remoteness area of patient's residence. The proportion of people receiving services was the same for *Major cities* and *Inner regional* areas (11.0%), whilst the proportion of patients receiving services decreased with increasing remoteness to 2.9% of people living in *Very remote* areas (AIHW, 2019, p2).

This matter of equity represents a significant difference between the ATAPS program and Better Access. The former is currently administered by regional Primary Health Networks (PHNs) which succeeded the Divisions of General Practice. The PHNs can direct their Commonwealth funding to regions or population groups with higher needs. By comparison obtaining a service from Medicare subsidised practitioners is highly dependent on them being available, as the data from AIHW indicate.

Inequities in access to mental health treatment also occur in urban areas, as was demonstrated in a comparison of disadvantaged and advantaged local government areas in Sydney and Melbourne:

> Our findings confirm previous findings of inequity in services provided by psychiatrists. Better Access activity rates are typically greater in more advantaged areas. There is variability between provider disciplines and items; within Better Access, this association is most strongly observed with high-volume clinical psychology services (Meadows, Enticott, Inder, Russell & Gurr, 2015, p193).

The MBS data quoted in the previous section show that many young people consult with GPs for assessment and completion of a Mental Health Treatment Plan. However, the pathways for follow up or continuing treatment are far less clear, as suggested by the above commentary. To this can be added the issue of 'gap' co-payments to allied health practitioners, which I suggest will be beyond the means of many young people. This can be seen in the comparative use by 15 to 24-year-olds of MBS Item 2715, the GP Mental Health Treatment Plan and MBS Item 80000, which covers a long consultation with a Clinical Psychologist. Young people represented 19.1 per cent of the total population using the GP service. This provides a substantial rebate and is frequently bulk billed. However, young people represented only 16.9 per cent of the population using the Psychology service, which would follow the initial GP assessment (Department of Health MBS online, n.d.).

A factor that may explain young people's lower use of Better Access services is the establishment of local headspace youth mental health services for people aged between 12

and 25 years. These services were first established in 2006. At the time of writing there are 110 centres across Australia, as well as telephone and online services. The role and activities of headspace will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

5.3 Young people and the social determinants of mental health

The survey and other data discussed so far indicate that a large proportion of young Australians experience a measurable level of mental health distress. This section will explore some possible causal factors for this phenomenon. The next chapter will discuss what I consider the major social determinant affecting the mental health of young Australians – inequality and its associated disadvantages and adversities.

As noted in the previous section, the establishment of mental health services in Australia followed western practices in providing institutional or hospital-based care for people diagnosed with mental illnesses. From the late nineteenth century until today, many discourses have emerged concerning the causes and treatments of mental distress, grounded in medicine, psychiatry and psychology but also in theoretical and philosophical perspectives. It is probably fair to say that there are as many different discourses around mental health as there are for economics or politics.

At the risk of stating the obvious, mental illnesses or disorders cannot be diagnosed in the same way as physical injuries and diseases. However, there are some severe mental health disorders that would seem to have predominantly biological causes, such as major (clinical) depression, perinatal depression and bipolar disorders (Black Dog Institute, n.d.).

As discussed in the introduction to this chapter, the National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing data identified high levels of anxiety and depression in the population aged under 25. These phenomena are not exclusive to Australia, as can be seen from Benjamin Hankin's research on young Americans:

> Rates of depression among adolescents are generally comparable to those observed among adults: the lifetime prevalence of major depression for 15- to 18-year-olds was 14%, and for minor depression, 11%...there is up to a sixfold increase in rates of depression from early adolescence (3% prevalence at age 15) to the end of adolescence (17% at age 18) (Hankin, 2005, p104).

Other literature about the causes of these phenomena also suggests that most individuals with a lifetime experience of anxiety or depression have their first experiences of these in adolescence:

> In some respects depression in adolescents can be viewed as an early-onset subform of the equivalent adult disorder because of its strong links with recurrence later in life (Thapar et al 2012, p1056).

These authors note the significantly higher prevalence of depression in females compared to males and suggest that earlier onset of puberty may be a factor. Both articles note that hormonal changes may be only one causal factor and that a myriad of stressful life events can contribute to the development of depression. This is supported by the current Handbook of DSM-5* Disorders in Children and Adolescents

(*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders):

> As with adults, the development of depressive disorders in children and adolescents has not been attributed to a single cause. Research has identified multiple factors affecting whether a youth will develop a depressive disorder, such that contemporary models of depressive disorders require an integration of neurobiological, cognitive, interpersonal, and genetic factors. Given the large number of potential factors which influence each other, it is likely that there is not a single cause or pathway to a depressive disorder, but multiple pathways from which a depressive disorder could develop (Powell, Ocean & Stanick, 2017, p155).

It should be noted that DSM descriptions and criteria are not without controversy. This has been the case ever since the production of the initial DSM-I in 1952. While the above extract clearly identifies that the causes for depression can include interpersonal (social?) factors, critics of DSM say that it is far too heavily based on medical models and the reduction of complex issues into diagnostic criteria. The medical historian Edward Shorter is one such critic:

> Depression, anxiety, and other mental symptoms are real. They exist. But fever or coughing up sputum are real too, and yet we don't have diseases called "fever" or "horking and gobbing." The task of nosology is to bring psychiatric symptoms together into diseases that really do exist, such as melancholia, now a well-recognized entity: Melancholia brings together the symptoms and findings of mental and physical slowing, high cortisol, and terrible feelings of personal worthlessness and sinfulness. But major depression is not like that. You can have a couple of symptoms on a list of eight or so and still qualify for the diagnosis, but the particular symptoms Mr. X has

> may well differ from those Ms. Y has. Do they both have the same disease, major depression? Probably not (Shorter, 2009, p283).

Shorter's commentary illustrates the complexity of assessing mental disorders. For the high number of young people experiencing anxiety and depression, I do not doubt that their feelings and experiences are real, what may be less clear are possible biological factors in some, but by no means all, cases. This has implications for the use of medications, which I will discuss in the next section of this chapter.

The contemporary literature on anxiety and depression experienced by young people appears to be consistent regarding onset in adolescence and high prevalence and is also consistent with the ABS and AIHW data cited earlier in this chapter. The data are somewhat limited in identifying and quantifying causal factors. For the purposes of this research, information provided by Beyond Blue* provides a useful checklist, suggesting that, for many young people, anxiety and depression results from a combination of factors. These include:

- a history of depression or anxiety in close family members, including when families have faced traumatic events for generations
- being female
- stressful life events
- personality and coping style
- history of physical illness or disability
- childhood experiences, such as lack of care or abuse
- family poverty
- learning and other school difficulties
- recent events in the person's life, such as being the victim of crime, death or serious illness in the family, having an accident, bullying or victimisation
- parents separated or getting divorced
- being in a minority group that's disadvantaged socially…
- lack of a close, confiding relationship with someone
- premenstrual changes in hormone levels
- caring for a person with a long-term disability
- the side-effects of certain medications or drugs

> …generally, the more of these factors a young person has, the more likely it is they'll develop anxiety or depression (Beyond Blue, 2016, p18).

I have quoted this checklist almost in its entirety, because it highlights the complexities of causes and suggests that for many (or even most?) young people experiencing mental health distress these causes lie in their family and social environments. These factors align

very closely with the experiences of the young unemployed people that I recounted in Chapter 2 of this thesis. However, becoming unemployed or being jobless for a long period would seem to be a significant omission from the list.

(*Beyond Blue was established in 2001 as Australia's 'national depression initiative'. Its current focus is on promoting positive mental health and providing information for consumers and health practitioners. Most of this information is concerned with addressing anxiety, depression and suicide prevention. The organisation also offers online and telephone support.)

5.4 Mental health medications for young people

Another treatment pathway for young people which is measured is the use of mental health medications. According to data collected from the Australian Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS), 7.6 per cent of 12 to 17-year-olds and 12per cent of 18-24-year-olds were prescribed these medications (mainly antidepressants) in 2018-19. For the population as a whole, antidepressants represented 70.9 per cent of all prescriptions and anxiolytics (medicines to treat anxiety) 9.0 per cent (AIHW, 2020). The data do not break these figures into age groups, but we could presume some differences for younger people, for example in the use of medication for attention deficit disorders (3.8 per cent of total prescriptions) which are more likely to be used by children and adolescents.

The use of medications to treat young people is controversial. One of the most popular antidepressant drugs in fluoxetine, widely marketed under the brand name Prozac. In 2004, the United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA) required that a warning label be provided with antidepressants regarding the risk of suicidality (suicidal thoughts and behaviour) for children and young people, however they are still approved for use in children as young as 8 (FDA, 2019). A meta-analysis of research studies on antidepressant usage by children and adolescents, conducted by Gordon and Melvin, concluded that a majority of the studies identified increased risks of adverse effects from medication. GPs and psychiatrists therefore need to exercise caution in prescribing and monitoring the effects of drugs (Gordon & Melvin, 2014). However, there is not complete consensus, with another study based on Swedish data suggesting that increased risk of suicide in young people may be related to depression itself, and that successful treatment with medication may in fact reduce risk (Mellis, 2014).

A greater concern may be the types of medications that are being prescribed. The UK National Institute of Care Excellence (NICE) provides thorough and peer-reviewed guidance for the treatment of depression in young people. These guidelines are globally available and frequently cited. The most recent iteration recommends 'watchful waiting' prior to clinical diagnosis, followed by comprehensive assessment and psychosocial support. NICE recommends that, in the first instance, only one class of drug, fluoxetine, should be used (NICE, 2019).

However, in spite of the NICE guidelines, data from a survey of mental health medications used in Wales indicate that other classes of drugs are frequently prescribed, despite concerns about side-effects and toxicity for young people (John, Marchant, Fone, McGregor, Dennis, Tan & Lloyd, 2016). These authors also noted concern that that rate of prescribing antidepressants had increased despite a reduction in incidence of diagnoses of depression.

A more recent meta-analysis strongly supports the NICE guidelines that medication should generally only be used in combination with psychological therapy (Dubicka & Wilkinson, 2018). These authors also suggest that brief psychosocial interventions, such as mental health first aid, can be a first line of assistance and that medication can be appropriate where young people may be waiting for clinical services.

The controversy over psychotropic medication for young people will doubtless continue for some time to come. A question that arises is, if we can accept that for most young people the experience of anxiety and depression is caused by social and interpersonal factors in their lives, then why is the use of medication so widespread? Is there another factor at work, such as the influence of the developers and manufacturers of these drugs? Edward Shorter certainly thinks so:

> But major depression was a diagnosis that cried out for a drug class of its own. After 1989, with the Prozac-style SSRIs, the wish was granted. As Ross Baldessarini, a leading psychopharmacologist at McLean Hospital in a suburb of Boston, put it much later, "The whole pharmaceutical industry is premised on broad definitions that allow big markets. It's hard to reverse that trend. For example, some people have argued that the SSRIs could just as well have been developed as antianxiety drugs and nobody would have known the difference." The big disease categories, in other words, were so heterogeneous as to be meaningless. Depression, anxiety, what's the difference? One size truly did fit all. Said Gordon Parker in 2005, "Not only has major depression

become the biggest game in town, it has become the only game" (Shorter, 2009, p287).

5.5 Comorbidity – mental health and misuse of drugs and alcohol

In the second chapter of this thesis, I discussed my experiences as a Centrelink social worker interviewing young unemployed people facing 'breach' sanctions on their income support payments. In discussing their personal and family circumstances, many of these people disclosed a life of complex adversities. These circumstances were almost always confirmed by historical records on the agency computer system. During the interviews, most of these clients, from my recollection at least eight or nine out of every ten, disclosed that they were frequent users of alcohol and/or illicit drugs. I formed an opinion that this substance use, notably daily use of cannabis, was not recreational but more likely represented self-medication.

The National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing data discussed at the beginning of this chapter group substance misuse disorders alongside anxiety and depression. From the way the survey was structured, I have assumed that this reported the disorder that had the most impact on an individual, that is, each disorder does not exclude comorbidity with another mental or physical health disorder.

More recent data on the association between mental health are provided by the National Drug Strategy Household Survey conducted by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. The latest survey conducted in 2016 reports that cannabis continues to be the most popular illicit/recreational drug used by young people. The report also shows associations between drug use and unemployment, and psychological distress and drug use:

> People who live in *Remote and very remote* areas, unemployed people and Indigenous Australians continue to be more likely to smoke daily and use illicit drugs than other population groups.
>
> The proportion of people experiencing high or very high levels of psychological distress increased among recent illicit drug users between 2013 and 2016—from 17.5% to 22% but also increased from 8.6% to 9.7% over the same period for the non-illicit drug using population (those who had not used an illicit drug in the past 12 months) (AIHW, 2017, p.xi).

Data from the survey indicate that use of tobacco and some illicit drugs is much higher in the population of unemployed people:

> Employment status, and unemployment in particular, is strongly related to health status. Use of some drugs is consistently higher among people who are unemployed than people who are employed…in 2016, people who were unemployed were:
>
> • 1.8 times as likely to have smoked daily
>
> • 1.5 times as likely to have used cannabis
>
> • 3.1 times as likely to have used meth/amphetamines as employed people (AIHW, 2017, p104).

The survey does not comment on the reasons for the higher use of these substances. Based on my own practice experience, I suggest that there may be two distinct dimensions of cause and effect. The first of these is that increased drug use, especially of cannabis, is a response to the enforced idleness associated with long-term unemployment. Regular cannabis use may help to pass the time and, in the short-term, relieve distress and anxiety. A study of European young people suggests that this is an issue not peculiar to Australia. The authors considered the very high youth unemployment rates following the Global Financial Crisis/Great Recession of 2008-2009, which has resulted in unemployment rates for 15 to 24-year-olds higher than 40 per cent in countries most affected such as Greece, Italy and Portugal. Survey data suggest that for every 1 per cent increase in unemployment, there is an increase of 0.7 per cent in the use of cannabis (Allyon & Ferreira-Batista, 2017).

The second dimension of cause and effect is the extent that substance misuse might contribute to young people becoming and remaining unemployed. For many of my Centrelink clients, their daily high consumption of cannabis appeared to be a major factor in their successive failures to comply with the conditions for receiving income support. This observation is confirmed by findings from the Christchurch Health and Development Study (CHDS).

The CHDS has been conducted in New Zealand over 40 years with a large group of participants (1,265) born in 1977. The broad findings of this cohort research suggest that people who have been exposed to adversity and disadvantage in childhood and adolescence, including parental drug and alcohol use, are far more likely to continue to

experience disadvantage and unemployment in adulthood. A 2016 study of the cohort at age 35 examined the associations between unemployment, cannabis use and alcohol use:

> The present findings support both social causation and social selection arguments, by indicating that unemployment plays a causal role in substance misuse, and that it is also likely that a reverse causal process whereby substance misuse increases the risk of unemployment (Boden, Lee, Horwood, Grest & McLeod, 2017, p127).

These causes and effects were also observed in a Swiss study of young unemployed (NEET) men. The relevance of this study to the Australian context is that cannabis use is similar in both nations and personal use is virtually decriminalised. The other factor of relevance is that Switzerland has one of the lowest youth unemployment rates among OECD nations and that considerable support is provided to place unemployed people, therefore long-term unemployed/NEET status is exceptional. The authors concluded from interviews, that substance use and associated mental health issues were strong causal factors in the participants in the study remaining unemployed, rather than unemployment leading to substance use:

> Additionally, this study confirmed that cannabis use and daily smoking are public health problems. Prevention programs need to focus on these vulnerable youth to avoid them being disengaged (Baggio, Iglesias, Deline, Studer, Henchoz, Mohler-Kuo, & Gmel 2015, p238).

The findings discussed here suggest that comorbid alcohol and drug misuse will need to be considered as an important factor in the mental health and well-being of many young people. These issues may also be underestimated as a factor contributing to long-term unemployment.

5.6 Youth mental health services and the evolution of headspace

In this section, I will discuss the headspace youth mental health services which have been established progressively across Australia since 2006. These services complement the primary mental health services which have been described earlier in this chapter.

Before discussing headspace, it is worth noting that primary health services for Australian young people are not a new twenty-first century phenomenon. The South Australian government established The Second Story (TSS) youth health service in 1985 in the city of Adelaide and three services continue in suburban locations (SA Health, 2020). What was

notable about the original inner-city TSS service was the provision of physical health services, including sexual health and health promotion, integrated with mental health and counselling services. With many of the service's users being homeless or in unstable accommodation, the centre provided for other visiting services such as housing and social security. This concept of integrated service delivery will be revisited and discussed later in this thesis.

The evolution of mental health services for young people has paralleled developments in adult mental health services. Australian jurisdictions developed child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) to provide hospital and community-based services. However, these services were (and are) only able to meet the needs of a small number of users with severe and critical disorders (McGorry, Bates & Birchwood, 2013).

The inception of headspace provided for the establishment of local services for people aged 12-25 years. As with the prototype services such as TSS, the centres provide integrated mental and physical health care. They also provided drug and alcohol services and vocational and educational assistance (McGorry et al, 2013). As of 2020, there are 110 centres across Australia and national telephone and online services are also provided.

An early qualitative evaluation of headspace clients indicated a high level of satisfaction with the support provided by the agency. However, the authors noted some areas of concern, including long waiting times to access services. As most mental health clinicians were being reimbursed by Medicare, there were also issues with the limit of 12 consultations each year prescribed by the Better Access rules (McCann & Lubman, 2012). Another early evaluation was based on activity data provided by the 30 headspace sites which were operating by 2008. This showed a rapid growth in the uptake of services by young people in the first two years of operation, with a higher proportion of male users than had historically not accessed primary mental health services. The authors noted that 'older' young adults and people from non-English speaking backgrounds were underrepresented in service usage (Patulny, Muir, Powell, Flaxman, & Oprea, 2013).

The implementation of the model has also been criticised for adding another layer of complexity to mental health service delivery which was already undertaken by government, nongovernment and private providers:

> "Overall, *headspace* has increased service fragmentation rather than decreased it because each of the 100 centres has its own lead agency, often a non-government organisation (NGO). This has added further complexity to an already complex youth sector, and it has required the creation of a large central *headspace* administration to oversee the national programme" (Allison, Bastiampillai, & Goldney, 2016, p111).

It should be noted that since this report was written, the national headspace administration has been much reduced. The funding and coordination of the services are now administered by the regional Primary Health Networks (PHNs). At the time of writing, it remains to be seen whether this will result in services more responsive and accountable to local needs. One problem that headspace does appear to be addressing is the inequities in access to mental health services for people living in outer metropolitan, rural and remote areas. For example, in South Australia there are 11 headspace sites. Of these, six are in rural towns or cities and three are in outer suburbs of the capital city, Adelaide.

Allison et al also raised concerns about the quality of services provided by the centres and the absence of clinical governance which would normally apply in other mental health services. They noted another evaluation (Rickwood et al 2015) which surveyed 24,000 service users and claimed that two-thirds of these had reported improvements in their mental health:

> "Notwithstanding the potential strengths of the *headspace* model, such as lower stigma and ease of access, these initial data showed equivocal benefits at best. Overall, *headspace's* outcomes were consistent with spontaneous improvement rather than active treatment…One reason for these disappointing results was the inadequate treatment received by many young people; almost half attended for only one or two sessions, which is well below the threshold for evidence-based treatment" (Allison et al, 2016, pp111-112).

This criticism has been echoed by psychiatry academic, Anthony Jorm, who has been an advocate for improving mental health services for young people for more than two decades. In his analysis of two evaluations of outcomes for headspace clients, he also concluded that results were equivocal. He also suggests that for some young people, they will improve without intervention and therefore statistics showing positive outcomes may be unreliable (Jorm, 2015).

In 2019, headspace conducted their own research, a follow up survey of the clients who could be matched with individual service data. Some limitations were noted with the relatively small response rate – fewer than 10 per cent of the nearly 21,000 clients invited to

take part in the survey participated in it. The survey concluded that a majority of respondents were able to report long-term positive outcomes after their engagement with the service:

> Overall, young people were very positive about the impact that headspace services had on their lives. Most reported improvements in mental health literacy, specifically in better understanding their mental health problems (86%), developing the skills to deal with them (80%), and feeling supported in managing them (85%) (headspace, 2019, p31).

Although these figures reflect good outcomes, the survey report does suggest some problems, evidenced by reasons that people ceased to use the service:

> There were 36 per cent who reported that they had stopped coming to headspace for positive reasons, either because they decided they were well enough (24%) or had achieved their goals (12%). There were 14 per cent who had used all their allocated Mental Health Treatment Plan (MHTP) sessions and couldn't return. Another 14 per cent felt headspace wasn't working for them. A smaller proportion (13%) left for personal reasons that included having other priorities (7%) or they had moved away (6%) (headspace 2019, p11).

One statistic contained in the report is notable – it was stated that in the 2018-2019 financial year a total of 'almost' 100,000 young people had received 426,000 occasions of service from a headspace centre. This indicates that each client would have received, on average, just over 4 services. This does not seem a high (or perhaps appropriate?) number of clinical services aimed at addressing significant mental health issues. Alternatively, it could be possible that many presentations at headspace centres may be for issues that do not meet the threshold for a clinical diagnosis of anxiety or depression.

5.7 A Critical Discourse Analysis – what are the social determinants of youth mental health?

There would appear to be a broad consensus that the high prevalence of mental health distress among young Australians is consistent with that found in other developed countries, and that this is considered a matter of concern for population health. The data show prevalence of anxiety and depression at between 20 per cent and 26 per cent of adolescent and young adult populations. Surveys such as the 2007 Australian National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing (NSMHWB) have incorporated robust methodologies which exclude transient stresses such as school exams or relationship breakups. To paraphrase Edward Shorter, there should be little doubt that anxiety and/or

depression are real for those experiencing symptoms and levels of distress can be measured.

What is less clear from the literature are the causes of mental health distress. My research does not seek to definitively address this question. However, I suggest a useful proposition is that for some young people there will be a disposition for melancholy which might be inherited or strongly influenced by parental behaviour. For many, this will be exacerbated by additional adversity experienced in childhood and adolescence. Studies such as the Christchurch Health and Development Survey clearly show the long-term effects of disadvantage, including familial unemployment and poverty. The NSMHWB clearly demonstrates higher levels of distress in people who are unemployed. The literature discussed in this chapter and public information provided by Beyond Blue, headspace and the Black Dog Institute all list many possible social and environmental causes for anxiety and depression. For the current generation of young people cultural factors may also be stronger contributing factors for anxiety, for example cyber-bullying and fears associated with climate change.

My contention here is that if, for many young people, the causes of mental health distress are rooted in family and social circumstances, then why is so much of the response based on individual treatment models? In the terms of Critical Discourse Analysis, is a 'social wrong' being masked by these circumstances being represented as illness or disorder, rather than unfortunate individual experiences and life events. This is not to disparage the need for individual support, therapy (including medication) or counselling but to raise the question of providing broader community and societal responses.

CDA requires an examination of the obstacles to addressing the problem or the social wrong. In the next chapters, inequality and welfare conditionality will be explored as they represent significant causes of mental health distress. This discussion and analysis will also examine how these factors are ignored or dismissed, this being an obstacle itself to addressing the core problem.

Another obstacle to addressing the problem of youth mental health may be in the apparatus that has developed over time to 'treat' individuals. Better Access, the most recent iteration

of primary mental health care is still based very much on a medical model of treatment, with the requirement for General Practitioners to prepare a Mental Health Treatment Plan as a gateway to psychiatric or allied health therapy. As Norman Fairclough argues, social structures determine practices – so has this situation arisen because of the vested interests of professional groups in 'owning' mental health?

In exploring vested interests, we might also consider the many organisations, largely government funded, who occupy the realm of youth mental health. For example, is it necessary or efficient that both headspace and Beyond Blue provide online and telephone services? The location of headspace centres in areas with high levels of disadvantage and relatively poor social services is no doubt beneficial to their clients, but the expenses of infrastructure and governance combined with the sessions funded by Medicare benefits suggest a very high cost for each individual service. As Anthony Jorm has said:

> "There is no doubt that the high prevalence of mental health problems in young people requires action. However, unless it can be clearly demonstrated that headspace is improving the mental health of its clients, it would be unwise to invest further in this model. This is because there is a substantial opportunity cost in tying up resources that could be used to explore alternative approaches that might be more effective" (Jorm, 2015, p862).

A final point that can be made about treatment for anxiety and depression is that some young people will improve without much therapy, as was observed by headspace in their client survey discussed in the previous section. It should be noted that headspace also provides support for people wanting to return to work or study. Several headspace sites are also participating in the Commonwealth funded trials of Individual Placement and Support (IPS) services. IPS will be discussed in detail in Chapter 8.

The third stage of CDA poses the question 'does the social order need the social wrong?' Apart from the contention about vested interests, I suggest that a narrow focus on the mental health of individuals can detract from considering social and economic factors that contribute to distress. This issue will be discussed in the next chapter which examines inequality.

The fourth and final stage of CDA identifies possible ways past the obstacles to change. These will be covered in the final chapters of the thesis. Regarding the current theme, I will

make some preliminary suggestions. The first is that a focus on participation in employment and education should be integral to all youth mental health services and practice. The second is that services dealing with unemployed people – Centrelink and employment services – should be required to provide individualised support which acknowledges and addresses mental health and wellbeing. Finally, all staff working in these services should be trained in basic mental health assessment and/or mental health first aid, as well as having access to their own advice and support from trained mental health professionals.

5.8 Mental health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on younger Australians

The coronavirus/COVID-19 pandemic that spread rapidly through most of the world during 2020 is likely to have profound effects for some years to come. The good news, relatively speaking, for young people in Australia is that the country has managed the crisis well, with a total death rate up to December 2020 of 908, or 4 people in every 100,000 of the total population. The vast majority of deaths (888) were in the population aged over 60, with only one person aged under 30 dying (Department of Health, 2020).

The success of the countries that have managed the pandemic well appears to be related to quick responses to outbreaks of the disease. In the case of Australia, these have included testing and contact tracing, quarantining and isolation of people identified as at risk, lockdowns on business and social activities and strict restrictions on domestic and international travel. At the end of 2020 many restrictions were lifted, except for international travel, with only a small number of cases identified in residents who had recently returned from overseas and who were in compulsory quarantine.

The effect of the pandemic on the mental health of Australians shows a much less positive picture. For younger people, the economic and social impacts have been profound. Many young people were in casual or precarious employment. Up to two-thirds of jobs lost were people under 25 working in retailing, tourism and hospitality. The initial lockdowns imposed in March and April severely restricted communal and social activities, including participation in education. The second wave of outbreaks in Melbourne, Victoria, resulted in many more months of lockdown restrictions across the city which has a population of nearly five million.

The contraction in employment opportunities for school leavers and graduates is likely to be profound and long-lasting, this will be discussed in the next chapter. The pandemic appears to have negatively affected the mental health of younger Australians and increased the already high prevalence of anxiety and depression. In December 2020 the Guardian Australia published a series of interviews with young people, which discussed individuals' experiences during 2020. A related article investigated the specific impact of the pandemic on mental health and mental health services, which I will quote at some length as the conclusion for this chapter:

> Though the pandemic may now be under control in Australia, Dr John Bonning, the president of the Australian College for Emergency Medicine, says the public health crisis is far from over as "unprecedented" numbers of young people struggling with their mental health present to emergency rooms across the country.
>
> Compared with last year, Bonning says the number of young people aged under 17 turning up in emergency rooms with high levels of stress, anxiety and other complex issues has grown by 25% through September and October in some regions.
>
> "Clearly significant social and economic pressure is being felt in our communities, and this often disproportionately affects already vulnerable members of our communities," Bonning says.
>
> "The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed the gaps in Australia's mental healthcare systems as being more like chasms and made already dire situations all the more urgent." (Kurmelovs, 2020).

The effect of the pandemic on the mental health of young residents of Queensland has been measured in a longitudinal study conducted by the Australian Catholic University. In 2020 a special survey was conducted with this group of 2,000 participants. Among the findings was an increase in people experiencing declining mental health:

> Prior to COVID-19, the mental health of young Queenslanders in the Our Lives cohort was steadily declining, and this trend has been exacerbated by the pandemic. Between ages 22 and 26, the proportion of respondents who rated their mental health as "Excellent", "Very Good" or "Good" declined from 82% to 70% – a drop of 3 percentage points per year. Six months later, this figure had already fallen by a further 4 percentage points, to 66%. This fall was larger for women (from 70% to 63%) than it was for men (73% to 70%) contributing to an emerging gender gap in the cohort's mental health. COVID-19 impacts such as feeling lonely or isolated, or tension and conflict in the household, were risk factors for major declines, whereas impacts such as strengthening of family/partner relationships and having more personal time were protective factors (Skrbis et al, 2020, p4).

These data illustrate how the pandemic has affected the existing fragile circumstances of many young people. For me, it also reinforces the contemporary relevance of the research question, of how best to address and improve the economic and social participation of young people and why this matters even more in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Recovery, especially for those most affected and most vulnerable, will require new approaches to policies and service delivery.

6. THEME 2:
INEQUALITY

6.1 Introduction – facets of inequality

This chapter will explore and discuss the characteristics and dimensions of inequality as they relate to young Australians. These facets include socio-economic inequality (particularly related to unemployment), intergenerational inequality and inequalities in health. In discussing health inequalities, access to health services will be considered as well as health outcomes for specific groups of young people.

A starting point for any discussion about inequality is consideration of the notion of social equality, issues of which have been far from settled over the past two centuries of human history and indeed a cause, along with religious and ethnic differences, for many revolutions and civil wars. Social equality can also be difficult to define, and a 'perfectly' equal society is both unachievable and probably undesirable, particularly if the evidence from many totalitarian regimes is considered.

For the purposes of this thesis, I will draw a parallel between social equality and social inclusion. As Peter Saunders has identified, social inclusion as espoused by Australian centre-left governments has been difficult to define and quantify, but aspects of social exclusion can be measured and amelioration of these can therefore be considered as contributing to improved inclusion (Saunders, 2013). Some of the main drivers of social exclusion are poverty, income inequality, insecure or poor-quality housing, unemployment and poor mental health. Some ethnic groups, including Indigenous Australians and refugees, experience higher degrees of these adversities (Australian Government Social Inclusion Board, 2012).

Social exclusion, represented by poverty and inequality, has also been identified by the World Health Organization (WHO) as a major factor contributing to poor health and lower life expectancy:

> Poverty, relative deprivation and social exclusion have a major impact on health and premature death, and the chances of living in poverty are loaded heavily against some social groups.
>
> Absolute poverty – a lack of the basic material necessities of life – continues to exist, even in the richest countries of Europe. The unemployed, many ethnic minority groups, guest workers, disabled people, refugees and homeless people are at particular risk…
>
> Relative poverty means being much poorer than most people in society and is often defined as living on less than 60% of the national median income. It denies people access to decent housing, education, transport and other factors vital to full participation in life. Being excluded from the life of society and treated as less than equal leads to worse health and greater risks of premature death (Wilkinson & Marmot, 2003, p16).

This article was written for the WHO European Regional Office, however these assertions could be equally applied to the Australian context. Australia also has groups who experience close to absolute poverty, including Indigenous people and refugees previously mentioned, as well as people who are homeless or who have otherwise slipped through the social security 'safety net'. While the plight of these groups should clearly be of concern, this chapter will largely focus on the concepts of relative poverty and inequality as they affect a significant part of the population of younger Australians.

As I have mentioned, in the course of drafting the final iterations of this thesis during 2020, the novel coronavirus/COVID-19 has affected most countries in the World. In the previous chapter I discussed the immediate impacts of the pandemic on the wellbeing of young people, in regard to loss of precarious employment and increasing mental health distress. There have been responses by Australian governments to ameliorate these consequences, including temporary increases to income support payments. In this thesis, and in this chapter in particular, I will endeavour to include contemporary policies at the time of submitting the final document. However, it is important that longstanding issues of inequality and poverty are examined.

6.2 Income inequality, unemployment, and poverty

The rate of unemployment payments relative to measurement of poverty was briefly discussed in Chapter 2 of this thesis. In April 2020 Newstart Allowance was renamed as Jobseeker Payment. The level and adequacy of Newstart and Youth Allowances has been a

matter of considerable public debate in recent years. These issues will be discussed later in this section.

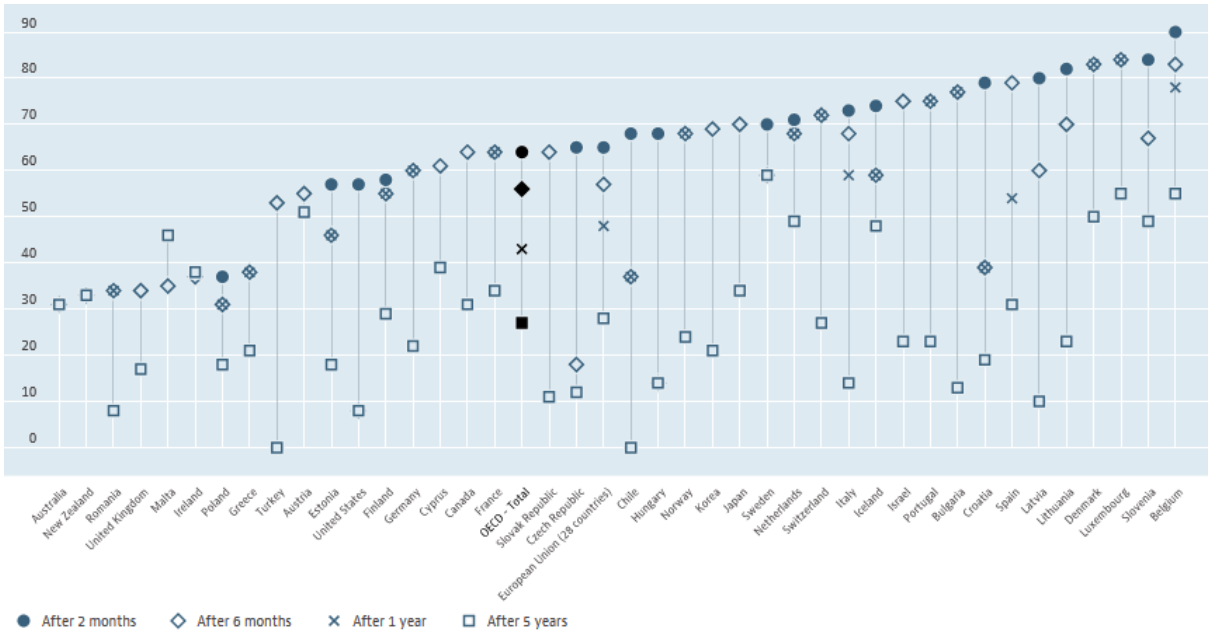
This chapter will examine relative inequalities. For example, we can consider how young people's incomes compare to those of people aged 25 years and above. Regarding employment and wages, I suggest that there is some degree of consensus for the payment of junior rates under Australian industrial awards and agreements. These rates for workers aged under 21 years generally reflect that younger workers have yet to develop skills and full productivity, or are still in training.

Regarding Youth Allowance, which is payable to unemployed people aged under 22 years and students aged under 26, there can be an argument that for young people living with middle to high income parents these payments should be assessed against family means. This has been Commonwealth Government policy for several decades. However, for young people assessed as independent or living away from home for reasons such as study, the maximum rates of payment are considerably lower than Newstart/Jobseeker and the adequacy of these payments needs to be considered in terms of whether they afford a reasonable basic standard of living. The adequacy of junior wages also requires some consideration, not so much about rates of pay but in recognition that for many young people their work is precarious – part-time, casualised and irregular.

The most recent research into measures of poverty, conducted by the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS) and the University of NSW, sets the poverty line of $457 per week income for a single person, based on this line being set at 50 per cent of median incomes. If the threshold of 60 per cent of median incomes is used, as suggested by Wilkinson and Marmot, then the poverty line is $548. These poverty lines are calculated as included housing costs (Davidson, Bradbury, Wong M. & B. & Hill, 2020). In April 2020, the maximum weekly rate of Youth Allowance, including rent assistance, was $277. The maximum JobSeeker Payment with rent assistance was $329 (Services Australia, 2020). So, there is a gap of $180 to $128 per week between these two income support payments and the lower (50 per cent) poverty line of $457. This income inequality is also apparent when the payments are compared to the maximum single rate for age and disability pensions of $472 per week (not including rent assistance) and the minimum full-time wage of $740 per week (Australian Government Fair Work Ombudsman, 2020).

The following chart compares unemployment benefits among Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) nations. It indicates that Australia appears to have the lowest benefits. However, the detail of the chart needs to be examined closely as it can be seen that in many countries, benefits reduce over time, or in the case of Turkey and Chile cease to be payable at all. Comparisons between systems are also difficult as, in the case of Australia, the basic Newstart/Jobseeker payment are not based on previous earnings and are not time limited. Additional income support such as rental assistance and payments for dependent children (Family Tax Benefit) are not included. In the Australian context this means that the gap between income support and the poverty line is smaller for families. However, for single young people the gap is still significant, as has been discussed above.

Figure 6.1:



OECD (2021), Benefits in unemployment, share of previous income (indicator). doi: 10.1787/0cc0d0e5-en

These OECD data have been examined by Peter Whiteford, a public policy academic at the Australian National University. His analysis considered how Newstart compared to pension payments and minimum wages, and Prime Minister Scott Morrison's 2019 claim that Australia had one of the best social security safety nets in the world. Whiteford's conclusion was otherwise:

> Newstart recipients are falling into deepening poverty. The gap between Newstart and pensions, between Newstart and wages, and between Newstart and the costs of maintaining a minimum standard of living are continuing to widen. And the picture is even worse once we take account of housing benefits. For many unemployed people, Australia not only doesn't have one of the best safety nets in the world, it has one of the worst (Whiteford, 2019).

Whiteford's assertion about the inadequacy of Newstart is borne out by earlier research commissioned by major church groups which examined quantitative data on households experiencing financial hardship:

> While the Australian economy has prospered in recent years one group that is falling behind the pack is the unemployed. The current unemployment benefit for single persons is $244 per week which is 40 per cent of the minimum wage in Australia. This study finds that households where the unemployment benefit is the main source of income are more than five times as likely to be in poverty with a poverty rate at 75 per cent…Rates of financial stress and deprivation are much higher amongst the unemployed households. Around 36 per cent of these households experience at least three forms of financially driven deprivation (out of six) compared with the all households average of 8.7 per cent. 45 per cent of unemployed households experience at least three financial stressors (out of nine) compared to 8.8 per cent for all households. 16.6 per cent of unemployed households went without meals while 13.5 per cent could not afford to heat their home (Phillips & Nepal, 2012, pp5-6).

In more recent years other organisations, including the Business Council of Australia and many nongovernment organisations, have joined ACOSS in calling for an increase in unemployment benefits, particularly as payments for single people and couples without dependents continue to decrease relative to the poverty line. Advocates for the increase in payment point out that these payments have not increased in real terms for more than 25 years, whereas pensions and family payments have done so. This is because of different indexation arrangements, with benefits indexed to the Australian Consumer Price Index (CPI) and pension indexed as a percentage of average wage incomes. There is a strong argument that the CPI is not a good reflection of overall inflation and cost of living increases, especially housing costs (Davidson, Saunders, Bradbury & Wong, 2018).

The Australian campaign to 'Raise the Rate' has been supported by groups, including State and Territory Councils of Social Service, which represent nongovernment welfare agencies. An anti-poverty coalition representing churches, faith-based service providers, trade unions and academics was instrumental in establishing a parliamentary inquiry into the adequacy of Newstart and related payments (antipovertyweek.org.au; Parliament of Australia, 2020b).

6.3 Senate Committee Inquiries on unemployment payments

The Senate is the upper house of the Commonwealth (national) Parliament which was established at Federation in 1901. Originally there was an equal number of Senators for each of the six States, formerly separate British colonies which constituted the Federation. This excluded the Northern Territory (NT) and Australian Capital Territory (ACT), both established as separate entities in 1911 under direct Commonwealth control. Both the NT and ACT attained self-government in the late 20th Century, and each elects two Senators. Currently the States elect 12 Senators each, for a total of 76.

The Senate electoral system is based on proportional representation, which has allowed for independents and minor parties to gain seats. While most seats are held by the Liberal and National Coalition (LNP) and the Australian Labor Party (ALP), the independent and minority 'cross benchers' frequently exercise a balance of power in reviewing legislation from the (lower) House of Representatives and can vote with the major parties to establish standing or issue-based committees. These committees usually represent all parties and can include independent Senators.

For the purposes of this thesis, the significance of the Senate committees is that they are well-resourced and can conduct public hearings anywhere they choose, not just in the national capital, Canberra. Submissions can be made by organisations or individuals, orally at hearings, or in writing. The hearings are transcribed verbatim and are freely available on the Senate website. While committee findings are not binding on the Senate or the Parliament as a whole, they can be an important representation of how Commonwealth Government policies affect individuals and communities, as well as providing a conduit for ideas for new or improved legislation and policies. Several Committee Inquiries will be discussed in this thesis.

The first Senate Inquiry into the adequacy of Newstart Allowance was conducted in 2012 when the Australian Labor Party was in government. It might have been expected that a nominally left-wing government would have supported at least a modest increase in payments, but this was not the case:

> Labor's return to government in 2007 did not bring about enlightened social security reforms in this area as many had hoped. The government refused over the course of its 6-year tenure to increase what had become a severely inadequate Newstart

> payment. This failure was attacked by some unions, by the welfare peak body, the ACOSS, and even by business figures and economists normally sympathetic to neoliberal policy. In fact, by 2013, Labor had extended work obligations to an even wider range of single parents and people with disabilities (Morris & Wilson 2014, p205).

While the Committee's recommendations did not include specific proposals to increase the overall level of payment, changes were suggested to allow support for older people transitioning from the roles of parents and carers, as well as more generous provisions for earning casual wages and being retained on the Centrelink payment system during periods of casual work. The quotes above and below are taken from a qualitative study of the lived experience of long-term unemployed people living in metropolitan Sydney. Although based on a relatively small number of interviewees (54), persuasive evidence is presented that when people were unemployed for even a few months, meagre financial reserves were exhausted. The consequences of this included losing secure housing and not being able to afford good nutrition and other necessities such as medication. The effects on both physical and mental health can be dire and would seem to do little to assist people in gaining work:

> Gary gave a startling account of how he felt that living on the Newstart Allowance had affected his health:
>
> > There are many occasions where my electricity has been cut off. It's led to increased health problems. Last year with no heating, and no electricity, no lighting, no cooking, I got pneumonia. This led to a virus, which caused the bone to collapse under my eye … Now I need open facial cranial surgery … That is a major $20,000 operation for which I'm in a queue that may never eventuate. And of course, because of the poor food … I have major dental problems … Because of … my diet quality … I now have Type II Diabetes; and high blood pressure … that's [at] near death level. I'm on expensive tablets, which I can't afford, and which I often don't take … This non-employment situation is killing me. I can't afford these tablets all the time. [After rent], I'm only on $19 a day.
>
> The financial situation of respondents also generated much psychological distress:
>
> > It kind of creates stress, not having enough money … It's really hard. It is kind of anxious [sic], because you don't really know what's going to happen, and then on top of that your payments just get cut for random reasons (Chris). (Morris & Wilson, 2014, p 214).

The later 2019-2020 Newstart Inquiry was conducted under the auspices of the Senate Community Affairs References Committee. Its full title is the 'Adequacy of Newstart and related payments and alternative mechanisms to determine the level of income support payments in Australia' (Australian Senate 2020). The Committee held public hearings in

each State and Territory, except Queensland, and received more than 450 submissions. The Committee's report was published in April 2020.

The Committee report published in 2020 contained 27 recommendations. Most of these can be summarised as recommending increases to Newstart, student allowances and other so-called 'working age' income support such as Parenting Payment. Other recommendations included establishing an independent body to set social security rates, and a review of the 'mutual obligation' requirements placed on unemployed people. It's important to note at this point that the Committee's membership was dominated by Senators from the ALP and the Australian Greens, with the (Government) Liberal Party Senators constituting only two out of the total membership of six. These two dissented with the majority findings of the Committee. Their views representing current government policies will be discussed in the discourse analysis at the end of this chapter.

The overall findings of the inquiry have a close resonance with the subject of this research, although the terms of reference were not limited to younger unemployed people. Apart from the detailed findings and recommendations in the report (more than 200 pages), there are eight transcripts of hearings. These transcripts form the records of all parliamentary proceedings, known in Australian and other Commonwealth nations as Hansard. The transcripts provide a wealth of data from a broad range of individuals and organisations including, most importantly, unemployed people themselves.

It was predictable that most of the people attending the Committee hearings would have an interest in raising the rate of social security payments and included advocacy groups such as the Councils of Social Service. Many service providers provided evidence which represents the complexity and consequences of inadequate income support. I will summarise a few of the recurrent themes in this evidence which highlight the disadvantages experienced by unemployed people and which perpetuate inequality:

Poverty and hardship – there were many accounts of people struggling to maintain even a basic standard of living, particularly if they had been unemployed for more than a few months. High housing costs and unavailability of affordable housing were frequently cited, with people having to make choices between paying rent and utilities or buying food. Many witnesses stated that the low level of payment is the major barrier to people looking for and

finding work, for example not having the mobility afforded by having a car, or not having access to computers and the internet.

Breaches and sanctions – unemployed people and advocacy groups raised issues about financial penalties imposed by employment service agencies, which add to existing hardship. The operations of employment agencies and the 'Targeted Compliance Framework' have been examined by other Senate inquiries and these will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

Health impacts – the effect of long-term unemployment on health and wellbeing was often cited by witnesses. Of particular note are the issues faced by people with chronic physical and mental health problems in affording medication. Lack of access to dental services was also mentioned, with poor dental health exacerbating other health problems. Missing teeth due to decay and infections are also a significant barrier for people wanting to find work in jobs that require a high level of presentation, such as hospitality and tourism.

There are many parts of the Committee hearings which could be quoted, which graphically describe the difficulties faced by people on Newstart and the agencies which support them. I will cite just two statements which highlight the barriers for people trying to enter employment or further education. The first is from a 25-year-old man giving evidence to the hearing in Northern Adelaide:

> I was saving up for a really long time this last year, because I wanted to go to university. I wasn't able to get in through the foundation course because they didn't accept me, so the only way to get in was to sit a STAT test, which I've just paid $375 for. That took me about a year to save up for—that and this new phone that I had to buy because my last one, which I had for about three years, just died. Those have been my leisure things of the year. Most of the time I sit at home. I make sure I've got all my bills paid, of course. That's the only responsible thing you can do (Parliament of Australia, 2019a, p27).

The second statement is from a manager of an advocacy agency that works with sole parents. The statement is in response to one of the Government (Liberal Party) Senators who had asserted that there was plenty of care work available for people and that such work did not require high levels of skill or training:

> It was only yesterday that I was helping a woman with tidying up her CV. She was applying actually for one of the jobs that the committee member was talking about. For her to apply, she needed, first of all, a police clearance, she needed a first aid

> certificate, she needed a roadworthy car, she'd needed certificates in OHS&W* and a basic TAFE* course, and that was deemed as an entry level into the job. When I've surveyed people, one of the responses that come up time and time again is that what prohibits them from working or applying for the jobs they would like to seek are those really basic licenses that are part of the entry level. Even for baristas there are courses. If you're in a restaurant, there is alcohol safety. If you're on Newstart, these are prohibitive amounts and we can't access them. I do want to actually just say that even those really entry level jobs sometimes cost money—whether it's safety clothes et cetera—so, if we don't offer that as part of our suite of assistance, we actually have a divide between those who want to jump into the jobs to those who just can't (Parliament of Australia, 2019b, p10).
>
> (*Occupational Health, Safety and Welfare; Technical and Further Education)

6.4 Commonwealth Government 'temporary' responses to the COVID-19 pandemic

The Coalition of Liberal and National Parties (LNP) has governed Australia since 2013, obtaining a majority of seats in the House of Representatives in the election of that year and in subsequent elections in 2016 and 2019. The usual term of each Commonwealth Parliament is three years, with the next election therefore due in 2022.

As discussed in the previous section, there has been widespread and growing support for unemployment benefits (Youth and JobSeeker Allowances) to be increased. Up until 2020 numerous LNP senior ministers have steadfastly refused to countenance this, with the refrain that 'the best form of welfare is a job'. These attitudes and policies appeared to change rapidly in March 2020, following the formation of the 'National Cabinet', comprising the Prime Minister and the Premiers/Chief Ministers of the six States and two Territories. The early decisions of this entity, aimed at containing the spread of the highly contagious disease, included lockdown and curtailing of many industries and events and closures of international and internal borders.

As was noted in the previous chapter, this erstwhile political cooperation and consensus has, so far, resulted in relatively low levels of infection and mortality in Australia. However, the economic consequences of the lockdowns resulted in hundreds of thousands of workers becoming very quickly stood down or unemployed. Prime Minister Scott Morrison and Treasurer Josh Frydenberg announced on 22nd March 2020 that there would be an immediate increase to JobSeeker and Youth Allowance payments in the form of a

‘Coronavirus Supplement’ of $550 per fortnight (Morrison, 2020). This effectively doubled the single rate of Jobseeker and more than doubled the maximum rate of Youth Allowance. Also announced was a ‘JobKeeper’ subsidy to employers to assist in retaining employees who were unable to work in their usual occupations. Unfortunately, the latter excluded many young casual workers unless they had been with the same employer for 12 months or more. Workers and international students on temporary visas were excluded from both schemes.

The supplement clearly provided a boost to income support recipients but appears to have been granted begrudgingly. It was reduced to $250 per fortnight in September and to $150 from January 2021. The $150 supplement was scheduled to cease at the end of March 2021. In February 2021, the Prime Minister announced that there would be a permanent increase of $50 a fortnight to JobSeeker and related payments, which was in fact a reduction of $100 from the January to March rate (Morrison, Cash & Rushton, 2021). The reactions to and implications of this decision will be discussed further in Chapter 10.

More than a few commentators have remarked that there was a strong political motivation to assist newly unemployed people, who were portrayed as somehow more deserving than those who had already been unemployed for months or years:

> When Prime Minister Scott Morrison talks about people thrown into financial hardship by coronavirus, he often points out they’re in this situation through "no fault of their own".
>
> Treasurer Josh Frydenberg used the same phrase on talkback radio last week. "You would have been just as heartbroken as I was when you saw those queues outside Centrelink," he said. "And people who have lost their job through no fault of their own need our support at this time and that's what the government has done in an unprecedented way." (Yeates, 2020)

These attitudes would seem to be further evidenced by the Prime Minister and his colleagues suggesting that, despite a continuing high ratio of unemployed people to available jobs, the higher payments were encouraging people not to work, as reported in *Guardian Australia*:

> Australia’s coronavirus economic supports could be holding the economy back by providing a disincentive to work, according to Scott Morrison and Coalition backbenchers, who want jobseeker peeled back and new rules on jobkeeper wage subsidies to compel workers to take shifts…Payments should be “targeted to the

people who get it who need it most" because while some companies were still in a slump, others' revenue would be "getting up above those previous downturn levels", he earlier told 2GB Radio.

Morrison also said businesses were reporting that "some of them are finding it hard to get people to come and take the shifts" because of the government's decision to double jobseeker to $1,100 a fortnight.

"What we have to be worried about now is that we can't allow the jobseeker payment to become an impediment to people going out and doing work, getting extra shifts." (Karp, 2020)

6.5 Regional inequalities in employment and unemployment

Two of the 2020-2021 Senate Committee hearings were held in areas of very high unemployment, the city of Playford in Northern Adelaide (South Australia) and the city of Launceston in Northern Tasmania. Witnesses identified that there were eleven or more unemployed people for each job vacancy, with a much higher ratio of potential applicants for unskilled or entry level jobs.

Anglicare Australia, a national faith-based service provider, has examined job vacancies in each state and territory. The 'Jobs Availability Snapshot' (Anglicare, 2017) considers the availability of entry-level and semi-skilled jobs. These are classified respectively as Level 5 and Level 4 occupations. Unemployed people, jobseekers in government parlance, are classified into three streams when they first register for employment assistance. Stream A jobseekers are considered to require minimal help in finding work, Stream B are assessed as requiring some help. Stream C jobseekers are identified as those with more complex personal issues and limited skills and qualifications, and requiring more intensive assistance to obtain and keep a job.

The 2017 Jobs Availability Snapshot identifies the number of entry-level vacancies and the ratio of these to the numbers of the most disadvantaged Stream C jobseekers as illustrated in the following table:

Table 6.1:

The number of job vacancies advertised in the sample month was typical given that there are approximately 169,000 jobs advertised on average in any given month in Australia. Level 4 and Level 5 vacancies comprised 27% and 15% of the jobs advertised respectively.

The Number of jobs advertised by skill level

Vacancy skill level	**National total**	**National percent**
Level 1	64,507	37%
Level 2	15,006	9%
Level 3	19,947	12%
Level 4	46,105	27%
Level 5	25,979	15%
All vacancies total	171,544	100%

Using the above figures, the 2017 JAS shows that the following ratios of jobseekers to available jobs looking at the two lowest job skill levels.

(Anglicare, 2017, p10)

The latest iteration of the Snapshot was prepared from Department of Employment data collected in May 2020. It focussed on Level 5 jobs and Stream C jobseekers, as at this stage vacancies had decreased and this group of unemployed people had increased in number, due to the early impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. The report noted that of 115,773 national vacancies, only 13,606 (11 per cent) were for Level 5 jobs. There were 1,442,760 people registered with employment services, meaning that there were 106 jobseekers for each Level 5 vacancy (Anglicare, 2020).

The report highlighted the changes that had occurred in 12 months, both nationally and each State and Territory. The table below illustrates considerable differences between regions.

Table 6.2:

Ratio of people in Stream C to Level 5 jobs advertised by region

Region	Stream C to Level 5 job, 2020	Stream C to Level 5 job, 2019
Australia	7.8	5.5
ACT	2.5	1.8
NSW	7.8	5
NT	6.2	4
Queensland	7.3	6
SA	10.3	9.1
Tasmania	21	13.9
Victoria	6.4	4
WA	9.1	7.5

(Anglicare, 2020, p9)

The Brotherhood of St Laurence (BSL), also an Anglican Church organisation, has conducted research examining issues of youth unemployment which highlights regional differences.

The BSL research has included a mapping of the 20 regions of Australia with the highest rates of youth unemployment and the 20 regions with the lowest rates. The rates in the high unemployment regions range from 16 per cent in North-west Perth (Western Australia) to 67.1 per cent in outback Queensland. The rates in the areas with the lowest youth unemployment range from 5.8 per cent to 9.5 per cent, 15 out of these 20 areas are in capital cities (Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Perth and Darwin).

The BSL report notes that between 2016 and 2018 this inequality has increased, with unemployment rates increasing in all but one of the high unemployment regions. These increases ranged from 0.2 per cent to 10.4 per cent in 19 areas, with Outback Queensland recording a rise of 32.6% most likely related to a prolonged drought. By comparison, in the low unemployment areas, the rates decreased by between 0.1 per cent and 10.4 per cent except for very slight rises in the Darling Downs (Queensland, 0.3 per cent) and Darwin (0.1 per cent) (Brotherhood of St Laurence, 2018).

The relevance of considering these regional differences is that policies applying to young unemployed people are set by the Commonwealth Government and are much the same

across the nation. It seems unreasonable that the standard requirement for an unemployed person to apply for 20 jobs each month should apply in areas where there are few, if any, vacancies.

6.6 The social determinants of health and mental health – intergenerational inequality and cross-generational disadvantage

In this section I will examine two of the social determinants that currently affect younger Australians. I define intergenerational inequality as inequality between generations, such as taxation policies that privilege older people over younger people. Cross-generational disadvantage is the persistence of poverty and disadvantage in particular groups, that continues across generations and families.

In 2017 the Brotherhood of St Laurence examined the extent of youth employment in Australia (BSL, 2017). The study is based on data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), including the Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey. Key findings in the report are the steady increase in youth unemployment in the 40 years up until 2017. There has been a similar increase in underemployment, where young people are in casual or part-time work and want to, but are unable to, secure more hours. The report refers to these combined factors as 'underutilisation' and identifies that for people under 25 unemployment is much higher than is represented by the national unemployment rate, for all ages, of between 5 per cent and 6 per cent:

> By February 2017 the rate was 31.5 per cent, the highest in almost 40 years and above the level of the recession of the early 1990s. Looking at the unemployment and underemployment rates separately, in February this year the rate of unemployment for young people in the labour force was 13.5 per cent, while an even bigger group – 18 per cent – was underemployed. These rates are well above the levels in the months preceding the GFC when the unemployment and underemployment rates were below 10 per cent and 11 per cent, respectively (BSL, 2017a, p3).

The Global Financial Crisis of 2008 (the GFC as referred to above) sharply increased unemployment in Australia for a couple of years, but overall employment participation slowly recovered. However, an analysis by labour market academic, Jeff Borland, demonstrated that this was not the case for 15 to 24-year-olds:

> Since the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) a substantial deterioration in employment outcomes for the young (aged 15 to 24 years) in Australia has occurred. From 2008 to

> 2019 their employment/population (E/POP) rate decreased by 4.3 percentage points, whereas the rate for persons aged 25 years and above has increased by 1 percentage point…The deterioration in employment outcomes for the young has been pervasive - affecting males and females; those aged 15 to 19 years and 20 to 24 years; those in full-time study and not studying; and spans across groups with different levels of education attainment (Borland, 2020, p1).

While these two documents highlight how much economic issues, such as the GFC, can affect youth unemployment, there are clearly some long-term factors at work. These include the lack of entry-level jobs, as was identified in the Anglicare report discussed in the previous section.

The changes in the circumstances of young Australians in this Century have been documented by sociologists Dan Woodman and Johanna Wyn in their book, 'Youth and Generation' (Woodman & Wyn, 2015). Data presented in the book are based on the authors' survey research on 'Life Patterns' of a cohort of young people transitioning from school education to employment, training and/or tertiary education. Statistics and research from other Australian and international sources are discussed in depth.

For young Australians, the most marked changes between the post-World War 2 'Boomer' generation (born between 1946 and 1964) and the 'Gen X/Millennial' generation have been in employment and education. In 1976, only 5 per cent of this population had a bachelor's degree or higher, 88 per cent of males and 54 per cent of females were working, but only 11 per cent of jobs were part-time. The comparative figures for 2011 were 26 per cent of people having university degrees, 79 per cent of males and 69 per cent of females working, and 34 per cent of jobs were part-time.

Woodman and Wyn argue that the increase in part-time work represents increased precariousness of work for younger generations and this is an international phenomenon. While increased participation in tertiary education may seem to be a positive trend, there is evidence that having a degree does not guarantee stable employment:

> In 2016, 71% of university graduates were working full time within 4 months of finishing their undergraduate degree. While this was an increase from 69% for the previous year, it was a large drop from 85% in 2008. Since the Global Financial Crisis,

> graduates have taken longer to gain a position in the labour market (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2017a, p3)

Young people in low-income families are much less likely to participate in tertiary education:

> Using the Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (a widely used place-based measure of socio-economic disadvantage in Australia), the Australian Bureau of Statistics has shown that young people aged 20-24 years from the most disadvantaged 20 per cent were approximately one-third as likely to have completed or be undertaking a Bachelor-level degree compared to young people form the most advantaged 20 per cent of areas (19 to 54 per cent). (Woodman & Wyn, 2015, p29)

Another change for young people has been in trades and vocational education and the decline of traditional apprenticeship career paths. As with tertiary (university) education, access to technical and further education (TAFE) has been monetised. Previously free or employer-subsidised courses were replaced by the VET-FEE-HELP (Vocational Education and Training fee) loan system. This resulted in a rapid growth in the number of private training providers. The evidence from media investigations and a subsequent Senate Inquiry suggests that there was widespread fraud by providers and that prospective students were lured into worthless courses, with promises such as free computers, without understanding that they would be liable to repay substantial loans. In his submission to the Senate Inquiry, the economist John Quiggin stated that:

> The problems that have recently emerged in the SA TAFE system are merely symptoms of a decade of policy failure by state and Commonwealth governments of both parties, involving cuts to funding and ideologically driven projects of marketization…most of the leading large-scale providers have been exposed as essentially fraudulent operations, exploiting government subsidies and leaving students with worthless qualifications. However, the pressure to respond to market competition has also had damaging effects within the TAFE sector. The problems reported in SA are consistent with this analysis (Parliament of Australia, 2018, p3).

As Woodman and Wyn have shown, students from disadvantaged backgrounds are much less likely to enrol in university education. The decline of the TAFE sector therefore seems to be a further example of inequality being perpetuated as there are even fewer opportunities for poorer young Australians to improve their employability. The opportunities for poorer young people to pursue a choice of university degree have been limited by Commonwealth higher education changes that apply from 2021. This policy raised tuition fees for arts and humanities courses by as much as 113 per cent, under the

guise of producing a greater number of 'job-ready' graduates in other disciplines to meet the needs of the post-pandemic economy (Hutchens, 2020).

These issues regarding education can illustrate the broader matter of cross-generational disadvantage. It may seem a statement of the obvious that privilege and wealth are inherited and continue through generations and that for most poor people, underprivilege and disadvantage remain the lot of their offspring.

One of the most persuasive studies that supports the existence of cross-generational disadvantage is the Christchurch Health and Development Study (CHDS) from New Zealand. This research has studied a cohort of more than 1,000 people born in 1977 through to age 35. Data from the study are detailed and comprehensive and include child and adolescent development, physical and mental health, family background and socio-economic circumstances. Approximately 15 per cent of the group interviewed at adolescence were assessed as experiencing major depression. Of this group, poor mental health was strongly associated with poverty, family dysfunction and childhood abuse or neglect (Fergusson & Woodward, 2002). When the relationship between unemployment and mental health was examined, the most disadvantaged groups had significant problems with maintaining employment or educational achievement and these problems were strongly associated with issues of behaviour and conduct, offending and comorbid alcohol and drug misuse (Fergusson, Horwood & Woodward, 2001). There are many similarities between Australia and New Zealand, including high levels of unemployment in regional areas, high levels of poverty in indigenous and (some) migrant communities, expensive housing, welfare to work policies and low levels of income support payments.

Issues of poverty and social exclusion were comprehensively studied in Australia, beginning in the 1960s. The 'poverty line' was established by the 1972 Henderson Commission of Enquiry into Poverty. The most recent data on poverty are contained in an extensive survey conducted by ACOSS and the University of NSW (Davidson et al, 2020). To briefly summarise some key findings, while overall poverty has not increased over the past two decades, the number of children and 15 to 24-year-olds living in poverty has increased. This trend is attributed to welfare to work policies such as moving sole parents from Parenting

Payment to the lower Newstart Allowance, the relatively low amounts of Newstart and Youth Allowances and high costs of housing.

I suggest that if something like the CHDS had been conducted in Australia, the findings would be much the same. The effects of poverty on the wellbeing of young Australians are demonstrated in the data from Mission Australia's 2018 survey of more than 20,000 young people, titled 'Working through it'. The responses of people with at least one parent or guardian in paid employment were compared with those whose parent/s or guardian/s were not employed. The latter group had significantly lower participation in study, less confidence in being able to attain goals such as going to university and perceived many more barriers to obtaining work. On the issues of mental health and wellbeing the findings from the survey are disturbing:

- More than double the proportion of economically disadvantaged young people reported feeling *very sad/sad* with life as a whole (19.3% compared with 9.3% of respondents with parent/s or guardians in paid work).
- A higher proportion of economically disadvantaged young people reported feeling *negative* or *very negative* about the future (15.7% compared with 9.4% of respondents with parent/s or guardians in paid work) (Carlisle, Hall, Fildes, & Plummer, 2019, pp4-5).

In summary, I suggest that intergenerational inequality can be considered as a subset of broader inequality, essentially representing differences in how social and economic policies advantage or disadvantage different population groups. Some examples of this in Australia include the lower rate of Youth Allowance for young adults, when compared to Jobseeker Allowance for people aged 22 or over. Many older Australians are advantaged by policies which do not apply to most young people, for example they received free tertiary education, are more likely to benefit from negative gearing on investments and pay no or minimal taxes on superannuation-based retirement incomes. These benefits to older Australians were the result of deliberate policy decisions. I will argue that the wellbeing of a significant minority of younger Australians should be worthy of attention, with development of policies that foster social and economic inclusion.

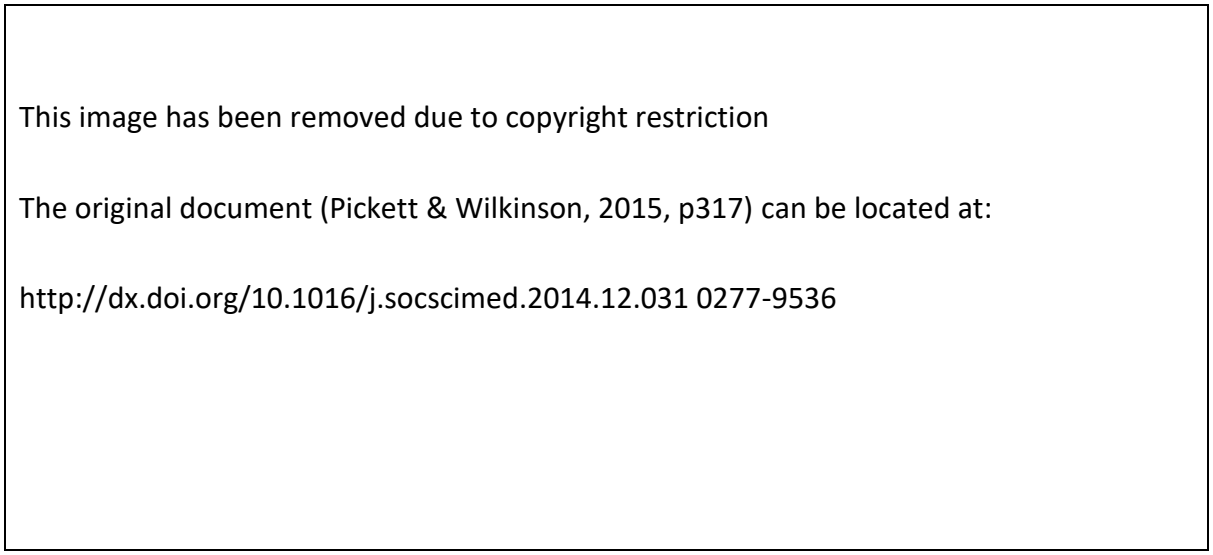
6.7 Inequality as a social determinant of health and mental health

The genesis for the contemporary understanding of public health and the social determinants of health (SDH) can be found in the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion developed under the auspices of the World Health Organization (WHO 1986). Following the development of the Charter there have been significant transnational advances in public health in areas such as immunisation, disease prevention and tobacco control. The social determinants of health and health equity/inequality have been recognised and in the early 21st Century these were extended to mental health issues. WHO's updated version of the SDH recognised that many factors of disadvantage contribute to poorer physical and mental health, including poverty, unemployment and inadequate food and housing (Wilkinson & Marmot, 2003).

The co-editor of this WHO report, Michael Marmot, developed the notion of the 'social gradient' of health while leading the 'Whitehall Studies'. These longitudinal studies of British civil servants showed a strong association between rank or status and health conditions – in essence, workers with lower status and a low level of control over their work were seen to have much higher incidence of chronic disease and generally poorer physical and mental wellbeing. Marmot has continued to explore issues of insecure employment and unemployment and how poverty negatively affects health (Marmot, 2014). Most recently Marmot has led a study examining how the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed health inequalities in England, with higher morbidity and mortality occurring in the most disadvantaged populations (Marmot, Allen, Goldblatt, Herd & Morrison, 2020). Some recommendations from this study, to 'Build Back Fairer', will be discussed in the concluding chapters of this thesis.

Richard Wilkinson has been cited earlier in this chapter in regard to his work with Marmot and the WHO. In subsequent work Wilkinson and Kate Pickett have argued that there is a strong causal relationship between income inequality, poor health, and other social problems. This argument is based on their analysis of more than 300 epidemiological studies and is represented as follows:

Figure 6.2:



When discussing the associations between inequality, disadvantage and the wellbeing of young people, it is important to recognise the complexities of the causes for those experiencing mental health distress. Not all incidences of distress are attributable to inequality. Anxiety, depression and related comorbidities such as eating disorders and substance misuse are also experienced by more affluent and privileged young people. Other contributing factors to mental distress, such as family breakdown and violence, do not just occur within lower socio-economic groups.

What I have attempted to demonstrate so far in this chapter is the evidence of persistently high levels of youth unemployment and underemployment in Australia and the poverty and disadvantage that are associated with these. Not every disadvantaged or marginalised young Australian will experience a high level of distress but, as the Mission Australia 2018 youth survey shows, the chances of this occurring are far higher than for more advantaged peers. As Michael Marmot unequivocally states:

> Unemployment is bad for mental health and is associated with increased risk of suicide. I have argued that a key consideration for economic policy should be the effect on mental health. There is little doubt that policies of austerity have had a disastrous effect on youth unemployment in Europe. Unemployment rates of 15–24-year-olds are 36% in Portugal, 41% in Italy, 58% in Spain and nearly 60% in Greece. Even allowing for some 'informal' employment that inflates these figures, the levels are shockingly high. And they have consequences. Comparisons across Europe show

> that the higher the rate of unemployment, the higher the suicide level. Government policies can mitigate these effects on suicide. The greater the government spending on social protection - active labour market policies, unemployment benefits, health care—the more the link between unemployment and suicide is broken. Fiscal policy is health policy (Marmot, 2014, p294).

In the next concluding section, I will examine how Australian fiscal policy is strongly influenced by neoliberalism, and how this contributes to inequality. I will also discuss further why inequality is important to considering how the wellbeing of younger Australians can be improved.

6.8 Discussion and analysis

In the introduction to this chapter, I discussed some challenges in considering issues of equality and inequality. Michael Marmot provides a helpful way to address the reality that perfect equality does not occur in any society, since there are always social hierarchies. Marmot suggests that social hierarchies can be thought of as a ladder and that a shorter ladder can provide for greater equality and upward social mobility. He provides an example of how this might work:

> …suppose, just for a moment, that the ladder were defined on the basis of years of education. People who had three years or fewer had life expectancy of 50 years, those who had 13 years or more had life expectancy of 80 and the rest were ranged in between in a graded way: the social gradient in health. Now if we had a societal change so that everyone had at least 10 years of education, and better health followed as a result, the magnitude of health inequity would be reduced. We have reduced inequities by making the ladder shorter (Marmot, 2009, p209).

Consideration of the social determinants of health, such as education, poverty and unemployment, would seem a very rational approach to government and policy making. I suggest that the detail of evidence presented to the Senate Newstart Inquiry makes a very strong case that the situations of unemployed people, including improved chances of gaining employment or education, are negatively affected by the low level of income support. It was also argued that increased benefits would stimulate local economies in areas of high unemployment thereby creating more jobs. Two Senators, representing the (Liberal/National Coalition) Government, did not accept the Inquiry findings. They argued instead that it was important that the welfare system should remain tightly targeted and 'sustainable', and that employment growth will only occur alongside continued economic

growth. They also suggested that proposed enhancements to employment services dealing with the most disadvantaged jobseekers will improve outcomes.

For the purposes of this research, the question arises as to why it is so difficult to effect change. This may not be simply an issue of party politics, for example a minority of members of the 2012 Senate Newstart Inquiry (Labor and Greens Senators) recommended an increase in payments, but this was rejected by the Labor Government in power at that time (Mendes, 2015). This appears to demonstrate that, despite the views of the Labor Party Senators, both Coalition and Labor Governments have little appetite for improving benefits. It is possible that this is because there is little perceived political advantage in doing so.

6.8.1 The influence of neoliberalism

This discourse can be best understood by examining the ideology that has dominated many nations and transnational organisations in the past forty or fifty years – neoliberalism. In his book, 'A Brief History of Neoliberalism', the British historian, David Harvey has provided a useful explanation of how this ideology, or philosophy, came about, and how it came to influence so many national governments (Harvey, 2005). The book is a critical analysis and, in paraphrasing Harvey's arguments and applying them to this research, I should state that it is not my intention to present neoliberalism and capitalism as unalloyed evils. There are several aspects of both that have undoubtedly improved the economic circumstances of many people and have driven technological and social innovations.

David Harvey describes the post-war genesis of neoliberalism, initially led by the economist, Friedrich Hayek, as initially a 'utopian project', concerned with the promotion of freedom following the totalitarian excesses of the first part of the 20th Century. The movement gained adherents in the post-socialist government of Chile (1973), UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (elected in 1979) and US President Ronald Reagan (elected in 1980). Harvey says that the ideology gained traction and popularity, because of the 'stagflation' prevalent in many economies during the 1970s – a combination of low economic growth and high inflation.

Harvey describes the common elements of neoliberal policies and politics: a smaller role for the state (including privatisation of state enterprises), lower taxation, deregulation of

business and the importance of individual rights over the social collective. He argues that the net result of these policies has been increased inequality, as wealth and capital have been distributed upwards to large corporations which are often owned by single individuals and dynasties.

In regard to this research, we might consider the paradox of an ideology that promotes smaller government, while expanding the role of government and contracted agencies in managing the lives of citizens receiving income support payments. In chapter 3 I have discussed the evolution and expansion of governmentality, this appears quite at odds with the claims that neoliberalism can promulgate greater freedoms.

Australia first adopted neoliberal principles under the Labor Government elected in 1983. Policies enacted included the privatisation of government-owned airlines and airports, the sale of the Commonwealth Bank and the partial privatisation of the Commonwealth Employment Service. It should be noted that the Labor Party was not neoliberal in all its policies. Their four terms in government, from 1983 to 1996, also saw the reintroduction of universal health insurance (Medicare), substantial increases in pensions and child benefits and the 'Accord' with trade unions, which saw the introduction of employer contributions to superannuation (retirement) benefits for workers. The Coalition Government elected in 1996 continued with major privatisations, including the national telecommunication provider, parts of the railway network and the Commonwealth scientific research body, the CSIRO.

I suggest that a more pernicious effect of neoliberalism, apart from increasing inequality, is that governments are no longer interested in investigating poverty and inequality. The research discussed in this chapter has been conducted by nongovernment agencies and academics. The Senate Newstart Inquiry provides further insight into the disinterest of government agencies in this area. The final public hearing of this Inquiry was held in February 2020 with only four witnesses, all from the Department of the Treasury. This Department is responsible for guiding national economic and fiscal policy.

In the preamble to each hearing the committee chair states that officials (civil servants) should not be asked to comment on government policies. However, it is legitimate for the

Senators to ask questions about the work of departments including research and policy development:

> **Senator McCARTHY:** Alright. Thank you. Have you provided any advice at all to government about Newstart in any way?
>
> **Mrs Wilkinson:** Treasury typically provides advice to government across a range of issues.
>
> **Senator McCARTHY:** Including Newstart?
>
> **Mrs Wilkinson:** Across any issue that we're asked to provide advice on.
>
> **Senator McCARTHY:** So when would the last time have been that you provided advice on Newstart?
>
> **Mrs Wilkinson:** I can't comment on the advice that we provide.
>
> **Senator McCARTHY:** But you do give advice on Newstart?
>
> **Mrs Wilkinson:** No, I'm not saying that we did give advice; I'm saying that we provide advice on a range of topics that we're requested to provide advice on by government.
>
> **Senator McCARTHY:** Does that include distributional impacts?
>
> **Mrs Wilkinson:** If we were asked by government to provide distributional impacts on any topic or any payment, we would, obviously, but we provide advice based on requests from government.
>
> **Senator McCARTHY:** But you can't confirm to the committee whether you've provided advice on Newstart in particular?
>
> **Mrs Wilkinson:** That goes to the nature of advice to government, and I can't comment on the nature of advice to government.
>
> **CHAIR:** We're not asking you about the actual advice; we're asking you specifically around Newstart. How does that go to the nature of advice?
>
> **Mrs Wilkinson:** We provide advice to government on a broad range of topics at different times.
>
> **Senator McCARTHY:** And that includes Newstart obviously? If you have a request around Newstart, you would provide advice?
>
> **Mrs Wilkinson:** Were we asked to provide advice on a particular topic, we would provide advice, yes.
>
> (Parliament of Australia, 2020b, pp6-7)

There were several similar exchanges in this hearing. Reading the transcript (Hansard) I formed two disturbing conclusions. It seems possible that the Treasury officials had provided advice to the government and were forbidden or not prepared to disclose this to the Committee. This does not suggest transparency – and this would hardly be a matter

affecting national security. An alternative conclusion could be that the department has not done any work in this area, which suggests indifference to the lives of citizens receiving Jobseeker and Youth Allowances, and to the potential economic benefits that increased payments could provide.

6.8.2 Why inequality matters

In his book, 'Battlers and Billionaires', Andrew Leigh provides a lively history and discussion of class and inequality in Australia, beginning with the initial European colonisation and settlement (Leigh, 2013). The book is written from a left-of-centre perspective – Leigh is a Labor Party MP and in 2013 was appointed Shadow (Opposition) Assistant Treasurer. Previously, Leigh was a professor of economics at the Australian National University, and the discussion in the book is well-grounded in economic data. Leigh is also careful to provide a range of other peoples' and parties' viewpoints. In concluding this chapter, it is useful to outline and debate Leigh's work.

Leigh's data clearly show that in Australia inequality has increased markedly since the 1970s, with a large transfer of income and wealth from lower- and middle-income people to those who are already well-off. Leigh attributes this trend to three factors: globalisation and technological change; the decreased influence and power of trade unions; and continuing tax cuts that have favoured the rich. And, relevant for this research, he also demonstrates that wealth and opportunity have been gained by older people at the expense of the current generation of young people. Upward social mobility has also declined, for example tertiary education is no longer an affordable option for already disadvantaged young people.

However, Leigh presents a sceptical view of the conclusions that can be drawn about the effects of inequality alone:

> For example, Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett argue that if the United Kingdom became as equal as Scandinavia, everyone would live a year longer, mental illness would be halved, teen birth rates would fall by two-thirds, homicide rates would fall by three-quarters and everyone could get seven extra weeks' holiday a year. This is a heady concoction, but I can't convince myself to swallow it. The closer you get to Wilkinson and Pickett's results, the more fragile they appear…
>
> To see the problem, take the case of health. As we saw in the Introduction, there is a strong relationship between an individual's income and their health. The poor have

> fewer teeth, experience more pain and even live for fewer years. But while a person's own income is a powerful predictor of health outcomes, there's little evidence that the poor get sicker when the rich get richer. The more careful one is with the data, the less convincing is the claim that rising incomes at the top reduce the health of those at the bottom. If inequality were bad for your health, you would expect to see the biggest health improvements in the countries that had not experienced a rise in inequality. But during the last two decades of the twentieth century, improvements in life expectancy were similar in countries which saw a substantial rise in inequality (such as Australia and the United Kingdom) and those where inequality stayed static (such as France and Switzerland). The impact of inequality on health is either small or non-existent. (Leigh, 2013, pp99-100)

I suggest that this is possibly a sweeping conclusion – life expectancy is only one measure of population health, just as Gross Domestic Product is only a headline measure of economic health. Neither measures can tell us much about the quality of life of individuals, or the share of health and economic resources they are able to access. We might consider that Australia, New Zealand the UK have universal public health care systems. Nevertheless, according to the indices portrayed by Pickett and Wilkinson, these appear to have limited efficacy in addressing health and social problems.

While inequality may not always result in illness and reduced life expectancy, I suggest that income poverty will, as Leigh acknowledges. The evidence from the work of organisations such as ACOSS suggests that poorer people are far less likely to be able to afford good nutrition or dental care, and struggle to afford decent housing and heating or cooling. Access to healthcare such as General Practitioners and mental health professionals is also much more limited in lower socio-economic areas.

As I discussed in the introduction to this chapter, achieving equality can be an unrealistic ideal. But, as Michael Marmot says, inequality can still be addressed by making the 'ladder' shorter. There is much evidence that unemployed and underemployed young Australians are at the bottom of quite a long ladder, with increasing gaps between their incomes and wealth compared to most other citizens, and very limited opportunities to climb up. To paraphrase the proponents of positive psychology, everyone needs someone to love, something to do and something to look forward to. An affluent society such as Australia cannot provide 'love', but it can certainly do better at providing employment and better prospects for its young people.

7. THEME 3:
CONDITIONALITY

7.1 Introduction and definitions

In the previous chapter I discussed the influence that neoliberal ideology has had on social policy in Australia and other countries. A policy area where there have been notable changes is the increased application of rules and conditions on people receiving unemployment benefits. These changes have occurred under various descriptors such as welfare reform, welfare to work, workfare, activation and mutual obligation (Raffass, 2016). I have selected the term 'conditionality' as covers the policies which apply specifically to unemployed people who receive income support.

In the context of the Australian social security and employment services systems, conditionality takes two forms. In this chapter I will focus mainly on the conditionality of unemployment benefits regarding **compliance** – the expectations placed on jobseekers about their activities and behaviour. I will discuss briefly other conditions which apply to the level of payments, such as income and assets testing. These can be significant issues for unemployed and underemployed young people. The Australian benefits and pensions systems are generally universal and available to all citizens, they are not contribution-based. However, they are tightly targeted, which means that benefits can be greatly reduced by modest casual or part-time earnings, or cash assets.

The next section will discuss the broad aspects of 'welfare reform', as it has evolved in Australia, and some parallels with other Anglophone nations. I will then discuss the two facets of conditionality as outlined above. The issue of compliance will then be examined in the context of how Australia's privatised employment services operate and how efficacious (or otherwise) these services are in supporting young people.

7.2 Trends in 'welfare reform' and unemployment as economic policy

As discussed in the previous chapter, David Harvey identified that the rise of neoliberalism in the 1970s and 1980s coincided with, and was fostered by, the election of the Thatcher

Conservative government in the United Kingdom (1979) and the Reagan Republican presidency in the United States (1980). In these, and many other developed nations, the 1970s had been characterised by economic and political instability. This instability was in no small part due to massive inflation caused by the raising of oil prices by oil producing nations, in response to Western nations' support for Israel in the 1973 Yom Kippur War against the Arab states of Egypt and Syria.

The Australian economist, Bill Mitchell, has argued that the so-called 'oil shock' was instrumental in a political and economic shift, as it had demonstrated that essential resources could no longer be controlled by governments:

> …the usefulness of resource economics was its contribution to defeating Keynesian economics, by undermining arguments for government regulation and proposing a neoliberal alternative: that the problem of the putative exhaustion of oil reserves can be overcome by market arrangements. This was not an argument for abstract forces of the market: it was for the deployment of a political technology, for that is what the neoliberal market projects offered (Mitchell, 2010, p200).

In examining the historical and current dimensions of unemployment in Australia, economist, Warwick Smith, discusses how these international trends influenced domestic policies:

> Even though the inflation of the 1970s was driven largely by external factors, including oil supply shocks and the increased mobility of global capital, the Australian solution focused on the relative power of labour and capital. This shift was not a result of fundamental structural changes in the Australian economy but, rather, global changes in governance ideology away from highly interventionist government towards free markets; at least where free markets suited the holders of capital. The shift in government priority from managing unemployment to managing inflation can also be seen through this lens as inflation is often thought of as a kind of tax on capital.
>
> These so-called "neoliberal" ideas and policy prescriptions had been developed over decades by small-government, free market advocates who were waiting in the wings for an opportunity to implement them. The oil shocks provided just such an opportunity to paint the dominant Keynesian system as a failure (Smith, 2017, p16).

According to Smith, this policy shift led to governments developing successive policies which changed how unemployment and unemployed people were considered. Following World War 2, many nations, including Australia, developed policies that envisaged a key role for governments in enabling and financially supporting full employment. In 1945, the wartime

Labor Prime Minister, John Curtin, had proposed a White Paper (discussion paper) on the Commonwealth Government's role in ensuring full employment. Curtin died in July 1945 and the paper was commissioned by his successor, Ben Chifley. The paper represented a number of key themes and concerns. These included the desire to continue to make use of the industries which had been developed as part of the war effort, absorbing returned service personnel into employment, improving training and skills development and avoiding extreme economic downturns such as had occurred in the 1930s. To achieve this, the Commonwealth was to take the lead role in maintaining spending in economic and infrastructure development, which in turn would stimulate private sector development and consumer spending. The White Paper also proposed the establishment of a public (government) employment service (Coombs, 1994).

Warwick Smith asserts that from the 1970s, the management of inflation has taken precedence over the management of unemployment. This new paradigm has resulted in policies which construct the problem of unemployment as largely the fault of the unemployed themselves:

> Since the days of the 1945 White Paper government policy has shifted from prioritising full-employment to an almost entirely laissez faire approach in which unemployment is treated as a private affair or individual failing…the never-ending push to increase workforce participation and jobseeker activity implies that there are many Australians who are voluntarily unemployed due to poorly structured incentives. The rationale seems to be that if we can just make life painful enough for those lazy people on the dole then they will find a job. Never mentioned in these narratives is the fact that there are already more job seekers than there are jobs. Motivating more people into the workforce is only useful (to them) if there are more jobs than job seekers or if there is an expectation of large-scale job creation (Smith, 2017, p24).

These policy shifts would seem to be at odds with neoliberal theories which advocate for greater individual freedom, greater choices and less interference by the state in people's lives. However, as Philip Mendes describes, advocates of neoliberal policies are fundamentally against most elements of the welfare state:

> Those who support a free-market economy, including unlimited liberty for the economically powerful, rarely apply this same principle to the individual freedom, choices and autonomy of those receiving welfare payments. Rather, they agree that the welfare state is a bad thing, that welfare spending should be massively reduced and that income security should not be used as a means of redistributing power and promoting greater social and economic equality…The term 'neoliberal' seems an

> appropriate generic description for this contemporary group of liberals, conservatives and libertarians who are wedded to a common anti-welfare state perspective (Mendes, 2017, p54).

This quote is taken from Mendes' book, 'Australia's Welfare Wars', which provides a contemporary and historical view of the Australian welfare state since World War 2. The book is particularly useful in documenting 'welfare reform' initiatives since the late 20th Century. In most instances these policies have represented a neoliberal approach. The pervasive influence of this ideology is demonstrated by its adoption by the major political parties, the Liberal National Party Coalition and the Australian Labor Party. The key elements of reform have been 'welfare-to-work' measures directed at unemployed people and sole parents. These measures and policies have also been described as 'activation', contrasting to what might be presumed to be 'passive' income support that is supplied without requirements placed on recipients.

In Australia, the first steps towards 'activation' followed the review of social security conducted by the Labor government in 1988. Unemployment Benefit became two separate payments: Job Search Allowance and Newstart Allowance. Job Search Allowance was paid for the first six months of unemployment, with the relatively simple requirements that individuals remain registered with the Commonwealth Employment Service (CES) and demonstrate some effort to apply for jobs every fortnight. Newstart Allowance was paid to people who had been unemployed for six months or more and was combined with additional CES assistance and programs to maintain motivation and improve employability. Support programs were also offered to sole parents in the form of the Jobs, Education and Training (JET) scheme. In 1991, the Invalid Pension was replaced by the Disability Support Pension and new recipients were in some cases offered support for education, training, or part-time employment (Ey, 2012; Mendes, 2017). Generally, the hallmark of this first iteration of welfare reform was that there was relatively little coercion exercised on income support recipients.

The Australian system in the 1980s and early 1990s appears quite mild when compared to welfare to work as enacted in the United States in the same period. Lawrence Mead describes these policies as:

> By welfare reform I mean the long-running struggle to transform Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), the nation's controversial family aid program. That effort culminated in the Family Support Act (FSA) of 1988, which expanded welfare work programs, and in the radical Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA)… PRWORA recast AFDC as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), ended the federal entitlement to aid, limited families to five years on the rolls, and stiffened work requirements, among other changes (Mead, 2005, p401).

Mead is a vehement proponent of neoliberal ideas about welfare. He has, at different times, been invited by the United Kingdom, Australian and New Zealand governments to advise on welfare to work programs. This does not suggest that when governments ultimately make decisions about new programs, these changes will be based on the views of a single academic or 'expert'. However, there are many similarities and parallel developments in these countries and the US, which suggest a cross-fertilisation of various ideas and ideologies. I will briefly discuss some history and features of the changes to welfare provision in the US, the UK and New Zealand as they provide some context for similar developments in Australia, and appear to represent the implementation of ideas promulgated by Mead. I am not sure how much such ideas have taken root in other developed countries, time and space have precluded exploring this in this thesis. One comparison can be made with the employment service in the Netherlands, which were surveyed by Mark Considine and his colleagues over many years (Considine et al, 2015). Among their findings was that, while there had become an increased focus on getting 'hard to place' individuals into work, the public employment services also provided a high level of professional support.

The policies that Mead refers to above substantially dismantled support programs in the US, that had been targeted at the most disadvantaged families and children, most of whom were African American and Hispanic ethnic minority groups. The sociologist, Loic Wacquant, has documented the PRWORA Act and similar initiatives as representing the removal of an already minimal social safety net and as an overtly political move in a presidential election year. Wacquant says that the changes were promoted by the Democrat President Bill Clinton to demonstrate that his party could be tougher than the rival Republican Party. Wacquant also observes that the legislation was punitive and proved to be of little real assistance to its target population:

> On paper, the "reform" endorsed by Clinton aimed at "moving people from welfare to work." But, to begin with, most mothers on assistance were already engaged in gainful activity, albeit on the margins of the workforce. Next—and this is revealing of the intentions of the legislators—*the law had absolutely no jobs component*. Not one of its eight titles addressed economic issues. Not a single measure in the law was aimed at improving the employment options and conditions faced by welfare recipients. No budget for job training and job creation figured in it (Wacquant, 2009, pp 85-86).

In the United Kingdom, changes to benefits for unemployed people had been made in the 1980s by the Conservative government, with greater conditionality and penalties for non-compliance, despite a rise in mass unemployment. Further reforms were made by the New Labour government elected in 1997. Of relevance to this research was the 'New Deal for Young People' which required 18 to 24-year-olds who received benefits for more than six months to undertake employment, voluntary work, or training. Another approved activity was joining an 'Environmental Task Force', which had striking similarities to the Australian Work for the Dole and Green Corps programs (Melrose, 2012). Many New Labour programs in the UK espoused that employment and social participation, even when compulsory, were an integral part of citizenship and promoted social cohesion (Donoghue, 2012).

Further changes to welfare in the UK were made by the Conservative government in the 2010s, this time in the shape of 'Austerity' following the Global Financial Crisis of 2008. Significant cuts were made to a range of benefits and other social services, some specifically aimed at younger people such as withdrawal of unemployment and housing benefits to under 21-year-olds (Lansley & Mack, 2015). For unemployed people, 'sanctions', that is penalties imposed on benefits for non-compliance with job search or training requirements, were far more draconian than the equivalents in Australia. In some cases, people were precluded from payment for months or even years.

New Zealand has also implemented various iterations of welfare reform, beginning in the 1990s under the National Party (conservative) government. All income support benefits were cut in cash terms, successive governments then introduced various welfare to work measures aimed at unemployed people and sole parents.

> The benefit cuts were defended, explained and justified on the basis of promoting work incentives by creating a gap between benefits and wages. This emphasis on paid work and work incentive (and associated articulations of 'benefit dependence' as the central problem in welfare and social security) remained a recurrent theme

> throughout the next two decades, culminating in current changes (O'Brien, 2013, p736).

In 2013, the New Zealand Government 'streamlined' social security payments into three categories, with unemployed people, widows and sole parents with older children being placed on the Jobseeker Support payment. Additional conditions and sanctions were attached to this payment, including compulsory drug testing for job seekers (New Zealand Government Ministry of Social Development, 2013).

European countries have also instituted forms of 'activation' for their unemployed citizens. These have taken various forms over time and have including retraining to meet labour and skills shortages, job creation during economic downturns and, more recently, focussing on enforcing individuals' job search and participation. This latter policy has been implemented despite high unemployment following the 2008 Global Financial Crisis. It may have little actual impact on employment. As Tania Raffass argues regarding labour market surveys in OECD countries:

> While the size of the gap between available jobs and jobseekers fluctuates from survey to survey, its presence and significance remain constant. Even if all the available vacancies were filled, there would still remain a large pool of surplus labour. It can be considered empirically ascertained that it is far from possible to find jobs even for those who genuinely look for them (Raffass, 2016, p420).

A common feature of 'welfare reform' in the US, the UK, New Zealand and Australia is how income support policies are used to move people into work. In the case of the US, benefits are time limited, in the other countries, benefits are stopped or reduced by sanctions. This occurs irrespective of labour markets and in the absence of government initiatives to create jobs.

7.3 Individual circumstances and financial conditionality

Before examining the issue of conditionality related to compliance, that is, the various obligations applied to unemployed people, there are two aspects of the Australian social security system that require some discussion. These are the waiting periods imposed on newly unemployed people and the automated debt recovery system which commenced in 2015, known colloquially as Robodebt.

As I have previously discussed, Australian income support payments are generally payable to citizens and permanent residents, but they are subject to various means tests. These include 'tapering' of fortnightly payments based on other income and assets tests that, above certain thresholds, can reduce or preclude payments. Other conditions affecting payment include relationship/marital status, the number of dependent children in a person's care and the proportion of care provided by each parent post separation or divorce. These arrangements are longstanding and reflect Australia's needs-based income support system.

Anyone who is newly unemployed is also subject to a 'Liquid Assets Waiting Period' before they can receive Jobseeker payments. For a single person, any cash, or savings above $5,500 can postpone receipt of payment for up to 13 weeks (Services Australia, 2020). I believe this can be particularly problematic for young people, who are less likely to have other reserves, such as equity in real estate or a superannuation account, to draw upon. Using up all or most of modest savings means that even when income support commences an individual will have no resources to meet contingencies such as vehicle repairs or health expenses. This will also contribute to difficulties in looking for or securing a job.

Another longstanding feature of the Australian social security system is the recovery of overpayments, which usually result from a person receiving additional income, most commonly from employment. These overpayments become a debt payable to the Commonwealth Government and can be raised even when the overpayment results from administrative rather than claimant error. Commonwealth agencies routinely match electronic data held on individuals so, for example, when a person who is receiving income support commences work, this will trigger a report from the Australian Taxation Office (ATO) to Centrelink, the agency responsible for income support payments.

People receiving Newstart and Youth Allowances, including students, were required to report earnings each fortnight, aligned with their fortnightly Centrelink payment cycle. Gross earnings (before income tax) had to be reported, as well as the days or times worked, rather than when the wages were paid. Historically, if a potential overpayment was identified by Centrelink, the payment recipient was asked to clarify and substantiate

evidence and reporting of income. Overpayments were manually checked and, if found to be correct, a debt was raised payable to the Commonwealth and repayments negotiated.

This system substantially changed in 2016, when the Commonwealth Government introduced a new system for matching earnings and Centrelink data – the Online Compliance Initiative (OCI). The OCI, colloquially referred to as Robodebt, affected many young people, both unemployed and students, doing part-time and casual work. It has been the subject of a Senate Committee Inquiry (Parliament of Australia, 2017), a large social media campaign (#NotMyDebt), a critical report from the Commonwealth Ombudsman and a class action in the Federal Court. I will describe the OCI as succinctly as I can, as it is a complex matter in regard to policy, administration, and law. I consider that it represents an egregious imposition on Australia's most disadvantaged citizens, including those young people in precarious employment.

The OCI was based on Centrelink matching data with the ATO, going back as far as 2010. These data were used to calculate overpayments, based on averaging an individual's earnings income over the 12 months in a financial year. This averaging was inconsistent with how people are required to report earnings and so misrepresented the circumstances of individuals working for part(s) of the year and going on and off Centrelink payments. Some hundreds of thousands of debts were raised, with many people who had moved addresses only finding out about their debts when contacted by private debt collectors. To compound people's hardship, 10 percent interest was added to debts, with reduced payments to people still receiving income support and others having their annual income tax refunds withheld by the ATO.

Some individuals had made claims for compensation in the Federal Court, having successfully appealed their debts at the Commonwealth Administrative Appeals Tribunal. In each of these cases, the matter was settled by government lawyers before court proceedings began, therefore the legality or otherwise of the scheme could not be established (Carney, 2018). In May 2020, the Government announced that some 470,000 debts would be refunded, without apology or a concession that the debts were improperly raised (Robert, 2020).

The class action was instigated in September 2019 by the opposition Labor Party, in partnership with the Melbourne legal practice, Gordon Legal. The action was based on the grounds that the OCI was not legal – it was unreasonable for the government to raise these debts by placing the onus on Centrelink clients to prove that they had not been overpaid and, in fact, even internal government documents had suggested that there was no legal basis for the way debts were calculated (Gordon Legal, 2020). The matter was settled in November 2020 by negotiation between the parties and agreement that some 400,000 debts would not be pursued, with additional compensation being promised to many individuals.

At the time of writing, the matter is still awaiting approval from the Court in regard to the precise terms of how individuals will be compensated for distress and money already repaid. This unfortunate saga is highly relevant to the topic of this thesis – the OCI having targeted individuals who were 'doing the right thing' by taking on available work whenever they could. None of the Government Ministers involved in the scheme since 2015, including the current Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, have actually acknowledged fault or responsibility for the fundamentally flawed and brutal scheme. Is this a clear case, as Loic Wacquant might put it, of punishing the poor?

7.4 Conditionality – the role of employment services and 'mutual obligation'

The Commonwealth Government currently allocates approximately $1.5 billion to employment services. These are described as 'Outcome 1' by the (then) Department of Employment, Skills, Small and Family Business. Services and programs include *jobactive*, Disability Employment Services and some smaller programs and initiatives (Department of Employment, Skills, Small and Family Business, 2019). The mainstream employment program, *jobactive*, was known as Job Services Australia up until 2015 and, prior to 2009, as the Job Network (Jobs Australia, 2015). In 2020, this program represented $1.3 billion of expenditure, which is administered by the Department of Education, Skills and Employment (Casey & Lewis, 2020). The *jobactive* services are entirely privatised and, to understand the current system, which is due to change again in 2022, I will provide a brief historical overview of employment services in Australia.

The first national employment agency was the Commonwealth Employment Service (CES), which was established in 1946 in line with the recommendations of the White Paper on full employment. The structure and operations of this new agency were modelled on the National Service offices that had been created during World War 2 to manage military and civilian recruitment. The role of the CES was to provide a labour exchange matching unemployed people to local employment vacancies and placing newly arrived migrants in booming industries and agriculture. The other chief function of the CES was to administer eligibility for unemployment benefits, which were also introduced in 1946 (O'Donnell, 2003).

From the outset, there was a tension between the roles of the CES as a jobs broker and as an agent of compliance for the social security system. In my experience working in the Department of Social Security (DSS) during the 1980s and 1990s, I had many interactions with CES staff and managers. I can attest to the problematic relationship between the agency and its clients, both individual and corporate.

The agency also had a problematic relationship with the Government. Priorities altered many times under successive Governments and Ministers. A notable difficulty for the CES was the increasing numbers of people classed as long-term unemployed, that is, for 12 months or more, sometimes for many years. In the recessions of the early 1980s and 1990s, when national unemployment rates were greater than 10 per cent, this group were particularly disadvantaged by age (over 50s, or education leavers with no work experience), low-level or outdated skills, and chronic physical or mental health issues. Technological changes, such as the rapid growth of the internet and online platforms, resulted in employers choosing to recruit directly, either by themselves or via private agencies. The CES was left with the task of trying to find work for people who were, in many cases, not attractive to prospective employers.

The following is an extract from a weblog written by a former CES worker and manager. It provides an insider's perspective on the demise of the public employment system.

> Australia's 'marketised' public employment service, Job Services Australia (formerly the Job Network), is undergoing yet another review in the lead up to issuing a new range of service provider contracts. After several makeovers, this method of delivering

> a public employment service has not delivered the quality services Howard government advocates claimed it would at the time it was launched in 1998. It has not provided a better deal for job seekers, particularly disadvantaged job seekers, nor has it provided a decent service to employers.
>
> Regular 'reforms' to improve the quality of service provision have failed, because they have not addressed its fundamental design problems, which in one way or another stem from the flawed policy of combining labour market brokerage with welfare policing, which has driven employment services standards backwards since it became the central objective of policy makers around 1987 (Mitchell, 2011).

As this writer has noted, the changes began in 1987, when the (then) Labor Government began to explore the idea of private entities competing with the CES. The first iteration of the Commonwealth Government's privatisation was in 1994, with tenders called and awarded to three hundred private providers. The CES was disbanded in 1998 and the Job Network was created. Some CES staff, including psychologists, moved to Centrelink, which had been established in 1997. Some CES offices remained as the short-lived Employment National agency, however, by 2003 all services were delivered by private agencies (Considine et al, 2015).

In a new round of tenders, the Job Network was replaced by Job Services Australia (JSA) in 2009. In a further round of tenders, JSA was replaced in 2015 and re-badged as *jobactive*. A notable feature of this new arrangement was the dominance of for-profit corporations and the reduction in the share of funding to not-for-profit services, from 70 per cent to 55 per cent. The largest for-profit organisation, with 231 local offices operating across 29 regions, is MAX Solutions (Jobs Australia, 2015). MAX is a subsidiary of the large US multinational corporation, MAXIMUS Inc. One cannot help but wonder whether the Australian nomenclature is intended to soften what might sound to some people like a rather brutal company.

The requirements placed on unemployed people by *jobactive* agencies are determined by their contracts with the Commonwealth Government and are described as 'Mutual Obligation'. These obligations are outlined in a complex 48-page document provided by the Department of Education, Skills and Employment (DESE). Unemployed people under 30 years of age are generally required to apply for 20 jobs per month and, if unemployed for more than 12 months, participate in 'Annual Activity Requirements' of Work for the Dole, or

voluntary work, of 50 hours per fortnight over 26 weeks. These requirements can be reduced, but not waived, for people with parenting/caring responsibilities, or who are deemed to have a 'partial capacity to work' due to health issues. The following details Mutual Obligation requirements that are to be enforced by *jobactive* agencies:

> Job seeker Income Support Payments are generally paid in fortnightly instalments, therefore, job seekers need to have and satisfy sufficient Mutual Obligation Requirements for each fortnight they are receiving Income Support Payments.
>
> A job seeker's Mutual Obligation Requirements are generally determined by considering their:
>
> - age
> - assessed work capacity, and
> - whether they have primary responsibility for the care of a child.
>
> Job seekers with full-time requirements should be looking for work full-time and actively addressing the individual circumstances that affect their capacity to undertake paid work.
>
> - Job seekers with part-time Mutual Obligation Requirements are:
> - Principal Carer Parents whose youngest child is 6 years of age
> - job seekers with a Partial Capacity to Work or a temporary reduced work capacity of 15 to 29 hours per week.
>
> Job seeker's Mutual Obligation Requirements include:
>
> - entering into a Job Plan and fully complying with the requirements in their Job Plan
> - attending all Services Australia and Provider appointments
> - acting on referrals to jobs from their Provider and attending job interviews offered by employers
> - undertaking Job Search (generally 20 Job Searches per month)
> - meeting their Annual Activity Requirement (refer to the Annual Activity Requirement section of this guideline)
> - participating in any Activity that is relevant to their personal circumstances and will help the job seeker to improve their employment prospects
>
> (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2021a, p5).

It should be noted that this guideline prescribes the obligations of jobseekers to agencies, and agencies to their government contracts. There is very little about the 'mutual' obligation to jobseekers by the agencies or government.

In Chapter 2 of this thesis, I briefly discussed the 2018 social security amendments and the introduction of the 'Targeted Compliance Framework for Participation Payments'. This policy resulted in *jobactive* agencies being given the delegation to decide on income support payments. This delegation includes suspending payments or applying sanctions to reduce or cancel them. As can be deduced from the contractual arrangements between the agencies and the Commonwealth Government for Mutual Obligation, it is expected that sanctions will be applied, with apparently little leeway. There is very little in the guideline document I have cited above, that proposes the application of discretion or compassion. I would suggest that for many providers there is little incentive to do so. Their activities and decisions are monitored by the employment department on the common IT platform and failure to comply with guidelines can result in investigations and potential loss of future contracts.

In the introduction to this section, I discussed the CES and its difficulties in helping large numbers of clients who had been unemployed for long periods and who also had other barriers to gaining employment. At the local level, there were frequent 'difficult conversations' with Department of Social Security staff (including me), about individuals who were particularly hard to place in work. My recollection is that we would occasionally deal with a recalcitrant 'shirker', but in most cases the referrals involved individuals with major personal, physical and/or mental health issues, including drug and alcohol problems. Most staff in both agencies were very mindful of the rights of our clients to support from their government. The resolution of problems was usually referral to other supports, or assessment made for alternative payments such as Sickness Benefit or Invalid Pension. The application of sanctions was rare and considered a failure, a last resort.

In present times, these unemployed individuals are considered as having a Partial Capacity to Work (PCW), meaning, as in the departmental guideline cited above, that they have a capacity to work between 15 and 29 hours per week. In 2019, 295,889 people receiving Newstart Allowance were considered by the Department of Social Services as PCW – 43 per cent of all Newstart recipients. A research study was conducted by Western Sydney University in 2019, which examined the circumstances of people assessed with PCW and how this group interacts with *jobactive* agencies, Disability Employment Services (DES) and the National Disability Insurance Scheme (St Guillaume, 2020).

This study covered a broad range of issues and did not specifically examine the population aged under 25 years. Some findings are nevertheless relevant to this thesis. The study found that 42 per cent of people in New South Wales assessed as PCW had a psychiatric or psychological condition as their primary health disorder. Employment outcomes are very poor, with fewer than three per cent of *jobactive* clients' transitioning to employment, and the average duration of payment on Newstart Allowance being more than five years. The application of Mutual Obligation to this group appears to be ineffective and ultimately pointless.

7.6 The lived experience of conditionality

In the second chapter of this thesis, I cited two reports completed in 2018 by ACOSS and Per Capita, which include the reported experience of unemployed people. The ACOSS report, 'Voices of Unemployment', is based on an online survey which had 311 responses from unemployed people who are *jobactive* service users. Eight respondents were followed up with an in-depth telephone interview. The Per Capita report contains similar themes but is based on a series of focus groups conducted with *jobactive* clients. The latter report is also more overtly political as it involved authors and researchers from the Australian Unemployed Workers' Union (AUWU). This latter group has been a trenchant critic of government policies, of both the Liberal National Party Coalition, which has governed since 2013, and the Australian Labor Party Government (2007-2013). Both reports were prepared in the context of a Senate Committee Inquiry into *jobactive* which was conducted during 2018, the report from this inquiry will also be discussed in this section.

The two reports contained some common themes. Participants expressed high levels of dissatisfaction with their service providers, citing poor levels of individual personalised service, inadequate referral to actual vacancies and highly restricted provision of discretionary funds to enable people to attend job interviews. Other complaints included the rigidity of job search requirements, which do not consider part-time or casual work already being done, and the application of sanctions for even trivial matters such as being late for appointments. Participants in the Per Capita focus groups were very critical of the requirements to undertake 25 hours per week Work for the Dole, as they felt coerced into

placements that offered very little meaningful work or skills development (Davidson, 2018; Bennett et al, 2018).

The methodologies for both these reports can be criticised on the basis that respondents have self-selected and are more likely to complete a survey or attend a focus group if they are disgruntled. However, a significant minority of respondents to the ACOSS survey did report some positive encounters with agencies, which reflected their experiences with individual staff that were more understanding and empathic.

The operations of the *jobactive* system were the subject of another Senate inquiry, conducted during 2018 under the auspices of the Education and Employment References Committee. The title of the final report may give some idea of the findings of the majority of committee members - 'Jobactive: failing those it is intended to serve'. The report contained 41 recommendations for change and improvement, which I will discuss in detail in the concluding chapter of this thesis. Witnesses and submissions to the inquiry were highly critical of Mutual Obligation and how compliance is enforced. There were instances described where a person's part-time or casual employment was deemed as less important than the requirements of *jobactive* agencies:

> A few weeks ago, I was cut off my payments for "failing to attend an appointment" with my agent. I was unable to attend that appointment, because I had been called in, last minute, to work a shift at my casual job--a job I got, mind you, without any help from a job agent. I tried to call and call my agency but nobody there ever answers the phone. (I brought this up at a later date and my [Job Services Provider] said they're too understaffed to answer the phones). Because I couldn't get through to re-schedule my appointment (i.e. my compliance demand) I received a text message to say that I was immediately stripped of payments (Parliament of Australia 2019c, p.10).

The experiences of unemployed people are rarely reported in Australian media, who are otherwise quick to report on allegations of malingering or fraud. There are some honourable exceptions - in 2018 and 2019, the Guardian Australia newspaper invited some people living on Centrelink income support to write a series of articles about 'life on the breadline'. I will leave the final words in this section to one of these authors, Nijole Naujokas, a student living in Adelaide. I will quote this column at some length as I think it illustrates what I suspect may be an all too common experience for young people ensnared in Mutual Obligation:

> I recently went with a friend to his Job Network meeting for moral support. This is an intelligent young man, with a university degree and previous retail and warehouse experience. He had already been forced into two supposedly "voluntary" Path programs by his Job Network; both unaccredited and not nationally recognised. These were incredibly dubious courses that, if the wider public knew about, would be horrified taxpayer money is being spent on. Courses like the "Theory of Coffee Making" course, where not a single student touched a coffee machine.
>
> The other Path course he was forced into was a "business" course in the loosest sense of the word, run by someone who bullied the students. All students were from the Job Network. Instead of letting her class go home early one afternoon when the work was finished, she forced them all to do a scavenger hunt where, I kid you not, activities like "counting the car parks" and "taking a selfie with the security guard" were listed. My friend was gobsmacked.
>
> …My friend did not want to do another Path course; from my descriptions of them I'm sure you can understand why. Under the legislation, the Job Network had the power to exempt him from it. They refused to do so, eventually admitting they could do so, but wouldn't as "their policy" was to enrol job seekers in courses. They demanded he re-enrol into a resume course he had completed three months earlier.
>
> Bear in mind that Job Networks gain extra government payments for "outcomes" like placing job seekers in training. There is a perverse financial incentive to enrol their clients into any course, no matter how pointless or inappropriate it is for the job seeker. My friend found out later that every time they put a client into the resume course, the company got $300 from the government for this "outcome". Not one of the courses he was forced into led to him gaining employment. (Naujokas, 2019)

This is clearly an emotive account and, hopefully, does not entirely represent all employment services and their staff. However, in regard to the key question of this research, I suggest that such egregious compulsory activities do nothing to improve employment prospects for young people. Cases such as described above may in fact decrease their capacity to prepare for and find work.

7.7 Responses to the COVID-19 pandemic

One of the Commonwealth Government's responses to the coronavirus pandemic was the (temporary) increase in unemployment, parenting and student allowance payments from April 2020. The details of these changes, including the gradual reduction of the supplement payments, were discussed in the previous chapter. The Liquid Assets Waiting Period was also waived until September 2020 (Klapdor, 2020).

Concurrent with the payment increases and the initial sharp increase in unemployment, Mutual Obligation requirements for unemployed people, including recipients of parenting payments, were suspended from March until August due to partial lockdowns and other restrictions on public activities (this suspension continued in the state of Victoria until November 2020 due to lockdowns being extended due to a 'second wave' outbreak of virus contagion). It has been estimated that the pandemic has resulted in a multimillion-dollar windfall for the *jobactive* agencies, who have received up to $1,500 in fees for each newly unemployed person (Casey & Lewis, 2020).

As reported by Guardian Australia in December 2020, suspension of payments by employment service agencies recommenced, with an important and permanent policy change. This gave people who had missed any Mutual Obligation requirement 48 hours to discuss and resolve issues before any action was taken to suspend payments. ACOSS were reported to be supportive of this initiative and anticipated a significant reduction on payment suspension and a reduction in anxiety and stress for unemployed people reliant on income support (Henriques-Gomes 2020). However, it should be noted that this policy does not fundamentally address whether the 2018 delegation of powers to private agencies, to suspend or stop payments, is a correct or just government policy.

7.8 Conditionality and governmentality

There is relatively little discussion in the Australian media of Mutual Obligation and its consequences, nor are the shortcomings of *jobactive* addressed in government reviews and reports. An example of the latter are the regular surveys of *jobactive* clients conducted by the employment department, which allegedly measure satisfaction with services and are used to rate agencies' performance. Yet nowhere in the department's annual reports are these data recorded (DESE, 2019).

Conditionality and 'activation' policies have nevertheless been the subject of much academic research. In this section, I will discuss Australian and UK literature which provide context, theoretical perspectives, and examples of how theories and ideologies are applied. As discussed earlier in this chapter, 'welfare reform' and 'welfare to work' usually represent neoliberal policy approaches and the application of governmentality - the management of the behaviour of certain citizens reliant on income support.

In an article examining welfare conditionality and benefit sanctions, UK academics, Del Fletcher and John Flint, have described these factors as manifestations of the 'tutelary' state. This term describes the role of the state as guardian and protector, and the developer and enforcer of regulations. It also describes the role of the state in defining expectations and instructing behaviours (cf. 'tutor'):

> The development of welfare conditionality, also termed coercive welfare (Phoenix, 2008) or authoritarian therapeutism (Wacquant, 2013), may be understood as the latest stage in the development of the tutelary state, in which an original conceptualisation of the state's obligation to the labouring classes morphed into an extensive apparatus of tutelary and therapeutic technologies. This was accompanied by an understanding that both social rights and opportunities were delivered by the state to marginal groups and, therefore, that reciprocal obligations should be required (Fletcher & Flint, 2018, p773).

I believe the above extract portrays the current Australian income support system as it applies to jobseekers. Kemran Mestan provides a further perspective on how 'welfare reform/workface' in Australia has represented the tutelary state, insofar as it aims to tackle 'welfare dependency' and promotes social inclusion. In other words, this is for the good of individuals, families, and communities, however harsh the means of achieving outcomes (Mestan, 2014).

Another feature of the tutelary state is how new information technologies can be used for monitoring and reporting on citizens. Paul Henman has described these as 'Gov 2.0', based on internet technologies that have emerged since the beginning of the 21st Century. These technologies are interactive and allow user-generated content (such as social media), they also enable users to interact with government agencies and systems:

> The ways in which Gov 2.0 – namely, the application of Web 2.0 to the conduct of government – is imagined is important because it denotes visions of what government can and should become, with consequent implications for public administrators, policy-makers and citizens. These are not trifling matters, but ones that penetrate to the heart of contemporary forms of rule, the role and nature of the state, and the state's shaping of social and economic realities (Henman, 2013, p1398).

Technology also provides for quicker exchange of information between agencies to ensure compliance (Marston, 2006). The technology enables further expansion of the scope of governmentality, both in the surveillance of citizens and the commercial value created by detailed data on individuals which is provided to outsourced agencies (Henman, 2011).

The predictions of these authors seem to have come to pass in the form of the Targeted Compliance Framework and Robodebt. The IT system shared between the Commonwealth and *jobactive* services means that demerit points and suspensions can be applied instantly. The Department is also able to monitor the real-time activities of agencies, so it can be assumed that any failures to impose sanctions will be detected. As has been discussed, the Robodebt initiative was found wanting due to a badly designed algorithm, coupled with a lack of human oversight.

In considering the effectiveness of conditionality – does it assist and motivate unemployed people to gain work? - it is worth examining the UK Welfare Conditionality Project 2013-2018 (2018). This project was conducted by staff at six universities and was a large-scale qualitative investigation which involved policy stakeholders, welfare practitioners and service users. The latter group were a significant part of the investigation, with multiple interviews conducted over several years.

Although there are many differences between the UK and Australian income support systems, a common element is the obligation required for 'unemployed' people, including parents, to undertake a range of job search, training, and volunteer activities. I have placed the term unemployed in inverted commas, as obligations are frequently applied to people who are already undertaking significant casual or part-time work. As has been mentioned, it is important to consider the large number of people with a partial capacity to work (PCW) due to health issues and caring responsibilities.

Some key findings of the UK conditionality project are worth considering regarding the efficacy of policies in both the UK and Australian contexts:

- Welfare conditionality within the social security system is largely ineffective in facilitating people's entry into or progression within the paid labour market over time. Stasis, a lack of significant and sustained change in employment status, is the most common outcome for the substantial majority across the repeat interviews.
- Recurrent short-term movements between various insecure jobs, interspersed with periods of unemployment, are routine among the minority who were able to obtain some paid work across the period. Occasional sustained movements, off welfare benefits and into work, are evident – but are extremely rare…
- Benefit sanctions do little to enhance people's motivation to prepare for, seek, or enter paid work. They routinely trigger profoundly negative personal, financial, health and behavioural outcomes and push some people away from

> collectivised welfare provisions (Welfare Conditionality Project 2013-2018, 2018, p4).

7.9 Discussion and analysis

In concluding this chapter, I will attempt an analysis of the issues I have identified and discussed, through considering the roles of 'street-level bureaucrats' and their relationship with institutional change, as described by Deborah Rice (2012). This analysis will also consider the high degree of influence exercised by information technology (IT) systems on both bureaucrats and consumers/clients. The recent work by US academic, Virginia Eubanks (2017), 'Automating Inequality', provides some case studies on how computer-based assessment and screening systems are used to profile and control mainly poor and disadvantaged individuals and families. The themes in this book are highly relevant to how poorly designed and executed IT systems can lead to intrusive surveillance and monitoring of unemployed people, as well as debacles such as Robodebt.

So far in this chapter, I have attempted to demonstrate the many limitations of Mutual Obligation and conditionality. Most unemployed young Australians want to work, and many who are underemployed want to work more hours. But it seems that the systems that are supposedly there to provide help and support are not working. I suggest that this analysis by Philip Mendes of the initial privatisation of employment services applies even more so to *jobactive*:

> The government argued that it would be more effective than the Commonwealth Employment Service, due to greater competition, increased flexibility to respond to individual circumstances and emphasis on job placement outcomes rather than inputs. The program experienced a number of early problems, including inadequate funding of providers, limited access to service in rural and regional locations, a poor level and range of services for people who were long-term unemployed and generally poor employment outcomes compared to the earlier Working Nation programs…there appeared to be ongoing problems with referrals and registration, harshly punitive compliance measures and inadequate provision of support for groups experiencing particularly high levels of disadvantage. These problems were attributed to the in-built conflict between the provider incentive structure established by the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations and the aim of providing a quality service to jobseekers (Mendes, 2017, p176).

The various iterations of employment services since the 1990s, and the increased use of compliance and sanctions, show that government policies are not immutable. It is possible

to imagine a different regime that focusses less on the regulation and behavioural management of jobseekers, and more on providing quality services that cater for their individual needs and capabilities. At present there is a marketplace, but this is not composed of customers with some degree of agency and choice. Rather, they are the market, representing a commodity that appears to exist to benefit *jobactive* services and their staff. As Melbourne academics, Mark Considine and Siobhan O'Sullivan, have bluntly described it, this welfare market is 'Buying and Selling the Poor' (Considine & O'Sullivan, 2014).

Considine, Sullivan and their colleagues have, over two decades, provided a most comprehensive analysis of how employment services and conditionality placed on the unemployed have evolved in selected developed countries. This work has culminated in the book 'Getting Welfare to Work' (Considine, Lewis, O'Sullivan & Sol, 2015). The authors compared the different employment service systems in Australia, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands, with research surveys conducted with frontline staff in 1998, 2008 and 2012 (the Netherlands was not surveyed in 2012).

The book is a significant piece of literature that has influenced this research. The authors begin with a description of how staff in employment services perform the street-level bureaucrat roles. There is a balanced narrative of the evolution of Australian employment services from the inception of the CES to (almost) the present day. This history demonstrates how, since the 1990s, there have been many changes to contractual and outsourcing arrangements, the priorities set by governments and the nature of the workforce in these services. The data from staff suggest that, over time, as services have become privatised and corporatized, the focus of staff has become less about provided quality assistance to clients, and more on compliance and meeting organisational targets, including revenue.

The authors specifically stated that their book was not intended to investigate the experiences of jobseekers, but the research would indirectly represent these. There are references in the survey questions to how unemployed people with complex needs and disadvantages were managed, although I note mental health issues are not explicitly mentioned.

The issues reported by Senate Committees and the work of ACOSS and Per Capita suggest that, in the current *jobactive* framework, the focus on compliance is even greater, with strong financial incentives for agencies to maintain high caseloads and to reduce or stop income support payments. As this occurs, the actual support given to unemployed people to improve employment prospects and find jobs is diminished.

Virginia Eubanks' three studies examine the failed automated income support system in the US State of Indiana, the implementation of a complex IT assessment system to assist homeless people in the city of Los Angeles, and the use of an electronic family screening tool in the city of Pittsburgh. The studies raise many important questions about how these systems are used selectively to target poor and minority groups, as well as the unintended consequences of using complex and detailed personal data for decision-making, with limited human oversight. (As an aside, the introductory chapter to the book is an interesting and lively history of how the lives of poor people have been regulated, beginning with the establishment of poorhouses or workhouses in the 19th Century).

Eubanks' work raises many difficult questions about the ethics and efficacy of the use of IT systems and I will discuss some of these in more detail in the concluding chapters of this thesis. In this section, I want to focus specifically on the interface between systems and decision makers.

The Eubanks' study most relevant to this research is the Indiana case, where the State Family and Social Services Administration (FSSA) was outsourced to a consortium of IT companies in 2006. In the US, federally funded programs, including Medicaid (health insurance cover), cash benefits and food stamps are administered by state and local authorities. As has been discussed, since the 'welfare reforms' of the 1990s, these programs have become highly conditional and, in comparison to Australia, very restricted. However, there were many problems with the FSSA initiative which resonate with some of the Australian issues discussed in this chapter.

The FSSA privatisation resulted in the automation of claims for public assistance, which had been previously administered by state-employed caseworkers working in local offices. The new system replaced most of these caseworkers with employees of the company, operating in centralised call centres. Claims were assessed based on online claims and electronic

and/or scanned documents, and decisions were based solely on these processes. As Eubanks describes it, there was a massive increase in both processing of and subsequent denial of claims. The requirement to communicate by telephone or computer, and to confirm old documentation recorded on the FSSA systems, particularly disadvantaged poor claimants in rural areas, people with disabilities and members of minority communities. Where claims were denied, this was usually because of the claimants 'failure to cooperate', even where there were errors in administrative processes and timeliness. The automation project was abandoned in 2009, with the contractor subsequently (and unsuccessfully) suing the state.

Most Australians who have dealt with Centrelink in recent years will probably relate to this case study, particularly regarding impenetrable call centres and web-based interactions. More specifically, the Robodebt program has demonstrated what happens when automated, and flawed, computer algorithms are unleased without human oversight. In the compliance framework applied to unemployed people, the street-level bureaucrats in *jobactive* agencies appear to have little or no discretion in applying sanctions and are themselves subject to automated surveillance of how they perform their jobs.

As argued earlier in this chapter, these policies and processes are not immutable, they result from deliberate decisions by governments and policy makers and can be modified at any time. Deborah Rice suggests that while street-level bureaucrats are usually characterised as enforcers of rules and gatekeepers, they can also use their knowledge and experience to influence positive changes in agencies and institutions.

I can attest to this from my own experience as a street-level bureaucrat in the Department of Social Security (DSS). In the 1980s, DSS social workers were frequently required to assess complex situations not clearly provided for in legislation. In one case, I identified issues of concern where females as young as 16 could be claimed as benefit dependents by (usually older) male partners. Apart from the potential for manipulation and abuse, there was an issue in the states of South Australia and Tasmania where the age of sexual consent is 17. By preparing research and discussion papers, I was able to instigate a protocol that allowed for denial of claims in line with the states' laws, and investigation and assessment where there were indications of exploitation. Another case involved the denial of a Carer Pension to a man looking after his aged mother because they were not considered to be living

'under the one roof', as they occupied adjoining apartments. After I had conducted a home visit and additional interviews, I wrote a detailed policy submission. This resulted in a change of rules, where the level of care provided became the primary criterion for the pension.

In a later role in DSS, I was tasked with establishing two new services in inner-city Adelaide, the first to service homeless and at-risk young people, the second to provide outreach services to adults sleeping rough or in precarious accommodation. In both instances, I was given free rein to consult widely with other government and nongovernment service providers and collect data on the target groups and their needs. The results were that we were able to design and staff services according to local circumstances, rather than just implement models determined by the national office in Canberra.

In these reminiscences, I am not claiming that I possessed any special powers, whether bureaucratic, intellectual, or divine. What I want to illustrate is that it is (or was) possible for large organisations to provide improved services by engaging with and empowering frontline staff. In the cases I have described, I was able to discuss proposals and advocate directly with policy makers – long before the 'flat structure' became a hallmark of organisational reform. More importantly, I think, there was an organisation with some belief in serving the public.

The great experiment in the job services market first begun in the 1990s promised, among other things, that jobseekers would have a choice of provider and some input into what services they required. These services would also be flexible and customised to the individual needs and capacities. These notions seem to have well and truly disappeared in current practice, but this does not mean that things can never change. As will be discussed in the final chapter, the existing models for employment and income support could be changed and include more direct provision by government agencies. This could be done by redistributing existing budgets, but would require a considerable shift in policy and politics.

8. THEME 4:
SUPPORT PROGRAMS FOR YOUNG UNEMPLOYED PEOPLE; PROGRAM AND POLICY INNOVATION

8.1 Introduction

This chapter will examine support programs for young unemployed people, with discussion of current programs that provide mental health support. This will include a close examination of the Individual Placement and Support (IPS) program. The Commonwealth Government funded IPS trial programs in 2017 and these trials are continuing at the time of writing.

To provide context for current and prospective programs, I will briefly discuss two programs that were initially established in the 1970s – the Education Program for Unemployed Youth (EPUY) and the Community Youth Support Scheme (CYSS). I will then examine the iterations of the Work for the Dole (WfD) which commenced in 1998, and which specifically targeted young people who had been unemployed for six months or more.

8.2 Prototype programs

In the second chapter of this thesis, I quoted a 1976 media release on youth unemployment, by the then South Australian Premier Don Dunstan. Unemployment had risen sharply in Australia in the mid-1970s, resulting from changes in both the domestic and global economies. Opportunities for school leavers, such as apprenticeships and entry-level jobs, were especially limited. And, as Woodman and Wyn (2015) have identified, only about 5 per cent of young people could obtain a place in university education.

In the absence of creating jobs in ether the public or the private sector, the Commonwealth Government created the EPUY and CYSS programs. The rationale and characteristics of the programs are described by a contemporary author:

> Clearly, the identification of personal characteristics as being responsible for the problems of rural unemployment/underemployment leads, to solutions which are based upon the need to change those characteristics. The federally funded Education Programme for Unemployed Youth (EPUY) and Community Youth Support Scheme

> (CYSS) have been based upon the assumption that the individual must change before the problems of unemployment can be solved. Thus, training the unemployed to be more presentable at job interviews, correcting their grammar, improving their mathematical ability and encouraging them to be better mannered are seen to be appropriate responses when it is the behaviour or personality of the individual which is to blame for his or her unemployment…There is, as might be expected, support for the government's schemes from both employers, who benefit from a better trained and disciplined labour force, and from public officials involved in the various programmes. It is claimed in one country town that the EPUY Scheme has had a success rate in excess of 50%: that is, of all those graduating from the course over half have found work. While this may sound impressive and helps to legitimise both the scheme and the idea that the unemployment problem lies with unmotivated youths not prepared to improve themselves for entry into the workforce, it is important to note that the policy of the local CES office is to give first offers of jobs to those who have completed the EPUY course (Lawrence, 1982, p64).

The focus and limitations of the CYSS program were identified in an earlier study of young unemployed people in the state of Tasmania:

> Tasmanian CYSS experience reveals the centres are predominantly attended by single young males with minimal educational and employment qualifications. This group also revealed evidence of childhood adversity and current domestic problems. The CYSS project was often considered of doubtful value in procuring a job but nevertheless the centres seem to provide valuable social contact and emotional support. There was less evidence of psychological malaise. Whilst CYSS projects are prohibited from searching for employment, counselling and the selling of goods produced by the centre, in fact, the centres often evade these prohibitions (Koller et al, 1980, p148).

I can add some personal experience to these observations. In the 1980s, I was a member of the management committee for a local CYSS site in inner southern Adelaide, until its demise in 1989. I also briefly worked in another CYSS site, on an ill-conceived youth health promotion program. This project was abandoned and unspent funds returned to the st ate health department, it was indicative of the malaise and lack of clear purpose for CYSS in the later years of the scheme. On my advice, the project was terminated, and funds were returned to the South Australian Health Department.

The Tasmanian study resonates with my recollections of the two sites in Adelaide. There were some worthwhile and purposeful activities, which were usually a result of the dedication and skills of individual staff. The programs could not develop enterprises or refer participants to jobs, although employment referrals did occur informally. For much of the time the centres appeared to be a hangout for a hard-core contingent of young males, and a

safe place to smoke tobacco or other things. CYSS was replaced by the SkillShare program in 1989, with the new program occupying many former CYSS sites. SkillShare sites were tasked with providing more structured education and training and building relationships with local government and services. Some sites became not-for-profit Job Services providers in the 1990s.

8.3 Work for the Dole

The idea for this program was originally proposed in 1987 by the Liberal Party Opposition. Following the election of the Liberal-National Coalition Government in 1996, pilot Work for the Dole (WfD) projects were established the following year. Participation was mandated for 18 to 24-year-olds who had been receiving Newstart or Youth Allowance payments for more than six months. The number of 'pilots' rapidly increased the following year. The program still forms a major part of the Mutual Obligation regime.

WfD has been controversial since its inception, and I will discuss the spectrum of views about it in this section. Before doing so, I should outline my personal position, which is that the program is dreadfully named. In the previous chapter I have discussed my scepticism about many aspects of Mutual Obligation, however I do not oppose the idea of unemployed young people participating in voluntary community work as a way of meeting conditions for receiving income support.

My main objection to WfD is the use of the term 'dole', which is redolent of early 20th Century charity and unemployment relief. The term was revived in Australia in the 1970's as the pejorative 'dole-bludger', applied to young unemployed people who were perceived as lazy and work shy. I consider the titling of WfD was a deliberate example of 'dog whistle' politics as practiced by the conservative Coalition – how to (somewhat indirectly) disparage a group of people to their older or more affluent voting base.

I believe the notion of having to work for income support is also problematic and represents a harsh form of 'workfare', perhaps not very different from the values and social conditions that created the workhouses. I imagine that for many WfD participants the experience is one of condescension – consider what this might be like for school or university graduates who have already worked for many years to attain qualifications, who are already

sufficiently motivated to find work and just require financial support to do so. To revisit the words of Prime Minister Robert Menzies in 1945, unemployed people are now not merely supplicant to the state, but also conscripted by it.

WfD has been expanded since 1998 to include people up to the age of 39. In 2020, unemployed people are required to undertake 50 hours per fortnight in 'approved activities' for at least six months in every year. These can include WfD combined with other activities, including voluntary and paid work, and participation in education and training. Participants in WfD receive an additional $20.80 per fortnight in their Jobseeker payment – this amount has only increased by 80 cents since 1998. It should be noted that the Community Development Program (CDP) which operates in remote Australian Indigenous communities is often referred to as 'work for the dole'. CDP has a few similarities with WfD but is different in regard to funding and participation requirements. CDP is complex and controversial and will not be included in the scope of this thesis.

Before discussing the criticisms of WfD, it is fair to consider what the proponents for the program present as its benefits, and evidence for some positive outcomes. It is important to stress two features of WfD that are often cited as positives. The first is that WfD is not meant to be a replacement for work and can be combined, or not, with other Mutual Obligation activities. The second is that WfD placements will always be in community-based and not for profit organisations, therefore participants' labour cannot be used to enrich private businesses.

The official rationale for WfD has been consistent from the beginning of the program, with the benefits to participants promoted as providing motivation, engagement and personal development, rather than a direct pathway into a job. For example, the current information for potential participants states that:

> Work for the Dole activities will give you the chance to:
>
> - build the skills that employers want, like teamwork, communication and reliability
> - increase your confidence and show you are ready for work
> - meet new people and make contacts who can be a referee for you when you apply for jobs

- be involved in your local community (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2020a).

In its 2019 annual report, the employment department claims outcomes for participants in five key areas:

> The department's post-program monitoring survey measured the impact of WfD participation on job seekers' soft skills and outlook. It was conducted six weeks after commencing in a WfD activity…In 2018–19, the proportion of WfD participants reporting improved motivation to find a job was 76.7 per cent, exceeding the 75 per cent target for 2018–19 and improving on 2017–18 (74.9 per cent). A majority of participants also reported an improvement in their desire to find a job, ability to work with others, self-confidence, work-related skills and chances of getting a job (Department of Employment, Skills, Small and Family Business, 2019, p35).

I will comment here that there might be an element of spin in these data. In the 2018-19 period 70.6 per cent of participants reported improvement in their work-related skills, and 61.3 per cent said they had better chances of finding a job. There are clearly significant minorities of WfD participants who have not experienced positive outcomes from the program. The possible reasons for this are not explored in the report.

While the official policies outline the benefits to individuals from participating in WfD, there can be little doubt that there was a strong moral imperative in the introduction of the program. For example, we can consider this 1997 statement in parliament by former Prime Minister John Howard:

> As I announced yesterday, the government will for the first time introduce, as part of the armoury of the policies it is employing to attack the problem of youth unemployment, a work for the dole scheme. We intend to pilot about 20 to 30 of these schemes in areas of high youth unemployment especially, but not only, in regional and rural areas of Australia.
>
> I believe that most Australians will strongly support the notion that it is not unfair in modem Australia to ask people, if they are able to do so, to undertake some work in return for the dole that they receive (Parliament of Australia, House of Representatives Hansard, 1997, p466).

This statement is also interesting, in how the problem of youth unemployment is portrayed. There is no mention of why unemployment is high in the nominated areas – perhaps because of a lack of jobs? Instead, it is suggested that the problem is somehow due to the

failings of the unemployed themselves. Howard then went on to state that work would be paid at (industrial) award rates and that there would be 'no exploitation'.

An evaluation of the initial WfD schemes was conducted in 2003, which examined outcomes such as participants moving off unemployment benefits, presumably into work. This study suggested that the benefits of the programs were slight at least and in fact had negative outcomes for many participants:

> The main conclusion is that there appear to be quite large significant adverse effects of participation in WfD. For example, for the group of matched WfD participants it is found that there is a difference in exit from NSA payments between WfD participants and non-participants equal to minus 12.1 percentage points; the difference in the proportions of WfD participants and non-participants on NSA payments at 9 months (after start of spell on WfD) is 8.5 percentage points (Borland & Tseng, 2003, p.ii).

This study was quantitative and did not explore the actual experiences of participants – for example, were the time commitments and requirements to attend WfD detrimental to people actually looking for work, or undertaking education or training?

In 2014, the Commonwealth Government introduced 'Work for the Dole 2014-15', a pilot program in 18 selected regions of Australia with high rates of unemployment. Key features of the initiative were that it was compulsory for unemployed people who had been on income support for more than 12 months unless they were working part-time. The program aimed to provide 'work-like experiences', with host organisations providing training for participants relevant to the needs of local employers. Work was also to engage with, and benefit, local communities. Dedicated coordinators were funded in each region to liaise with community organisations and identify work opportunities.

The Social Research Centre at the Australian National University (ANU) was commissioned to evaluate the program after six months of operation. The data were gathered over four months, from December 2014 to March 2015. The methodology included quantitative data on outcomes for participants, including comparison with jobseekers who had not been engaged in the program. It also incorporated detailed qualitative data based on interviews with participants, host organisations, area coordinators and employment services.

The evaluation report is a comprehensive document which appears to be independent and frank in its findings. There was a statistically significant, if small, rise in part-time and full-time employment for participants. Generally, participants indicated high levels of satisfaction with their placements (if completed), the interviews with both participants and host organisations suggest that the more successful placements occurred where there were high levels of support and inclusion, and where there was a good match between the aspirations of participants and the work opportunities offered.

The report provides some other interesting insights into aspects of long-term unemployment:

> There was a general agreement among stakeholders that the job seekers eligible for WfD2014-15 had significant labour market barriers generally interwoven with difficult or challenging personal circumstances…Examples given by providers included people recently released from prison, people with drug and alcohol problems and people who had experienced violence or abuse. The concern was that until some of the resultant problems were resolved, these individuals would continue to face difficulties in successfully engaging in the labour market…A few host organisations remarked that for some job seekers issues were not initially visible but became apparent after a few weeks of being in the work experience activity. These typically included poor social interaction skills and underlying personal issues…
>
> Some other specific issues for the client group that were observed included:

- The impact of intergenerational unemployment
- Low skills, education and training levels
- Mental health problems, and
- Transport/location difficulties

> (Social Research Centre, 2015, pp43-44).

The report also commented on the prevalence of mental health problems among participants:

> Mental health issues were mentioned often, by providers and host organisations as well as by job seekers themselves. The experience of being long term unemployed (or in some cases never having worked) appeared to have a profound impact on confidence, self-esteem and general social skills. Anxiety appeared to be common, particularly social anxiety related to worries about participating in a group activity, talking to others at the work experience, communicating with staff and customers and so forth. In some cases this was compounded by other problems relating to family background or personal circumstances:

> *And it [unemployment] affects their self-esteem and that's one of the areas I think there with, especially with a lot of the people who are Work for the Dole, that's half their problem and that is, how could I say? Their confidence levels. (Host Organisation)*
>
> (Social Research Centre, 2015, p45).

Host organisations and employment service providers also noted other common barriers to successful participation in the program and potential for employment. These included low levels of literacy and numeracy and a high number of people not possessing driving licences. The report noted that there was considerable stigma attached to WfD, both because of organisations having negative previous experiences with the program and its title.

As I have stated, WfD has been criticised since its introduction, frequently by ACOSS and other nongovernment organisations such as the Brotherhood of St Laurence. This commentary from Per Capita and the Australian Unemployed Workers' Union is a good summary of longstanding concerns about the program:

> The reality is that Work for the Dole does not get people off welfare and into work. A review of Work for the Dole outcomes, commissioned by the Government, found that participation in the program increased employment outcomes by a negligible 1.9 percent. It is widely accepted, even on the Australian Parliament's own Flagpost blog, that Work for the Dole is not effective as a labour market program, and that its main function is job seeker compliance and the sense that participants give something back to the community. The claim that Work for the Dole helps unemployed workers gain skills and experience was denied by our focus group participants. Many of our focus group participants had been in Work for the Dole placements and had not gained helpful skills or experience…
>
> Our participants also reported feeling that Work for the Dole was unsafe. These concerns are supported by the available data on Work for the Dole. In a one-year period between 2014-15 and 2015-16, reported injuries at Work for the Dole sites increased from 92 to 500. An Ernst and Young audit of the program found that 64% of sites did not fully meet appropriate safety standards. Despite this, unemployed workers that refuse to attend their Work for the Dole activity over safety concerns face financial penalties. Not only are unemployed workers being forced to participate in pointless undertakings that take them away from other more useful activities, they are being placed at risk of injury. In April 2016, 18-year-old Josh Park Fing died at his Work for the Dole site in Toowoomba. It was later revealed that prior to his death Josh had unsuccessfully tried to lodge a complaint about a back injury he had already suffered at his site (Bennett et al, 2018, p29; p31).

8.4 The Prepare, Train and Hire (Youth Jobs PaTH) program – Work for the Dole version 2.0?

The PaTH program was established by the Commonwealth government in 2017, with the claim that it would assist up to 120,000 young people into long-term employment. The media release by the Employment Minister, Michaelia Cash, indicates the rationale for the program and its three components:

> The Turnbull Government intrinsically understands that the best form of welfare is a job, and so we are ensuring our young Australians are well equipped to enter the workforce and become self-sufficient.
>
> The elements of Youth Jobs PaTH are:
>
> Prepare — Employability Skills Training (EST) to help young people better understand what employers expect of them in the workplace and equip them with the skills, attitude and behaviours for them to be successful in a job. The rollout of courses commences this month.
>
> Trial — under the $250 million 'Trial' component, the Government is encouraging local businesses to take on a young person aged 17 to 24 in an internship for a period of up to 12 weeks.
>
> Hire — a Youth Bonus wage subsidy of up to $10,000 has been available since 1 January 2017 to help more businesses hire young people. More than 1,600 businesses have already taken up this subsidy (Morrison, Cash & Coleman, 2017).

Recent data from the employment department show that the EST program appears to be popular, with some positive outcomes:

> In 2018–19, there were 35,575 commencements in PaTH EST in 4,100 courses. Young job seekers who are employed following EST have better job placement to outcome conversion rates (43 per cent) than job seekers of the same age who do not participate in PaTH (41 per cent). Over 41 per cent of job seekers who have participated in EST have obtained a job placement and/or a PaTH internship within six months of undertaking the training (Department of Employment, Skills, Small and Family Business, 2019, p49).

The internships, however, appear to have fallen far short of the claim that tens of thousands of jobs would result from the initiative. The department's own data show that up until 2019 a total of 10,349 internships were commenced and 6,464 completed:

> Of those, 65 per cent (4,183) resulted in a young person gaining employment following an internship placement. Of internship placements that resulted in

> employment, 34 per cent were for young people with an unemployment duration of two or more years (Department of Employment, Skills, Small and Family Business, 2019, p49).

PaTH has been criticised by a number of agencies since it was first proposed. A good summary of the perceived faults in the program is contained in a 2016 Senate Committee inquiry report - this inquiry was conducted prior to the introduction of the scheme. The Labor Party (opposition) Senators on the committee raised concerns about the possible exploitation of interns, the apparent lack of status as employees (and coverage by workers compensation), and business using interns to fill positions that would have been created anyway.

In regard to alleged exploitation, PaTH can be seen as an improvement on Work for the Dole, inasmuch as the additional income support of $200 per fortnight is better than the $20 supplement paid to WfD participants. However, although a PaTH intern will continue to receive the full rate of Youth or JobSeeker Allowance, they may in reality be working up to 50 hours per fortnight for an hourly rate of pay far lower than the minimum Australian casual wage of approximately $25 per hour. SmartCompany, a newsletter providing information to small and medium-sized businesses, has reported that companies are dissatisfied with employment service agencies' referrals and the poor quality of pre-placement training. In addition, this report noted:

> The PaTH program has previously been criticised as a method for businesses to get low-cost labour with no intention of keeping interns on.
>
> Fast-food company Hungry Jacks came under fire several weeks ago over advertisements for PaTH interns over Christmas, which the Retail and Fast Food Workers Union said showed the program was being taken advantage of.
>
> "The Federal Government's $4 per hour 'internships' were not supposed to swallow up jobs. This year Hungry Jacks literally replaced its Christmas casual hires with the taxpayer-funded internships," the union said (SmartCompany, 2019).

Relevant to the topic of this thesis, the PaTH program would therefore seem to offer little that improves the overall participation of young people in employment, particularly if interns are replacing casual workers that would have been employed. One might also be sceptical about the Department's data on employment outcomes following internship placements. Would those jobs have been created and filled anyway?

Before discussing the Individual Placement and Support program in the next section, I will briefly describe Empowering YOUth Initiatives, another Commonwealth-funded support program relevant to this thesis. The program ran between 2016 and 2019 and comprised 39 projects across Australia. All projects focussed on training and preparation for employment or apprenticeships, including the provision of certificate-level vocational training. The projects were diverse and appeared to have been developed in response to regional needs and specific populations such as Indigenous and culturally and linguistically diverse young people.

Two of the projects were national and conducted by the headspace Youth Mental Health Foundation. They were the Digital Work and Study Service (2016-2018) and the Digital Industry Mentor Service (2017-2019). The former program provided support and counselling, particularly aimed at early school leavers, and the latter provided access to 'experienced industry mentors' to support connect young people with job opportunities (Department of Employment, Skills, Small and Family Business, 2019). According to the employment department's website, an evaluation of the initiatives was to have been completed by the end of 2019. At the time of writing this has not been published. However, an independent survey of users of the Work and Study was conducted, which indicated positive outcomes, albeit with a limited sample size (Rickwood, Kennedy, Miyazaki, Telford, Carbone, Hewitt, & Watts, 2021). Findings of relevance to this thesis include the adaptation of Individual Placement and Support principles, providing tailored and unconditional support to help individuals identify and work towards goals. Also of interest is the online interface, which can be particularly helpful for individuals with high levels of mental health distress who struggle with social interactions.

8.5 Individual Placement and Support (IPS)

The Individual Placement and Support model, sometimes called Individual Placement Support, is, as far as I am aware, the only program in widespread use that has explicitly combined and integrated employment support and placement with mental health services. In this section, I will outline the development of IPS and its key features, and then discuss its adoption and trialling in Australia in recent years.

IPS originated in the US, with a pilot program study conducted by Robert Drake and Deborah Becker with clients of a community mental health agency in Dartmouth, New Hampshire. The program took the form of a randomised control trial, with some participants continuing in a 'traditional' vocational rehabilitation program and the experimental group involved in IPS. The vocational rehabilitation program had focussed on social support and some preparation for employment, while the IPS model took the approach of placing service users into employment as a priority. The study was described as:

> One quasi-experimental study has been conducted. It involved a natural experiment in which a community mental health center operating day treatment programs in two rural sites was faced with budgetary cuts. One site closed its day treatment program, replacing it with a supported employment program known as Individual Placement and Support (IPS). The other site continued its day treatment along with traditional brokered vocational rehabilitation services. Clients at the day treatment program that converted to IPS had an increased employment rate; no change was found for the site that did not convert its day treatment program. Increases in employment rates were especially marked for regular attenders of day treatment. Moreover, the program that converted to IPS had no increases in negative outcomes such as hospitalization, incarceration, homelessness, suicide attempts, or program dropouts. Interviews with clients, their families, and mental health staff revealed widespread satisfaction with the conversion. The second site subsequently converted to IPS, with similar favorable results (Bond, Drake, Mueser & Becker, 1997, p337).

It should be noted at this point that this early iteration of IPS involved people with more serious mental health issues or diagnosed mental illnesses. The expansion of IPS across the US and its adoption in the UK and European countries has also been in community mental health services dealing mostly with people with low-prevalence and high impact disorders, including psychosis and major depression. The promotion and adoption of IPS in Australia has also concentrated on young people experiencing serious mental health conditions. However, by comparison, the Commonwealth-funded IPS trials, which commenced in 2016 and which will be examined later in this section, have engaged young people with more common mental health issues such as anxiety and depression.

IPS services are required to adhere to 'fidelity' with eight key principles of operation and management. The following are the principles prescribed for the Australian trial sites by the Department of Social Services. They are entirely consistent with international or universal IPS principles. I have chosen this version as it provides contemporary and local context:

> All IPS services must subscribe to a set of Practice Principles that underpin delivery of support to participants. IPS is a highly defined form of supported employment and has eight core Practice Principles:
>
> 1. **Focus on Competitive Employment**: IPS services are committed to competitive employment as an attainable goal for participants with mental illness seeking employment.
>
> 2. **Eligibility Based on Participants Choice:** Participants are not excluded from the IPS service on the basis of readiness, diagnoses, symptoms, substance use history, psychiatric hospitalisations, level of disability, or legal system involvement.
>
> 3. **Integration of Rehabilitation and Mental Health Services:** The IPS model is based on a close integration of mental health treatment teams, including clinical care.
>
> 4. **Attention to Participant Preferences:** Services are based on participants' preferences and choices, rather than headspaces' judgments.
>
> 5. **Personalised Benefits Counselling:** Vocational specialists help participants obtain personalised, understandable, and accurate information about their government entitlements. (Fear of losing benefits is a major barrier to employment)
>
> 6. **Rapid Job Search:** The IPS model is based on a rapid job search approach to help participants obtain jobs directly, rather than providing lengthy pre-employment assessment, training, and counselling.
>
> 7. **Systematic Job Development:** Vocational specialists build an employer network based on participants' interests, developing relationships and partnerships with local employers.
>
> 8. **Time-Unlimited and Individualised Support:** Follow-along supports are individualised and are continued for as long as the participant wants and needs the support (Department of Social Services, 2016, p17)

The adoption of IPS in Australia has been strongly promoted by the Orygen Youth Health Research Centre. In 2014, Orygen published a detailed report on young people, mental health, employment and education named "Tell them they're dreaming" (a famous catch phrase from *The Castle*, a popular 1997 Australian comedy film about the triumph of ordinary people against authority). This report provided detailed analysis of the complexities of the systems that young people experiencing mental health distress are required to negotiate. Some other issues raised in the Orygen report will be discussed in the next chapter. In regard to IPS, the two recommendations concluding the report were [to]:

- Introduce federally funded IPS employment and education services as part of the headspace model that do not require assessment or social security benefit eligibility to improve both education attainment in younger people and transitioning to the workforce for the slightly older cohort.
- Improve the implementation of evidence-based employment services by establishing an accreditation system for providers based on high fidelity to evidence-based practices (Orygen, 2014, p52)

Initially 14 IPS trials were established across Australia in headspace youth mental health centres. With the exception of the capital cities of Darwin and Hobart, all were located in regional towns and cities or in disadvantaged outer metropolitan areas. In January 2019, the Commonwealth Government announced that these trials would continue to receive funding for two years beyond June in that year, with an additional 10 sites to begin working by July 2019 (Fletcher & Henderson, 2019). The 10 additional trial sites were all in rural or relatively disadvantaged metropolitan areas.

Each of the trials has been based around two vocational (employment) specialists employed in the headspace centres, to work with clinicians and young people towards participation outcomes in employment and/or education. Young people were registered as headspace clients but were not required to have a formal diagnosis of mental illness or mental health disorder.

The Department of Social Services has been responsible for funding the trials and compliance with 'fidelity', the contract for the latter being awarded to the Western Australian Association for Mental Health. The consultancy firm KPMG was contracted to conduct an evaluation of the program and the initial trial sites. The final evaluation report was published in June 2019.

This evaluation is a detailed document and appears to be a dispassionate and honest account of the trials. The evaluation strategy was quantitative and qualitative, the latter including interviews with staff, stakeholders and clients. There is acknowledgement of the limitations of some data collection, challenges in implementation and initial communication between the department and the agencies. Due to a delay in ethics approval, only 13 of the 14 sites were included in the evaluation. The report examined many facets of the trials, including the implementation phase, the efficiency and effectiveness of the program and its appropriateness to community needs and current government policies. Some of the issues

canvassed about the potential broader application of IPS and its principles will be discussed in the next chapter. In this section I will primarily discuss participant outcomes.

The evaluation provides qualified support for IPS. The report states that in the period covered by the evaluation (just over two years), 676 or 43 per cent of participants achieved an outcome in employment or education. It is claimed that these positive outcomes are higher than for clients using Disability Employment Service (DES) agencies. I suggest that these outcomes can be seen as very positive regarding the particular adversities faced by participants, and how they would otherwise have fared in the mainstream jobactive services.

The KPMG report has quantified the average program cost per participant as $4,899. I presume that this is based on all participants, not just the 43 per cent with successful outcomes, therefore the cost for these latter would be more than $10,000. The evaluators commented that it was difficult to assess whether this represents value for money for the department without a benchmark comparative figure. I think this is probably a fair comment and the cost per individual could be considered as quite high, however this does not take into account overall cost savings of young people moving off income support and requiring less mental health support as they progress towards independence.

Another important outcome, which may be hard to quantify financially, is the benefit to the quality of life of participants. This is represented by case studies described in the report. The following extract from the evaluation encapsulates the challenges in the program, even when dealing with (possibly) less severe mental health disorders. It also illustrates how professional staff can work together to provide innovative support and problem-solving:

> The Trial has engaged a diverse range of participants, and overall consultations outlined that the nature and severity of mental health conditions was not a dominant factor in achieving outcomes. In some instances, it was suggested that mental health conditions could play a role depending on individual circumstances, with the recognition that the nature/severity of mental illness did not operate in isolation from other influencing factors. Across the Trial sites, Vocational Specialists and clinicians observed that young people with anxiety and depression were a dominant client group. The 2017-2018 headspace annual report noted that anxiety and depression were the presenting issue of 29 and 27 per cent of clients respectively. Anecdotally, consultations pointed to similar numbers within the Trial participant group. Some Vocational Specialists observed that participants with depression and anxiety could be

> more difficult to engage, particularly around meeting in the community, or engaging with employers. This was supported by some clinicians who noted that some young people's anxiety impacted on their ability to engage with employers, and spoke about the development of strategies that were put in place in conjunction with the Vocational Specialists to assist in the achievement of outcomes for these participants (KPMG, 2019, p91).

Unfortunately, while the evaluation was able to identify the numbers of participants who exited the program, or did not achieve an employment or education outcome, data were not collected on reasons for exit or non-achievement. This would be useful in further evaluation of the efficacy of IPS. The report did identify and discuss some key issues affecting participants' success in the program. As indicated in the above extract, the severity of mental health distress and ability to engage were significant factors. The report also identified lack of employment history, skills and education and practical barriers such as not having a driving licence or access to phones and computers. So, while the IPS trials have demonstrated success in assisting young people with multiple adversities, they have also highlighted the difficulties many young unemployed people routinely experience.

8.6 Discussion and analysis

In this chapter I have attempted to summarise a diverse range of programs aimed at unemployed young people, which have evolved or come and gone over time. It is somewhat challenging to compare diverse programs that have happened in different eras.. This being said, I think that two key issues can be considered for each program . The first is 'how effective was the program in getting young people into work or education?', the second issue is 'did the program provide other benefits (or not) to participants?'

EPUY, CYSS and SkillShare – of these three historic programs, only EPUY seems to have had a strong focus on employment outcomes. The 1982 paper by Lawrence suggests that the Commonwealth Employment Service may have been instrumental in achieving these outcomes by preferring to refer EPUY participants over others to job vacancies. It may also have been the case that this was enabled by the CES having the monopoly of the 'labour exchange', registering employer vacancies and jobseekers.

As Koller et al noted, the CYSS programs were specifically precluded from duplicating the function of the CES but did achieve some informal economic benefits. More significantly,

the local projects provided support and reduction in the social isolation experienced by young unemployed people. The SkillShare projects were similarly precluded from doing the work of the CES but were more focussed on training for 'work readiness'. A qualitative study of 133 SkillShare participants found significant improvements in mental well-being and motivation during engagement in programs (Creed, Machin & Nicholls, 1998). Unfortunately, these improvements were not sustained – possibly because the participants remained unemployed. Apart from the study just cited, there is no contemporaneous literature evaluating the effectiveness of SkillShare.

Work for the Dole – as has been discussed, it is difficult to establish how successful the various iterations of this program have been in providing a transition to paid employment for young people. As has also been discussed, the employment department's most recent annual report has claimed that a majority of participants in WfD have identified some benefits in developing work-related skills and confidence in finding a job. However, a significant majority did not report these benefits and the contribution that engagement in WfD makes to general wellbeing is not assessed. The evidence from Per Capita and other critics of WfD suggests that for many participants, wellbeing decreases due to the compulsory nature of the program and its associated stigma.

Youth Jobs PaTH – this program has been subject to an extensive evaluation involving employers, employment service providers and participants, the evaluation report being published in February 2020. Having described criticisms of this program earlier in this chapter, I must also concede that the evaluation indicates some positive outcomes for both employers and young people. Where outcomes have occurred, a number of common factors were identified. These were the importance of engaging and supporting young people, including providing appropriate training prior to placement and matching candidates with potential employers. Ongoing support, where required, to interns and employers was also instrumental in completion of internships and continued employment (DESE 2020).

As with outcomes for WfD, the PaTH evaluation is somewhat circumspect in regard to long-term employment outcomes, only reporting the percentage of participants who achieved a job placement three months after completing the internship. This was 57 percent of interns

referred via jobactive agencies, with seven in ten of these receiving the Youth Bonus Wage Subsidy. The report does not indicate the levels of ongoing employment once this 12-month subsidy ends.

PaTH seems to be particularly helpful for young people with little or no work experience, however, a limitation was identified in that, to be eligible, a young person is required to have been receiving income support for six months or more. This precludes people under 22 who do not receive support because of parental means. The program would also seem to have limited benefit for higher education graduates and those already possessing work skills and experience.

The PaTH evaluation also identified some complexities in administration, which in some cases deterred employers taking on interns. In Chapter 11, I will identify possible ways that internships and subsidised employment might be improved, building on the learnings and some positive outcomes of PaTH.

Individual Placement and Support – as has been mentioned, this is the only program that explicitly combines mental health and employment support. The results from the IPS Trial appear encouraging, although not necessarily conclusive. The lack of data about why participants did not continue with the program or were not successful in gaining employment or returning to education is disappointing. The KPMG evaluation also comments that it was difficult to determine the value of the Trial in the absence of a 'counterfactual' – what outcomes would have occurred if the Trial had not taken place?

One aspect that was not covered in the evaluation is the characteristics of the vocational specialists who have been employed in the Trial sites. Individual caseloads of approximately 20 per worker are much lower than in mainstream jobactive agencies. Although it is not explicitly discussed, I suspect that assessment and engagement skills would be much higher in this group, compared to their counterparts in jobactive.

One significant issue with the Australian implementation of IPS is its location in headspace centres. The evaluation noted that this limited participation for some young people if they were not engaged with headspace or were on a waiting list for clinical services. An expansion of IPS in its current form would also preclude young people who do not have a

local, and accessible, headspace service. The evaluation investigated implications for practice and also noted a number of unintended positive outcomes from the Trial.

In concluding this chapter, it is worth considering how each of these programs have, in Carol Bacchi's terms, represented problems, and how these representations have resulted in the particular design of programs. For example, Work for the Dole in its various iterations represents the notion that unemployed people require compulsion to get back to or into work, even if jobs are non-existent or precarious. PaTH and IPS represent a more compassionate and supportive approach to the problems experienced by young unemployed people. In Chapter 11 I will discuss how some of the principles of IPS could be incorporated in mental health and employment services for young people.

9. UTOPIA AS METHOD: THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL MODE

9.1 Introduction

In Chapter 4, I outlined the methodology for this thesis, which will be framed by Ruth Levitas' 'Utopia as Method' (2013). This and the subsequent two chapters will therefore use the three modes of description and analysis developed by Levitas – the archaeological (historical); the ontological (how societies encourage 'human flourishing'); and the architectural (how society can be reimagined and reconstituted).

While the primary focus of this thesis is on the current issues concerning young unemployed Australians, it is vital to understand how policies have evolved over time, in particular, in the past 10-15 years. The increase in inequality and the implementation of highly conditional income support also need consideration within a much longer historical context, beginning with the establishment of modern welfare states after World War 2. As described by Eric Hobsbawm, this 'Golden Age' existed until the mid to late 1970s – how then, did things change so much, and to the disadvantage of people who are already marginalised and excluded?

The COVID-19 pandemic has had profound social and economic effects across most nations, with negative consequences similar to the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, the two World Wars and the Great Depression in the 20th Century. A common element in these previous events has been the role of governments in mobilizing resources and citizens in response to threats, albeit with varying degrees of compulsion and success. The impact of the pandemic, which appears by no means over at the time of writing, will be discussed in these next three chapters. This discussion will include an exploration of issues existing prior to the pandemic, the contemporary circumstances during 2020 and 2021, and how recovery could be supported by new approaches to policy and service provision.

A good starting point for consideration of what worked in previous times and what could be revisited now, is Janet McCalman's description of post-World War 2 Australia, and how good government might contribute to post-pandemic recovery:

> [And] Australia also had arguably the best government in its history under prime ministers Curtin and Chifley. They believed in the social contract that government was there to serve the people; that our Commonwealth was formed for the 'common good'…Their postwar reconstruction scheme, in just four years of war and four years of peace, established a welfare state and addressed historical injustices to Indigenous people who came under Commonwealth laws. They legislated to mandate full employment after the war, despite the demobilisation of the military and of war industries – and it worked…They invested in national and international air travel. They trained hundreds of thousands of unskilled workers to be skilled workers, and sent ex-service people to university. They opened Australia to non-British migrants, changing us forever (McCalman, in Dawson & McCalman, Eds., 2020, p18).

As discussed in Chapter 6, the Commonwealth Government implemented a number of responses to the pandemic to mitigate the effects of many people losing jobs, or being unable to work, due to lockdowns. These responses, such as the 'Coronavirus Supplement' increase to Jobseeker and Youth Allowances, appeared to represent a compassionate and timely response to a crisis. However, the measures are time limited. JobMaker, a program which subsidises employers taking on new younger workers aged 16 to 35, still relies on 'the market', rather than creating government or public employment. Unlike the post-war initiatives then, these policies seem to represent a continuation of neoliberal ideas, rather than a new or different approach to structural problems.

9.2 Neoliberalism as a moral cause

We might therefore ask, why neoliberal policies dominate so many societies, including Australia, when they clearly do not work in favour of people in lower socio-economic groups, including those in work. In Chapter 6, I cited David Harvey and his description of the early development of neoliberal philosophy as a 'utopian project'. Harvey goes on to outline how neoliberalism also evolved into a moral project in the USA, where, in the 1980s the Republican Party allied itself with evangelical Christian churches:

> It also appealed to the cultural nationalism of the white working classes and their besieged sense of moral righteousness (besieged because this class lived under conditions of chronic economic insecurity and felt excluded from many of the benefits that were being distributed through affirmative action and other state programmes).

> This political base could be mobilized through the positives of religion and cultural nationalism and negatively through coded, if not blatant, racism, homophobia, and antifeminism. The problem was not capitalism and the neoliberalization of culture, but the 'liberals' who had used excessive state power to provide for special groups (blacks, women, environmentalists, etc.). A well-funded movement of neoconservative intellectuals (gathered around Irving Kristol and Norman Podhoretz and the journal *Commentary*), espousing morality and traditional values, gave credence to these theses. Supporting the neoliberal turn economically but not culturally, they excoriated the interventionist excesses of a so-called 'liberal elite'—thus greatly muddying what the term 'liberal' might mean. The effect was to divert attention from capitalism and corporate power as in any way having anything to do with either the economic or the cultural problems that unbridled commercialism and individualism were creating (Harvey, 2015, p50).

The link between neoliberalism and conservative Christianity is also explained by the Australian philosopher, Jessica Whyte. She argues that neoliberalism is both a moral and an ideological project, rather than merely an economic framework. In her book 'The Morals of the Market', Whyte describes the aims of the Mont Pèlerin Society, founded in 1947 by the Austrian economist, Friedrich Hayek (generally considered as the father of modern neoliberalism):

> …neoliberal thinkers aimed to establish (or revive) a set of moral values that would secure social integration in a context of market competition. The founding statement of the Mont Pèlerin Society makes this clear: diagnosing a civilisational crisis characterised by the disappearance of the conditions for 'human dignity' and threats to freedom of thought and expression, it states that these developments 'have been fostered by the growth of a view of history which denies all absolute moral standards'. Rather than an external supplement, or a pragmatic partner, social conservatism, including explicit appeals to family values, Christianity and 'Western civilisation', was foundational to the consolidation of organised neoliberalism in the mid twentieth century (Whyte, 2019, p12).

Whyte also identifies the influence of Christian and social conservatism in opposing universal rights, where these might challenge the 'freedom' of capitalism and individual enterprise. Such ideas changed the nature of the welfare state and how it operates:

> It has often been noted that a liberal revival that came to prominence as a critique of the paternalism of the welfare state ended up expanding state involvement in the welfare system. Neoliberal welfarism, critics note, enlists the state to coerce welfare recipients into the worst, lowest-paid jobs and subjects them to invasive supervision and income-management. Such 'neoliberal paternalism' is often understood as the product of a tactical alliance between freemarket neoliberals and family-values social conservatives who found common cause in opposition to the 'ungovernability' of the

social movements of the 1960s (Whyte 2019, p70).

It may be no accident that the Prime Minister of Australia in 2021, Scott Morrison, is a prominent member of an evangelical church that preaches the 'gospel of prosperity'. The Government Services Minister, Stuart Robert, who is responsible for Services Australia and Centrelink, is also part of a similar congregation.

In considering the issues raised by Harvey and Whyte, I think the moral dimensions of neoliberalism could be overstated, as its dimensions, including increased inequality and the concentration of wealth in few hands, need to be scrutinised on economic and social merits. Nevertheless, for the purposes of the discussion and analysis in this chapter, it is important to consider the implication contained in the quote from Jessica Whyte. This being the question: how many elements of the welfare state, including inadequate income support and punitive sanctions, are fundamentally economic policies masked by a veneer of 'tough love' morality?

9.3 How youth, unemployment and mental health issues are represented and problematised

In Chapter 3, I introduced Carol Bacchi's WPR methodology for policy analysis – 'What's the problem represented to be?' (Bacchi, 2009). Her chapter on welfare, youth and unemployment was briefly discussed and will be revisited in more detail later in this section. Before doing so, I will explore some of the archaeology of the issues and whether they are in fact as complex or considered as wicked problems in the way that they are often portrayed in academic literature and public discourse.

Some useful historic perspectives were provided by the economist, Michael Jones, in his book 'The Australian Welfare State' (Jones, 1990). This third edition of the work, initially published in 1980, is described by the publisher, Allen and Unwin, as 'the standard authoritative work in the field, documenting the changes in Australia's social policies'. The book contains a detailed history of the development of social provisions in Australia up until the time of publication, including social security, public health, and social housing. The discussion considers many factors in Australia's economic and political development, such as centralised wage setting; the history of industrialisation (protected by high tariffs on

imports); and the development of government income supports such as age pensions, unemployment benefits and family allowances for dependent children.

Much of Jones' book is a relatively even-handed discussion of the evolution of the Australian welfare state, and the various political views and movements that have influenced this development. One issue that he is concerned about is what he terms the increase in 'social dependency'. This is evidenced by the increasing numbers of people reliant on government benefits, and Jones highlights this in the book's introductory chapter:

> In 1971 there were 21.3 people dependent on Commonwealth social-security benefits for every 100 persons in the full and part time workforce. The dependent groups included age, invalid, widow's and war veteran pensioners and recipients of unemployment, sickness, special benefits, and supporting parent's benefit…The ratio of dependency rose during the 1970s to reach 34.8 in 1977. By 1988, despite a booming economy, this ration had risen to 40.8, after peaking in the 1983 recession at 47.1…There are no simple explanations for this extraordinary increase in dependency.
>
> The full development of the welfare state has arrived unexpectedly, at the same time as the economy has faltered (Jones, 1990, p1).

Jones did go on to write a fourth edition of the book, incorporating a different subtitle of 'evaluating social policy' (Jones, 1996). I have chosen to cite the earlier edition as I think it is broadly representative of the discourse prevailing at the time it was written, concerning the 'problem' of the welfare state and the perceived need for reform of social security payments for citizens of working age. At that time, these were males aged over 16 and under 65 years, and women aged over 16 and under 60 years. It should be noted that this edition was published in a year when Australia had experienced a rapid and steep economic recession. This may explain the author's somewhat feverish tone.

Jones' work is also a representation of social issues as binaries or polar opposites, that is, a demarcation between one clear choice or another. So, people are either independent or 'welfare dependent' – this paradigm does not acknowledge that many income support recipients also work in paid jobs or contribute to society through volunteering or caring for family members. I would also question Jones categorising diverse groups of people together under the umbrella of 'dependents', with apparently negative connotations. For example, I suggest that military veterans and widows of veterans, as well as people receiving age pensions, would quite rightly see their income support as entitlements recognising service

and working life. At least elsewhere in the book, Jones does acknowledge improved life expectancy, surely a good thing, as a factor in the number of pensioners increasing.

Carol Bacchi begins her chapter on youth and unemployment by examining the introduction of amended Work for the Dole (WfD) legislation in 1997. This made WfD compulsory for unemployed people aged 18 to 24 years. The program was later extended to people aged 18 to 39. Bacchi then goes on to discuss how youth unemployment has been represented and problematised. I will summarise and discuss her key points in these next few paragraphs.

The problem of unemployment was portrayed very much as a moral issue, for example the Minister for Employment at that time, Tony Abbott (later to become Prime Minister), said the aim of the Government was to '…replace long-term idleness at taxpayers' expense with a real job if possible, but useful activity in the community if not' (Bacchi, 2009, p57). Unemployment is therefore a problem because of the nature of unemployed people themselves. There is little recognition of the many problems long-term unemployment causes for young people, as I have discussed in earlier chapters. The discourse was, and continues to be, that governments should have little to do with job creation or direct intervention. Compare this to the sentiments expressed by South Australian Premier Don Dunstan in 1976, which were discussed in the introduction to this thesis.

Young people themselves are categorised as a problem, as Bacchi says:

> 'The category 'youth' operates in public policy as if it referred to a distinct minority group, rather than a phase of life we all live through' (Bacchi, 2009, p59).

Reliance on income support is constructed as welfare dependency and treated as being similar to dependency on drugs or alcohol, and to be discouraged. Bacchi suggests that there is an artificial binary established here between self-reliance and dependency. As I have noted earlier in this chapter this misconstrues the fact that many people receiving Youth and Jobseeker Allowances also work.

Mutual Obligation policies imply that the majority of unemployed people need to be motivated into looking for work or otherwise compelled into activities, however pointless these may. This reflects a common discourse, and another false binary, that people are

either leaners or lifters. In Australia in the 1970s, young unemployed people were referred to by the media and some politicians as 'dole bludgers'. The term bludger is a particularly derogatory Australian expression, which, according to the Australian National Dictionary, originally meant a man living off the earnings of others, i.e. a pimp (Australian National Dictionary Centre, Australian National University, 2021). In the modern context, the term means not only a person who is lazy or workshy, but who is also apparently illegitimately existing 'at taxpayers' expense'.

Earlier in this thesis, I have described in some detail the complexities of conditionality for unemployed people claiming income support, including requirements to undertake pointless activities, harsh penalties and the now discredited Robodebt program. I have formed the conclusion that unemployed people, in particular young people, have been deliberately problematised to suit political agendas. Put bluntly, over time, systems have been put in place that are designed to entrap people by enforcing obligations that are increasingly difficult to meet. When this happens, punishment follows, which then becomes proof of the recalcitrant nature of this group and the need to continue to enforce even harsher sanctions.

9.4 Problematisation and the 'production of ignorance'

My closing comments in the previous section may seem somewhat strident. There are many far more trenchant critics of neoliberal welfare reform, such as Loic Wacquant who I have cited earlier in this thesis. In this section I will discuss how the 'problems' of the welfare state have been presented in particular ways, drawing on an article by the geographer, Tom Slater (Slater, 2012).

In this paper Slater explores how a myth of 'Broken Britain' was generated by the UK Conservative Party in the early 2000s, to justify the premise that in the five years between 1997 and 2002 the New Labour Government had done little to alleviate poverty and social disadvantage. Slater's theme is based on the notion of 'agnotology', which is a term coined by the American science historian Robert Proctor, to describe how ignorance is deliberately produced and disseminated (Proctor, 2008). In Slater's framework, he argues:

> …that a familiar litany of social pathologies (family breakdown, worklessness, antisocial behaviour, personal responsibility, out-of-wedlock childbirth, dependency) is repeatedly invoked by the architects of welfare reform to manufacture ignorance of alternative ways of addressing poverty and social injustice (Slater, 2012, p948).

Slater's narrative begins in 2002, when the then Leader of the Conservative Party, Iain Duncan Smith, visited one of the most deprived urban areas of the City of Glasgow and pledged that, if elected, his party would address past failures of both themselves and the current government to promote social justice and solve problems of inequality. Duncan Smith was subsequently deposed as leader by David Cameron, who was elected as Prime Minister in 2010. As a self-described 'quiet' backbencher, in 2004, Duncan Smith established a think-tank called the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ).

In Slater's account, the CSJ, while purporting to promote social justice and fight poverty, actively set and pursued an agenda portraying the UK/Britain as 'broken'. The causes of 'breakdown', supported by spurious research and surveys, essentially guided discussion in the direction that 'big government' had failed and in fact had encouraged the moral decay of British society and many of its citizens. What were not canvassed were issues such as inequality, low-paid and insecure work, high levels of unemployment in post-industrial areas like Glasgow, poor housing and social infrastructure and very low levels of social security benefits. Slater cites an example of a CSJ survey question, which provides for limited responses:

> "Which of the following would most help prevent family breakdown and its associated problems?"
>
> a) A return to traditional moral values in society
> b) Government should use the tax system to support married couples
> c) More awareness of the effects of family breakdown on children (Slater, 2012, p955)

When the Conservative Party was elected in 2010, Duncan Smith became Work and Pensions Secretary, the minister responsible for social security payments. It is perhaps not surprising that his reform agenda appeared to contain little about social justice:

> During a morning radio interview, he stated that it was a "sin" that people failed to take up available jobs (Wintour, Ramesh and Mulholland, 2010). In Parliament later that day he condemned Britain's "growing dependency culture" whilst announcing the most punitive welfare sanctions ever proposed by a British government, where unemployed people would stand to lose benefits for 3 months if they refuse the offer

> of a job (or "community work") for the first time, 6 months if they refuse an offer twice, and 3 years if they refuse an offer three times (Slater, 2012, p949.

In Chapter 4, I discussed the first iteration of Australian welfare reform in the 21st Century, following the two McClure Reports. These resulted in relatively mild changes, with a focus on mainly older income support recipients and personalised support for people to engage voluntarily in social and economic participation (and exempt from Work for the Dole). As I have also discussed, such policies reflected changes in welfare provision in the UK, the USA and New Zealand. There appears to be cross-fertilisation of ideas in the Anglosphere, evidenced by the common use of terms such as personal responsibility, reducing dependence and smaller government. In retrospect, I now think that early iterations of welfare reform in Australia may have been the beginning of a process of producing ignorance, in that instance focussing on the personal capacities (or incapacities) of individuals while ignoring the many structural problems older workers face, including age discrimination in employment.

I have argued in Chapter 7 that the income support system has become more conditional and punitive since these earlier reforms. This is not some inevitable force of nature but a result of deliberate policy decisions, such as the introduction of the Targeted Compliance Framework and Robodebt. Even when these initiatives cause harm to citizens, as the evidence from the Senate enquiries demonstrated, there seems to be little public outrage. Although the Robodebt program was found to be illegal, none of the ministers responsible for its implementation have admitted culpability.

One explanation for this complacency or silence is the nature of Australia's commercial media. The national and capital daily newspapers are mostly owned by the Murdoch Family's News Corporation and syndicated radio networks with listener input, so-called talkback, are largely dominated by right wing hosts. Issues such as poverty and disadvantage are rarely discussed. I had access for many years to national media monitoring of social security and welfare issues. The coverage was often dominated by the aforementioned 'dole-bludger' narrative, along with stories of prosecutions of people fraudulently claiming benefits. The only group of social security recipients represented in a sympathetic way was age pensioners, who were usually portrayed as victims of poverty or perceived injustices, such as the introduction of assessment of assets to calculate

entitlements. There appears to be little academic enquiry into how public discourse is shaped in Australia. The most recent article I could find that specifically discussed media representation of unemployed people was from the University of NSW Social Policy Research Centre (Eardley & Matheson, 2000).

The other significant influence on public and political opinions about unemployment and unemployed people is the well-resourced right wing think tanks – examples in Australia being the Institute of Public Affairs (IPA), the Centre for Independent Studies and the Menzies Research Centre. As with the CSJ described by Tom Slater, all could be considered to be involved in the production of ignorance.

I will take the IPA as an example, an organisation which was sponsored for many years by the tobacco industry and has reportedly received several millions of dollars in funding from the Australian mining billionaire, Gina Rinehart (Barro, 2018). A quick look at the IPA website (ipa.org.au) reveals that in the Melbourne office there are nine senior executives and 19 staff 'fellows' with important-sounding titles that suggest a high level of academic scholarship. The banner headline is 'Saving Australia's Way of Life', which is apparently not threatened by such things as climate change or environmental degradation, but by feminists, trade unionists, political correctness, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, et al. The term freedom is used a lot, but this apparently does not apply to welfare recipients. There may also be an irony in the organisation's title, as its focus seems to be on anything but public services, unless calling for their dismantling or privatisation.

The silence of organisations such as the IPA on matters of social concern represents the 'production of ignorance'. The empirical work of academics such as Tom Slater, Danny Dorling (both geographers) and Michael Marmot not only identifies inequality but shows its negative effects on both economies and societies. In these fractious times, however, these matters can be dismissed as 'fake news' and replaced with 'alternative facts'. As Slater puts it:

> Right-wing think tanks in the UK continue to gain in power, and their influence is hard to avoid in any assessment of how the contemporary neoliberal state is aided and augmented. Their glossy and authoritative publications, their fast channels of access to authority and opinion-makers, their speechwriters and backroom "researchers"

have together successfully deflected attention away from the reality of the problem to be addressed: a *broken state* (Slater, 2012, p964).

9.5 The evolution of the roles of street level bureaucrats in the 21st Century

Michael Lipsky first described the roles of street level bureaucrats in 1980, in an era where governments were much more directly involved in service provision. As I have described, in Australia this was reflected by the existence of two large national Commonwealth agencies – the Department of Social Security (DSS) and the Commonwealth Employment Service (CES). DSS was responsible for all income support payments, such as pensions, unemployment and sickness benefits, and allowances for dependent children. Within the departmental structure was the Commonwealth Rehabilitation Service (CRS), which provided national occupational rehabilitation programs to individuals, most of whom had been injured at work or in motor vehicle accidents. DSS also had responsibility for most Commonwealth grant funding to nongovernment service providers such as children's services, family support programs and emergency financial relief.

These agencies and their operations were directly accountable to the Commonwealth Parliament and Ministers, within a framework of legislation. They were also accountable to service users, for example decisions by DSS staff could be subject to review and appeal by the Social Security Appeals Tribunal (SSAT, established in 1975) and the Administrative Appeals Tribunal (the AAT, established in 1976). Appeals unresolved by either the SSAT or AAT processes could also be considered by the Federal High Court. From 1982, citizens could also request documents and records concerning their individual cases, via the provisions of the Freedom of Information Act.

Although he was discussing the American context, Lipsky's description of street level bureaucrats in the 20th Century welfare state could be equally applied to Australia. It certainly reflects my experience working for DSS and with CES and CRS staff in the 1980s:

> Street-level bureaucrats dominate political controversies over public services for two general reasons. First, debates about the proper scope and focus of governmental services are essentially debates over the scope and function of these public employees. Second, street-level bureaucrats have considerable impact on peoples' lives. This impact may be of several kinds. They socialize citizens to expectations of government services and a place in the political community. They determine the eligibility of citizens for government benefits and sanctions. They oversee the

> treatment (the service) citizens receive in those programs. Thus, in a sense street-level bureaucrats implicitly mediate aspects of the constitutional relationship of citizens to the state. In short, they hold the keys to a dimension of citizenship (Lipsky 1980, p4).

I have discussed the privatisation of employment services and the increased conditionality imposed on recipients of income support. In the next section I will examine the evidence for how this has constrained the roles of staff in employment services and the benefits agency, Centrelink. Here I will briefly discuss two programs that illustrate how the roles of street level agencies and their staff have changed markedly over the past two decades. Michael Lipsky described the role of street level bureaucrats as implementing policy, but also noted that they could, in many cases, exercise flexibility and discretion, and even influence policy changes. The application of flexibility and discretion appears to have greatly diminished, particularly as rules and compliance are increasingly administered by IT systems, rather than humans. Both of the programs discussed below are mainly targeted at sole parents, but I believe the issues identified are highly relevant to young unemployed Australians, especially in regard to conditionality and the imposition of payment sanctions.

9.5.1 Welfare to Work

This program was introduced in 2006 and included people (mostly women) receiving Parent Payment Single (PPS). Previously this payment, initially titled Supporting Mother's Benefit and later Sole Parent Pension, had been payable until the youngest dependent child was sixteen years old. There were no 'mutual obligations' associated with these payments, but assistance was offered by the Jobs, Education and Training (JET) program. JET officers were located in DSS and CES local offices and individual participation in the program was entirely voluntary.

Welfare to Work requires sole parents to participate in Mutual Obligation activities once their youngest child turns six years of age. Following the 2006 changes, sole parents cease to receive PPS and are moved to the (lower) JobSeeker Allowance when their youngest child turns eight. A study undertaken by Michelle Brady examined the early years of this initiative and included interviews with Job Network (employment agency) staff who were working with single mothers (Brady, 2011). These interviews elicited a striking difference in attitudes of the staff working for private for-profit agencies and non-profit, usually religiously affiliated, agencies. The former group were strongly focussed on the explicit government

policy that mothers had an obligation to find employment or undertake training. The latter group were concerned with assisting women into employment, but explicitly acknowledged that the primary focus of their lives was on mothering and caring, including living on limited incomes even if working part-time. Brady noted that these roles were like the street level bureaucrats identified by Lipsky, albeit not employed directly by government. The non-profit agency staff:

> …saw this 'big stick' message about rules and punishments for non-compliance as ultimately unproductive. In terms of their own engagements with clients, they sought to move away from technologies of government that emphasized rules and prohibitions, and to focus instead on encouraging compliance through understanding the client's desires and aspirations (Brady, 2011, p274).

Since Brady conducted her research, the nature of Welfare to Work has changed greatly. As I have discussed, the employment services 'market' is now dominated by for-profit providers. These agencies, now branded as jobactive, are also required to implement the Targeted Compliance Framework and apply sanctions, including suspension, reduction and cancellation of income support.

A more recent report on Welfare to Work conducted by the advocacy group Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand examined how policy was implemented and included data from interviews with 26 single mothers.

> Payments are administered using a bonus system, which encourages providers to push clients towards certain outcomes regardless of individual circumstance. Further, despite the complex barriers to employment faced by individuals enrolled under Welfare to Work, providers are unable to offer tailored, specialised services. Their options for supporting individuals into work are extremely limited (McLaren, Maury, & Squire, 2018, p49).

9.5.2 ParentsNext

This program was introduced as a pilot/trial program in 2016 and expanded nationally in 2018. It is essentially a version of Welfare to Work, extended to include recipients of Parenting Payment with children aged under six years. As stated by the Government, its aims are to:

- reduce welfare reliance and intergenerational welfare dependency;
- increase female labour force participation; and

- help close the gap in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment (Senate 2019, p3).

One of the features of the program is that for most participants it is compulsory, and they are therefore subject to the Targeted Compliance Framework and associated sanctions. Of the total of participants in ParentsNext, 19 per cent identify as Indigenous Australians and 68 per cent are sole parents (Parliament of Australia, 2019d). The program has attracted considerable criticism and resulted in the establishment of a Senate Committee of Inquiry in 2018. The Committee's report, and related submissions from advocacy groups, argued that there were, and remain, considerable problems with the program (Parliament of Australia, 2019d). These include harsh sanctions of payment cancellation or suspension, with evidence of vulnerable parents and families placed in financial hardship. Significant other criticisms include that participants were coerced into signing 'participation plans' which were not compulsory and which sometimes were detrimental to parenting and other activities already being undertaken, including study and work. This is illustrated by three comments from respondents to a survey conducted by the National Council for Single Mothers and their Children (NCSMC), this survey was presented to the Senate Committee:

> "The added stress of having to attend Rhyme Time weekly with my daughter who is quite overwhelmed with the other children running around and being disruptive is ridiculous!! I have chronic pain conditions and have to sit on a hard wooden step for half an hour whilst I watch other women on their phones and their children running wild in a library!! My girl gets better support at my mother's group catch ups!"
>
> "I have never had to report to Centrelink. Now I have to report fortnightly to Centrelink, and weekly to somewhere else regarding my parents next activity (don't know where I do that) AND print a 3 page form and post (no free post) to Centrelink fortnightly. It's a pain in the bum and all it achieves is me saying nothing's changed. It stresses me out. I've also had to make 2 phone calls to Centrelink and one to parents next as things hadn't been explained properly and now I have another problem so I'll need to call again on Monday."
>
> "I was already studying full time yet made to attend parents next compulsory appointments for them to write on a piece of paper that my participation ... is full time study. Total waste of time as I get no help, I get no assistance towards my university course or transport costs and it means I lose a day of study to attend a pointless appointment." (Parliament of Australia, 2019e, p13).

What appears to be occurring under this program is that the jobactive agencies and staff who are participating in ParentsNext are applying a highly inflexible and unproductive

approach, which in many cases is causing distress rather than improving the circumstances of parents and children who already experience high levels of adversity. It appears that the activities of the street level bureaucrats in these employment service agencies are ever-more strictly prescribed, and they are unable or unwilling to exercise discretion.

9.6 Street level bureaucrats in income support and employment services

Earlier in this thesis I have described some of the history of the transformation of the government departments (DSS and CES) into Centrelink and the privatised employment service agencies. Before examining how the roles of staff in these agencies have evolved over more than two decades, it is useful to briefly describe the establishment and evolution of Centrelink. A useful resource for this study is the history of the first ten years of the agency written by John Halligan from the Australian National University (Halligan & Wills, 2008).

The impetus for the establishment of Centrelink in 1997 was the desire of the Liberal/National Party Coalition Government, which had been elected in 1996, to seek efficiencies in the provision of the Commonwealth's frontline services represented by the DSS and CES networks. As the privatisation of employment services was increasing, the residual role for the government was in the registration and initial assessment of newly-unemployed people. Many of the remaining CES staff were transferred into the DSS local offices which then became the network of Centrelink Customer Service Centres.

This nomenclature was also a representation of the other major rationale for the creation of Centrelink. This was to make services more focussed on the individual needs of citizens, who were to become 'customers', rather than pensioners, beneficiaries, or clients. Halligan describes in depth how the organisational and governance structure was developed, which was completely novel in terms of traditional public service department administration. He also provides a detailed (if somewhat hagiographic*) account of how this transformation was managed under the leadership of the initial Chief Executive, Sue Vardon and the (late) Deputy Chief Executive Ross Divett.

One of the more ambitious attempts to transform the nature of service delivery in Centrelink was to introduce more personalised 'One-to-One' service at the local service

centres and telephone call centres. This process was commenced in 1998 and implemented by 1999. The rational for this is described by Halligan:

> Customers indicated that approaching welfare issues in terms of programs did not correlate with the events of their lives. What was needed was to be able to tell one person their story once, not have to repeat it and to be able to understand what services were available to help with the current crisis in their life. Centrelink's response was to provide a single point of contact for the customer—a one-to-one contact officer—so each customer would have only one main person within Centrelink with whom they made contact.
>
> For the first time, customers would be able to tell their story once only and receive a personalised response. The one-to-one officer would coordinate and integrate the products and services available from Centrelink (or elsewhere) to respond to the specific needs of the customer. Staff members were allocated a pool of customers and accepted responsibility for all continuing business relating to that group. These arrangements were expected to speed up decisions, to help staff to develop a more professional relationship with customers and to give them greater satisfaction with their work (Halligan & Wills, 2008, pp41-42).

Halligan notes that this innovation attracted international attention and was subsequently adopted to some degree by social security agencies in New Zealand and the UK. However, the experiment was to be short-lived in Australia. The demise of the model was the subject of a qualitative research study by Cosmo Howard, who interviewed frontline staff, managers and customers. Howard also examined internal policies and procedures (Howard, 2012).

One of Howard's key findings was the difficulty, if not impossibility, of meeting the demands of very large number of recipients with finite numbers of agency staff. The One-to-One initiative was implemented at the same time as a major reduction in staffing levels (approximately one-sixth), which was required by the Government as an 'efficiency dividend' from the merger of the two large agencies. Howard calculated that individual Customer Service Officers (CSOs) had potential caseloads of between 500 and 1000 individuals, even before consideration of how to manage planned or unplanned absences of staff.

*** I make this comment based on personal experience, having had many dealings with these two individuals as a national Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) delegate from 1999 to 2005. We frequently had robust differences of opinion about issues affecting our members and the negotiating of workplace conditions, and the CPSU was often critical of how organisational change and priorities were managed. This being said, I had the highest regard for the integrity of most of the senior managers in Centrelink and their personal commitment to providing quality public services.**

Mutual Obligation policies had also been introduced in 1998, with Centrelink staff having the responsibility to prepare participation plans and negotiate subsequent compliance with employment services and Work for the Dole agencies. Howard argues that while theoretically obligations were negotiated with customers, the choices of activity were very limited. So, while the street level bureaucrats (the CSOs) were supposedly empowered to exercise discretion and make decisions in their clients' best interests, this was largely illusory:

> The general feeling in Centrelink was that there was little frontline flexibility in most aspects of the Mutual Obligation Initiative. For example, a customer service officer from the Hunter Valley pointed out that he had no choice but to force the customer to start her activity when the policy required:
>
> > Mutual Obligation **...** it's about one-size-fits-all and one-size-fits-all doesn't work. There's no flexibility. You know, why does she need to start Mutual Obligation straight away? She's got a **job** in a month's time. Well put Mutual Obligation off for a month! You're not supposed to (Howard, 2012, p667).

This lack of flexibility also seems to have permeated the privatised employment services, which had also been tasked with providing more tailored and individualised services. Catherine McDonald and Greg Marston examined data extracted from a survey of not-for-profit Job Network staff, which had included responses on the workers' attitudes to unemployed people and the benefits system (McDonald & Marston, 2008). The authors found that a high number (74 per cent) of these staff expressed negative attitudes towards unemployed people. A minority (18 per cent) were more neutral, with a very small minority of only eight per cent expressing positive attitudes and respect for their clients.

In their report, McDonald and Marston compared the attitudes of the employment services staff to social workers in Centrelink, a group that they had surveyed as part of a separate project. With the qualifier that there were limitations to such a comparison, they suggested that the Job Network would benefit from engaging more social workers to engage and promote unemployed people's self-efficacy. However, in a subsequent article based on the Centrelink social workers survey, they observed that flexibility and discretion had declined significantly following the implementation of Welfare to Work policies:

> The social workers, who at one time characterised themselves as generalist social workers (for example, engaging in assessment, brief and/ or crisis interventions,

> referral and follow up, plus some community service development work with community sector agencies), now claim that they are required to project the need to 'participate' (in the workforce or in employment services) in all of their encounters with service users. In practice, this means that whereas once the social work service ran as a generalist social work service somewhat disengaged from the core administrative business of providing income support, under the current circumstances, promoting 'participation' has become core business, binding the social workers into the 'work first' agenda (McDonald & Marston, 2008, p178).

In Chapter 7 I briefly discussed the work that Mark Considine and his colleagues have undertaken, examining the changed nature of employment services in Australia since the 1990s. The three surveys of staff, conducted in 1998, 2008 and 2012 showed that, as these agencies became more dominated by for-profit corporations and reliant on computer scripted assessment and referral tools, the autonomy of staff declined. It is difficult to see that these street level bureaucrats have had much of an opportunity to provide personalised service, or have any influence on how policies and services are designed:

> Frontline staff used a narrower band of measures, spent less time with individual jobseekers, had less to do with employers, and only rarely made contact with other support services. Different types of agencies began to look more like each other. The job itself lost much of its former discretion at the frontline. Over time, the firms employed more early- and late-career-stage staff, more females, and people with lower levels of education, and expected them to work full-time at a job with a higher caseload and more compliance reporting (Considine et al, 2015, p67).

9.7 The COVID-19 pandemic and the younger generation of 'Pandemials'

In earlier chapters I have discussed some of the effects of the 2020 pandemic. At the time of completion of this thesis, there remains a great deal of uncertainty about the medium to long-term effects on global health and economic conditions. From the archeological perspective of this chapter, it is worth considering the immediate effects of the pandemic in 2020 and 2021. The effects on younger people across the World are encapsulated by *The Global Risks Report 2021*, prepared by the Swiss-based nongovernment think tank The World Economic Forum (WEF).

The WEF is an organisation well-resourced by large multinational companies and is probably best known for its annual winter gathering of global elites and national leaders in the Swiss ski resort of Davos (the 2021 meeting was virtual due to the COVID-19 pandemic). The WEF describes itself as 'The International Organization for Public-Private Cooperation'

(www.weforum.org). Its left-wing detractors view it as an attempt to make capitalism more palatable, for others it is representative of darker forces attempting to impose a New World Order (Thomas, 2020).

The Global Risks Report, by its nature and title, is inevitably a somewhat pessimistic document. It examines a range of contemporary issues, including economic downturn, environmental degradation and civil unrest. The chapter on the circumstances of young people, who are termed 'Pandemials', describes how many young people have had their prospects seriously diminished since early 2020, especially in regard to education and employment. The report also acknowledges that many young adults have been doubly affected as they already were experiencing the negative effects of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis. This extract from the report is a concise summary of the contemporary situation and provides some introductory themes for the next chapter: what we understand about how best to develop young people and help them to flourish:

> The pandemic has exposed youth's vulnerability to widespread economic and societal shocks. Political and economic systems will need to adapt globally to directly address youth's needs and minimize the risk of a lost generation. Investment in improving education sectors and in upskilling and reskilling, ensuring adequate social protection schemes, closing the gender gap and addressing mental health scars should be at the centre of the recovery process (WEF, 2021, p46).

10. UTOPIA AS METHOD:
THE ONTOLOGICAL MODE

10.1 Introduction

> The ontological mode of the Imaginary Reconstitution of Society, of utopia as method, is necessary for two reasons. First, any discussion of the good society must contain, at least implicitly, a claim for a way of being that is posited as better than our current experience. It entails both imagining ourselves otherwise and a judgement about what constitutes human flourishing…The archaeological mode of utopia as method properly includes the ontological, in excavating the assumptions about human nature and human flourishing that are embedded in political positions and institutional proposals, as well as in overtly utopian literature. Utopians always have an account of human nature, and they vary considerably. The second reason is the need for utopia not just to account for, but to speak to, the level of affect (Levitas, 2013, p177)

In this chapter, I will explore Ruth Levitas' ontological method, which aims to understand and address social issues. There can be many dimensions to ontology. Here, I will consider the nature of being and the nature of existence. These can be a useful basis for critically analysing the contemporary circumstances of younger Australians.

In the previous chapter, I have summarised some of the critical issues in the recent and current provisions of the welfare state. The primary focus of this chapter is to explore the 'here and now' and to identify examples of policy and service provision that will enable the 'flourishing' of younger Australians. Before doing this, it is important to define some parameters, such as how we might define notions of flourishing. It is also important to provide realistic perspectives and evidence of policies that are effective and those which could be improved or even abandoned.

I have previously referred to the historian Eric Hobsbawm and his description of the post-World War 2 'golden age' of prosperity in developed countries. At this stage it is necessary to raise some qualifications about the welfare state. In Australia during this period, there was a rise in overall prosperity which was driven by full employment and supported by government provision of social security, housing and health services.

However, it's important to consider that this era was by no means a golden age for all Australians. The headline economic indicators, such as employment and home ownership, were positive. However, these largely benefitted middle class males and nuclear families, farmers and skilled (mostly male) unionised workers. Women were excluded from many professions and education opportunities and were paid far less than men for performing equivalent jobs in factories and offices. Single working women were usually forced to give up their jobs if they married – this 'marriage bar' policy existed in the Commonwealth public service until 1966. Many children of widows and single parents grew up in poverty and, at worst, were placed in the care of institutions where custodians were permitted opportunities to be abusive to their charges. Prevalent problems such as domestic violence, lack of workplace safety and environmental pollution were not acknowledged. And some groups of people, such as homosexuals and Aborigines, were considered to have little or no rights. Homosexual men were subject to criminal prosecution in most jurisdictions, the State of Tasmania only repealing laws forbidding consensual sex between men in 1997. Indigenous Australians were only fully recognised as citizens following a national referendum in 1967.

We might pause to consider some limitations and dangers of utopian aspirations. An ideal situation for some members, even the majority, of a society, may be entirely the opposite for others.

10.2 The dangers and limitations of utopian ideas

I have chosen Levitas' methodology because I believe it provides chronological philosophical and political frameworks for developing the arguments in this thesis. Before proceeding with the discussion in this chapter, it is important to identify the limitations inherent in utopian discourses.

Prior to discovering the work of Levitas and deciding to adopt and adapt her methodology, I had not really given much thought to utopian ideas, except when reading science or speculative fictions. Nor was I aware that there was a discipline of utopian studies. I consequently realised that utopian ideas have been more pervasive than I had thought and have some broader relevance to the themes in this thesis.

Perhaps the most powerful manifestation of utopian ideas has been in national politics, and in particular, totalitarian regimes driven by ideologies which promise a near-perfect society as long as there is a high level of conformity and compliance by citizens, the most obvious contemporary example of this being the North Korean state. Utopian thinking was also a basis for the promulgation of welfare states, with some justification that citizens' lives can be improved by social provision. Utopian thinking can also appear in other modes of politics, for example, consider the slogan 'Make America Great Again' so beloved by former US President Donald Trump. Implicit in this in the notion that somehow or somewhere the USA (the largest economy and military power in the World) had stopped being great and this situation could be addressed by sheer will, but not actual policies.

Earlier in this thesis I have portrayed neoliberalism as both an ideology and a moral cause. It can also be considered as a utopian idea, with the concept of a pure free market operating as a dispassionate, efficient and self-correcting economic machine. In an essay titled 'Neoliberalism: the idea that swallowed the world' (Metcalf 2017), the American writer Stephen Metcalf portrays the 'father' of neoliberalism, Friedrich Hayek, as having ambitions far beyond developing a new form of economic thinking:

> …[Hayek] did not think he was staking out a position on the political spectrum, or making excuses for the fatuous rich, or tinkering along the edges of microeconomics.
>
> He thought he was solving the problem of modernity: the problem of objective knowledge. For Hayek, the market didn't just facilitate trade in goods and services; it revealed truth…
>
> When the idea occurred to Friedrich Hayek in 1936, he knew, with the conviction of a "sudden illumination", that he had struck upon something new. "How can the combination of fragments of knowledge existing in different minds," he wrote, "bring about results which, if they were to be brought about deliberately, would require a knowledge on the part of the directing mind which no single person can possess?"
>
> This was not a technical point about interest rates or deflationary slumps. This was not a reactionary polemic against collectivism or the welfare state. This was a way of birthing a new world. To his mounting excitement, Hayek understood that the market could be thought of as a kind of mind (Metcalf, 2017, web page).

In Metcalf's account, Hayek's ideas were not adopted at a time when the ideas of the British economist John Maynard Keynes were dominant and influential in addressing post World War 2 recovery. Hayek languished and sulked in various universities until his ideas were

embraced in the 1970s, by future US President Ronald Reagan and future UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher.

On a smaller scale, there have been many examples of utopian communities based on religion, ideology or 'charismatic' leadership. William Metcalf, a cultural historian, has studied Australian communities and movements. His original PhD thesis is a study of alternative lifestyle communities, which had become prevalent in many countries during the late 20th Century (Metcalf, 1986). This thesis describes the long history of utopian ideas and movements, going back to ancient Greece and Rome and the establishment of Christianity. What is relevant in these histories, over two millennia, is that while movements and groups were established to challenge the dominant hegemony of their contemporary societies, they equally required members to conform to a high degree of common beliefs and behaviours.

The history of utopian movements also has many examples of the harms that can be caused by extreme conformity and ideologies, which may be likened to cults. Many of the more extreme movements were quite repressive and exploitative. Metcalf argues that these groups identified prospective new members and seduced and socialised them into the collective. Some of the more excessive groups have ended in tragedy and mass death, such as the 'Peoples Temple' in Jonestown, Guyana, in 1978 and the 'Branch Davidians' in Waco, Texas, in 1993.

It might be timely at this point to consider again the ideas of Laurence Mead and Charles Murray, with their trenchant antipathy to welfare and the welfare state. In their schemas, utopia is represented by governmentality, which forces people to become better citizens by removing the perceived evil of government support. These improved citizens become subject to the free market, and are therefore 'free' to compete and comply with the terms of whatever services they can purchase.

I therefore argue that there are inherent limits to utopian notions of what our contemporary societies could or should look like. Utopian ideas can lead to bad outcomes and, as the Scottish writer, Ewan Morrison, argues, utopian societies portrayed in fiction can be very bad indeed:

> Our inability to create credible utopian fiction shows why, throughout history, experimental communities and states based on utopian ideals have either collapsed or become totalitarian regimes—and will continue to do so in the future. The inability to address real human failings, desires and conflicts within the utopian imagination is a symptom of its inherent inhumanity.
>
> It's time to take an honest inventory of the outcomes of the utopian ideal. We might want to give up on the idea, which resurfaces every second generation or so, that the only things stopping us from creating a newly revised utopia on earth are lack of imagination and political will. It is not simply bad or uneducated people who stand in the way of realising this secular heaven on Earth—the flaw lies within the utopian ideal itself…
>
> The failure of the utopian fiction genre highlights a pressing political question: if no one in history has ever managed to imagine a credible, functioning utopian society that is not founded on the eradication of everyone it deems politically unfit, why should we keep on attempting to steer our existing societies towards a land we can't even usefully imagine? (Morrison, 2020, web page).

While I agree with most of what Morrison says in this article, we should still concern ourselves with what can be made better for citizens. This is desirable and achievable and does not require aspiring to create the ideal society, or for that matter the ideal or perfect citizen.

10.3 What does it mean to 'flourish' in the 21st Century?

In her chapter on ontology, from which I have quoted above, Ruth Levitas explores the dimensions of flourishing and happiness in past and present societies, as examined by philosophers, sociologists and, among others, novelists. The threads running through this discussion are that there are many opinions on what makes people happy, or a 'good' society. If there is some consensus, this recognises that flourishing is a combination of factors including material security, individual wellbeing and social connectedness. Furthermore, this will always be a work in progress:

> Utopian accounts are always contested, and should be so. The central point of the ontological mode is that the utopian method necessarily involves claims about who we are and who we might and should be. These claims, like the institutional parameters of the good society, need to be made explicit through the archaeological mode and developed in terms of their implications for the architectural mode. A commitment to dignity and grace is here a preliminary to considering what is necessary to make them more of a reality and less of an aspiration (Levitas, 2013, p196).

In this section, I will briefly explore these ideas in regard to the themes of this thesis – the material, emotional and social wellbeing of younger Australians. I will attempt to illustrate some of the challenges in how these can be measured. In the next section, I will explore current policies, including those whose negative effects can be quantified.

I have argued in earlier chapters that there are many factors that affect young peoples' wellbeing. I have also attempted to collate the evidence about social determinants of health and mental health. However, I acknowledge that there will always be individual factors, and therefore individual differences, in how young people perceive their situation. And some will be predisposed to anxiety or depression even when their general circumstances are good.

The Mission Australia 2020 Youth Survey, with 25,800 respondents, provides a contemporary snapshot of how young Australians aged 15 to 19 years are faring. As with previous surveys, respondents reported relatively high levels of mental health distress and, perhaps unsurprisingly, the COVID-19 pandemic was identified as one of the top three personal issues of concern. The survey asked about respondents perceived levels of stress:

> For the first time in 2020, young people were asked to report on how much of the time they felt stressed in the past four weeks. More than four in 10 (42.6%) young people felt stressed either *all of the time* or *most of the time*. Double the proportion of female respondents felt stressed *all of the time* or *most of the time* (53.9% compared with 26.8% of males) (Mission Australia, 2020, p5).

Although the Mission Australia survey identifies a number of negatives, it also provides some positive outlooks. These provide good indicators for what helps young people to flourish, and indeed suggest that many young people are maintaining optimism even if experiencing some adversities. For example:

> Respondents were asked how confident they were in their ability to achieve their study/work goals after school. Almost half (48.6%) of respondents indicated high levels of confidence in their ability to achieve their study/work goals: 9.7% indicated they were *extremely confident* and 38.9% indicated they were *very confident*. Over four in 10 (41.4%) reported feeling *somewhat confident* (Mission Australia 2020, p4).

Survey responses also indicated that most young people were socially connected and felt confident in seeking support if required:

> As in previous years, *friend/s* (83.5%), *parent/s or guardian/s* (71.7%) and *relative/family friend* (55.3%) were the three most frequently cited sources of help for young people (Mission Australia, 2020, p5).

While the Youth Survey is focussed on adolescents and young adults, I suggest that a survey including young people up to the age of 24 would have similar findings, albeit with some additional issues identified as young people navigate leaving secondary and tertiary education and attempt to establish financial security. The survey nevertheless reinforces the importance of two areas where young people need to, and frequently do, flourish – identifying achievable educational goals and being socially connected and supported.

10.4 How to measure flourishing – the case of social inclusion and social exclusion

In Chapter 6, I mentioned the views of Peter Saunders on the challenges of measuring social inclusion and how it is probably more useful for development of policy to identify and measure social exclusion. Professor Saunders' remarks were made as an introduction to a lecture by him, which I attended in early 2013. This idea was influential in the development of my Masters and PhD research, in particular the need to scrutinise inequality and the social determinants of health and mental health. At that time, Saunders demonstrated some prescience in his discussion of why social inclusion is not popular with conservative political parties. The Australian Social Inclusion Board (ASIB) had been established by the Labor Party Government elected in 2007. One of the first decisions of the Liberal National Party Government which was elected in September 2013 was to abolish the ASIB and discontinue its ongoing projects.

In a retrospective analysis of the ASIB and social inclusion policies, Saunders used survey data collated by his own organisation, the University of NSW Social Policy Research Centre (SPRC), together with another survey framework from the Melbourne Institute and the Brotherhood of St Laurence (Saunders, 2015). The methodologies identified and attempted to measure indicators of social inclusion and exclusion and compare findings to those of the ASIB. The study indicates that between 2006 and 2010 there were broad improvements in social inclusion, at least in regard to the extent to which people felt excluded from services and opportunities, including employment. Less positive are the data that show that there is a significant association between levels of social exclusion and poverty, and people's subjective wellbeing.

These findings are highly relevant to this research. The wellbeing of the survey population that was most economically disadvantaged declined more, as people experienced greater numbers of experiences of social exclusion. The four measures of wellbeing were standard of living, life satisfaction, happiness and perceived autonomy. As I have discussed in earlier chapters, the mental health and wellbeing of young Australians are directly affected by social and economic factors, including multi-generational disadvantage. I have also detailed what I believe are the critical factors that contribute to social exclusion, including inadequate income support, inequality, and punitive policies for people who are unemployed. In the next section, I will revisit these factors and policies, in regard to how they define and determine the existence and wellbeing of young unemployed and underemployed Australians. Peter Saunders suggests that addressing these issues will require a great deal of reform of government and governance or, as Ruth Levitas might say, a new architecture:

> Despite several notable policy reform achievements, relatively little progress has been made in tackling the bureaucratic and administrative obstacles that prevent the kind of holistic integrated approach needed to combat social exclusion. More might have been achieved in a unitary system and there is little doubt that the politics of Australian federalism – spurred on by an unstable governing coalition and a hostile opposition – made it harder to achieve the kinds of coordinated action that was needed. Even within the federal bureaucracy itself, there were signs that departments sought to protect traditional territory and resist the kinds of change that the inclusion agenda demanded. The silos proved to be resilient (Saunders, 2015, p153).

To conclude this discussion, it is worth noting that, apart from the relative lack of success of implementing social inclusion policies, the notion of what constitutes inclusion may be contested.

For example, as observed By Greg Marston and Mike Dee (2015), the ASIB focussed somewhat narrowly on employment being a key element of exclusion, which does not take into account the importance of people being parents and carers. Levitas provides an example of how inclusion can be disingenuous, in her account of how the UK Government from 2010 introduced major cuts to public programs under the banner of an inclusive 'Big Society':

> Talk of the 'Big Society' is, in the mouths of the Coalition, little more than an attempt to get necessary social labour done for nothing, disproportionately by women, by

> pushing work back across the market/non-market boundary. We'll sack your librarians, but if you want you can keep your libraries open using volunteers. We'll cut your care services, so if you don't look after your relatives and neighbours they will be abandoned, or left unfed and untended even in hospitals. We'll axe the programme for intensive social work with families with multiple problems, and replace it with untrained volunteers in the Working Families Everywhere programme, headed up by millionaire Emma Harrison (Levitas, 2012, p322).

10.5 Being young and unemployed in 21st Century Australia

In this section, I will consider the issues of being young and unemployed, and the nature of existence, or daily life, for many unemployed people. We can start by considering the language which describes all people in this group as 'jobseekers'. This has been formalised in 2020 by the change to payments, with Youth and Newstart Allowances becoming the JobSeeker Payment. I am aware that I have used the term jobseeker in earlier chapters, and that this reflects how neologisms can quickly pervade social discourse, perhaps even unconsciously.

The use of the term also illustrates how the 'being' of unemployed is defined. An unemployed person, particularly one needing income support, is reduced by terminology to a simple dimension, that it is their primary purpose to look for work. Their situation is individualised, and thus detached from the social facts such as unemployment rates, available job vacancies, and precarious work. Similarly, receipt of income support is defined through this narrow window of conditionality, therefore a recipient can no longer be considered as a beneficiary or a client.

In the previous chapter, I discussed the common stereotyping of unemployed people, especially the young, as malingerers and 'dole-bludgers'. This, coupled with the jobseeker soubriquet, dismisses the reality of the lives of young Australians. They may be receiving JobSeeker Payment, but as citizens they are also part-time workers or students, volunteers, partners and parents. Many are also caring for family members with health problems, or have chronic illnesses or disabilities themselves, but are considered to have a 'partial capacity' to work (PCW). As noted in Chapter 7, this population was estimated in 2019 to represent 43 per cent of the population receiving Newstart Allowance (St Guillaume, 2020).

The income support and employment services systems have a profound effect on the daily existence of unemployed Australians. I believe that the unemployed represent the most surveilled group of citizens, after people in the community corrections system or those subject to mental health orders. This surveillance can go far beyond Mutual Obligation, and can include scrutiny of bank accounts, income management and the raising of illegal Robodebts. In the remainder of this section, I will revisit and discuss two major themes – the adequacy of income support and conditionality.

In Chapter 6, I discussed the historical adequacy of JobSeeker Payment and its predecessors relative to poverty measures. The various and gradually reduced level of the Coronavirus Supplement resulted in a permanent increase to pre-pandemic payment rates of just $50 per fortnight. This rise was announced by Prime Minister Scott Morrison and Social Services Minister Anne Rushton in February 2021 (Morrison & Rushton, 2021).

As of April 2021, the maximum rate of JobSeeker Payment for a single person is $615.70 per fortnight, Youth Allowance for a single unemployed person aged 18 to 22 years is $512.50 per fortnight (Services Australia 2021). Youth Allowance rates are considerably lower for under 18-year-olds, or recipients where parental income and assets affect the level of payment.

As discussed in Chapter 6, ACOSS and the University of NSW have calculated the poverty line for a single person in 2020 as an income below $457 per week, or $914 per fortnight. It can be seen that with the permanent increase to income support, even including rent and energy assistance of approximately $150 per fortnight, a single JobSeeker recipient will be existing on at least $148 per fortnight below the poverty line, a recipient of Youth Allowance is $252 per fortnight below that line. So, for these citizens, many with little or no savings or additional support, the nature of their daily existence is defined by poverty, for example having to make choices between paying rent or eating, or between paying for electricity or medicine.

At the aforementioned Prime Minister's media conference, the then Employment Minister, Michaelia Cash, announced that Mutual Obligation policies would return to pre-pandemic requirements, despite a persistent increase in unemployment and the ending of wages

support to employers in the form of the JobKeeper. Furthermore, Cash proposed a hotline for employers, so they could report individuals refusing job offers:

> As the Prime Minister has said, the best form of welfare is a job. And our commitment as a Government is to do everything that we can to get people who are on welfare to get into a job. As such, we're reinstating mutual obligation requirements but we're also strengthening them. Last year, as a result of COVID-19, we did have to put a pause on our mutual obligation requirements. But now, in 2021 and in particular with 93 percent of the jobs lost during COVID returning to the economy and with our focus on our post-pandemic economy, it's time to reinstate mutual obligation. What does that actually entail? In the first instance, there will be a requirement for job seekers to attend face-to-face appointments with their providers. They currently do not have to do that, as a result of COVID-19. We're also going to increase the number of job searches a job seeker does per month. As a result of COVID, they were reduced to eight. We will progressively move that to 15 job searches a month and then, as of 1st July, 20 job searches a month, which is what it was before the pandemic hit…You often hear, though, employers saying, "Joe applied for a job. He was qualified for the job", or she, "and they said no." What we will be doing for employers is introducing an employer reporting line. So that if someone does apply for a job, they're offered the job and they're qualified for the job but they say no, the employer will now be able to contact my Department and report that person as failing to accept suitable employment. This will then mean that my Department can follow up with that person or alternatively, Jobactive can follow up with that person to ascertain exactly why they said no to a suitable job. In the event that they do not have a valid reason, they will be breached for that. We will, at the same time though, be increasing the number of audits we do of our job providers. We need to ensure that our job providers are following up on our job seekers and ensure they are doing the right thing. Remember, this is all about getting people off welfare and into work (Morrison, Cash & Coleman, 2021).

Cash's proposal was dubbed 'jobdobber'. Even some employer groups were quick to criticise it as ineffective and pointless. Historically, very few unemployed people have been sanctioned for refusing job offers:

> In July 2019 to December 2019 – the last six-month period not affected by the pandemic and the suspension of mutual obligations – 571 work refusal penalties were recorded by the department.
>
> That compares with a total of 886,276 jobseekers recorded in the system over the period, meaning an estimated 0.06% were issued such a penalty.
>
> In the previous 12 months, July 2018 to June 2019, 1,119 work refusal penalties were issued, an estimated 0.12% of all jobseekers over that period (Henriques-Gomes, 2021).

I have quoted Minister Cash at length as I believe the return to pre-pandemic policies represents an intransigence about unemployed people, a failure to imagine different approaches to helping people into work and prejudice being substituted for facts. The evidence from the various Senate inquiries and from organisations such as the Brotherhood of St Laurence and Per Capita, suggests that conditionality and the current model for employment services are ineffective and actually harmful to many unemployed people. Where we could have services which help young people to flourish, instead we have governmentality and regulation of behaviour, to no good purpose. This appears to truly be a manifestation of Virginia Eubanks' 'digital poorhouse'.

10.6 An exploration of positive and enabling policies for young Australians

In the previous section, I have clearly been critical of the historical and current policies affecting young unemployed Australians. I do not wish to be unrelentingly negative. As the data from the Mission Australia shows, a majority of young Australians are optimistic about achieving life goals and can identify sources of social support. In this section, I will discuss positive developments over several decades that have resulted in improved service provision and support for young people. I will discuss the development of mental health policies and services in the following section, as this requires more detailed consideration of a number of complex issues.

Before identifying social responses to the needs of adolescents and young adults, it is worth considering the archaeology of how 'youth' has been conceived and constructed from the later part of the 20th Century until the present day. I suggest that the concept of 'youth', or young people as a distinct population group, is very much a post-World War 2 phenomenon. And as Steven Threadgold argues, young people have either been studied as a problem or are portrayed as a distinct group for the marketing of music, entertainment and fashion:

> … youth only becomes 'present' either as trouble or fun (Hebdige 1988, 17–36). The 'youth as trouble' version appears when youth is a problem, in documentary discourse, in news and media, and in 'supposedly disinterested tracts emanating from the social sciences' (1988, 17). The 'youth as fun' version appears with the invention of the teenager to create a post-war consumer market (Threadgold, 2020, p689).

When I first attended university in the early 1970s, only about one in twenty of my generation did so. For everyone else, they left school, often at 15 years old, and went

straight into unskilled work or trade training. It's worth remembering that even nursing training was a form of apprenticeships, and, in the UK, high school graduates were given jobs as 'untrained' schoolteachers. Most men and women married and started families in their 20s, or younger. So, youth as a lengthy transitional period was the luxury of a privileged minority, whereas most school leavers moved straight into adult roles and the expectations associated with these.

I may be generalising somewhat, but my argument is supported by the data from Dan Woodman and Johanna Wyn which were cited in Chapter 6. These showed the great changes in education, work, identity and relationships that occurred between 1976 and 2011 (Woodman & Wyn, 2015). These changes do represent that, for many more people, youth is a longer period of transition as societies require a more educated and skilled workforce, and work is less secure and more precarious. I suggest that these phenomena have also led to the recognition that young people require more supports provided or funded by governments, as they attempt to navigate more complicated communities and societies.

Some of the programs discussed in Chapter 8 are representative of governments' responses to the complexities of transition – for example, the South Australian Education Program for Unemployed Youth (EPUY) and the national Community Youth Support Scheme (CYSS). While these two programs may not have been terribly effective, they at least represented some recognition of the problem of youth unemployment, and some responsibility by governments to ameliorate this.

There are other areas where services for young people have developed and improved since the 1980s and I will briefly enumerate these, with the comment that most were non-existent when I began my social work career in 1979.

Education support – during the 1980s four Australian states raised the minimum age for leaving from 15 to 17. Some jurisdictions now provide alternative schooling options for young people with different learning needs, for example South Australian Government high schools offer 'Flexible Learning Options', where students can undertake work experience

and accredited vocational training. Student counselling and learning support has become more specialised and professionalised, rather than an add-on to teachers' classroom roles.

Wellbeing and health literacy – Woodman and Wyn note that, in many areas, the physical health of young Australians has improved. This is supported by contemporary Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) data which show, for example, decreases over time in injury death rates from accidents and violence, decreases in tobacco use and use of illicit drugs (AIHW 2020). Some areas are still of concern, including high levels of alcohol use and increasing incidence of obesity.

Income support – Youth Allowance was introduced in 1998, replacing a range of payments for students under 25 years-old and unemployed people under 22 years-old. It provided for higher rates of payment for young people needing to live away from home for study and for those considered independent of family means tests. The independent category included young people unable to live at home due to family conflict and other difficult circumstances. While this explicitly acknowledges the need for some young people to live apart from their families, it can be seen from the figures cited earlier in this chapter that the current rate of Youth Allowance is well below the poverty line.

Housing – young people can face homelessness due to family breakdown but can also face housing stress and insecurity due to high rents and housing shortages. Some needs are addressed by nongovernment (government supported) agencies providing emergency and supported accommodation. As with many other youth-specific services, most of these agencies were only established from the 1980s onwards.

10.7 Current mental health policies and services

In Chapter 5, I discussed the establishment of headspace youth mental services, which began in the late 2000s. This has represented a recognition of the high prevalence of mental health distress among young Australians and the need to provide local services designed to meet the needs of adolescents and young adults. I have expressed some reservations about whether the services are meeting these needs efficaciously, particularly as the data show, based on the short duration of contact with clinicians in many cases, that

it has been difficult to clearly establish positive clinical outcomes (Jorm, 2015; Allison et al, 2016). I will outline ideas for how this issue might be addressed in the next chapter.

Australian mental health policies over the past three decades have included many proposals for reform, beginning with the first National Mental Health Strategy in 1992 and the accompanying five-year National Mental Health Plan. These strategies and plans are developed under the auspices of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) Health Council, comprised of the eight Commonwealth, State and Territory Ministers for Health. The current (fifth) plan covers the years from 2017 to 2022 (COAG, 2017). Given the complexities of the Australian Federal political system, the strategy documents are high-level and are much concerned with the responsibilities of each level of government and funding arrangements. As such, the current plan understandably focusses on people with more complex mental health conditions, who are consumers of services provided by the States and Territories.

For the purposes of this thesis, a current and useful policy document is the 2020 report of the Commonwealth Government Productivity Commission Inquiry into Mental Health. The Commission is a statutory body independent of the Parliament which has conducted a wide range of enquiries in economic, social and environmental issues. The Inquiry was conducted from 2018 to 2020 and, like the many Senate Committee Inquiries which have been referred to in this thesis, it has incorporated input from agencies, experts and consumers.

The report highlights issues that have been canvassed in this thesis. The prevalence of mental health distress among younger people is noted, with people aged 15 to 25 years experiencing the highest rates of depression (seven per cent) and substance use disorders (six per cent) compared to other population groups. The prevalence of anxiety disorders is also high (eight per cent), but is nearly as high in the 25 to 35 years age group. Unemployed people of all ages report far greater levels of psychological distress (25 per cent high or very high) than people in training, education and employment. Regarding young people, the report notes that:

> The years of 16 to 24 are an important transition point in a person's life regardless of their mental health. Many are studying, but some are also (or alternatively) working - usually on a non-permanent basis in industries such as retail, tourism and the food

> services sector that are particularly vulnerable to external economic shocks and sharp changes in the need for employees. Of all age groups, young adults have the highest rates of mental illness - 26% of 16-24 year-olds have an anxiety, mood or substance use disorder - and report relatively high rates of psychological distress (Productivity Commission, 2020, p48).

The report is also critical of employment services and welfare conditionality:

> We identified additional reforms that should also be considered for people with mental illness who participate in Australia's current employment support service - jobactive, Disability Employment Services and the Community Development Program. These services tend to place participants with mental illness (including those with complex needs) into programs that offer limited assistance with job searching and penalise participants when they fail to complete mutual obligation requirements, where required (Productivity Commission, 2020, pp52-53).

The Inquiry has made specific recommendations for supporting young people with mental health distress in social and economic participations. These have included the expansion of Individual Placement and Support (IPS) programs and will be discussed in the next chapter.

10.8 Recent and contemporary developments in mental health

While I have commented on the lack of comprehensive and coordinated policies addressing the mental health needs of younger Australians, it must be acknowledged that, in recent decades, there have been progressive developments. The promotion of good mental health and wellbeing has been significant, and this has enabled broader understanding that mental health is not just about individual disorders or illnesses. In this section I will briefly discuss some key issues – positive psychology, prevention, and mental health literacy. In the next chapter, I will expand on how these could be improved and enhanced, and incorporated in policy.

The concept of positive psychology is not particularly new. Many professionals in human services, including social workers, have incorporated practices that focus on improving wellbeing and happiness, and which emphasise individuals' strengths, rather than their problems or deficits. A leading proponent of the positive psychology movement is Martin Seligman, who has developed academic and practice frameworks as well as writing many popular books. In the introduction to the Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology, Ed Denier acknowledges Seligman's contribution to the field:

> In another sense, positive psychology is less than a decade old. Around 1999, Martin E. P. Seligman began meeting with a group of scholars to form the positive psychology network. Seligman's audacious plan was to bring together the researchers and practitioners who were working on human strengths and positive attributes rather than focusing exclusively on human problems. This plan was amazingly effective, as a new field has emerged around the world in a matter of a few years (Denier, 2009, p8).

Positive psychology provides a foundation for the purpose of this thesis – that if young unemployed people are enabled to participate in work, training and education, then there are benefits not only for themselves, but also for society. As Denier puts it:

> Although individualism allows people freedom, once material needs are met there is little guidance as to what should come next. Furthermore, individualism can create its own societal problems when individuals are not given sufficient grounding in positive psychology because they can make individual choices that are harmful to the group or nation. When individualism is pursued without concern for the well-being of the broader society, the outcomes can be destructive. Positive psychology emphasizes not only the actualization of the individual, but development within the framework of his or her contributions to other people and the world. Thus, our discipline is poised to answer questions that are pivotal to building healthier societies (Denier, 2009, p8).

In Chapter 7, I discussed the social determinants of mental health in the context of inequality and disadvantage. The evidence from research such as the Christchurch Health and Development Study clearly shows the effects of entrenched childhood disadvantage on the long term mental and economic wellbeing of people, included higher rates and duration of unemployment.

Prevention and/or early intervention strategies for young people experiencing mental health distress have been identified in the National Mental Health Strategies and the associated five-year plans. The establishment of headspace has represented a good response to this need, but access to these services is by no means universal. The Productivity Commission report cited above provides a comprehensive framework for intervention and support through the life course, including programs for parents and school age children. These recommendations will be examined in more detail in the next chapter.

I would describe mental health literacy as having two components. Firstly, it is important that individuals are able to understand their own mental health, and if distressed able to seek appropriate therapy and support. The second component is community awareness

about the importance of good mental health, better understanding of the high prevalence of anxiety and depression and the need to reduce stigma.

In the next chapter, I will argue for the need to further improve mental health literacy, particularly in educational institutions and employment services. However, I acknowledge that during my working life community mental health literacy has improved greatly, with mental distress and ill-health no longer seen in clinical terms of madness or illness.

The development of the internet since the 1990s has made a (mostly) positive contribution to awareness of mental health issues, with freely available access to information and online support and/or counselling. As with most things concerning the World Web Wide, some caution might be exercised. An early study of online mental health literacy (Christensen & Griffiths, 2000) identified many useful websites and tools that could be used by consumers and practitioners, but they also identified the potential of some sites to provide misleading or inconsistent information. Another risk, as with many other health sites, is that people may use 'Dr Google' to misdiagnose themselves. A later qualitative study of an Australian youth mental health forum facilitated by Reachout! found very positive results and participant outcomes, attributed to the communications being moderated by mental health professionals (Webb, Burns & Collin, 2008).

11. UTOPIA AS METHOD:
THE ARCHITECTURAL MODE

11.1 Introduction

> What, then, needs to change? Well, just about everything. I sketch here some principles and some institutional conditions: human flourishing; equality of condition; sustainability; rethinking what counts as production and wealth; quality of work; revaluing care; recognizing unpaid work; a regulative and enabling democratic state; and a guaranteed basic income and universal child benefit, both as a goal and as a transitional strategy. I explore something of what these changes might enable, individually and in our relationships with each other (Levitas, 2013, p199).

This chapter is guided by some of the principles outlined above by Ruth Levitas in her introduction to 'Utopia as architecture'. The chapter is constructed around the four thematic chapters (5-8) in this thesis, by considering the issues in regard to the topic and research questions. Before this discussion, it is time to revisit and discuss the title of this thesis. This was chosen to be deliberately bland and open-ended, not pre-empting arguments which have been developed in the course of researching policy and the literature, so that the arguments can stand up for themselves.

'Improving participation support for disadvantaged young Australians' – this is meant to suggest that improvement is needed, particularly in coordinating policies and services. 'Participation' is the broad description that can apply to employment, training, education, social connectedness and combinations of these. 'Support' includes services, such as benefits, employment, education and mental health, but also encompasses the concept of society and communities that encourage young people to flourish. This is the opposite of the conditionality imposed by the 'tutelary state' (Fletcher & Flint 2018).

While this thesis is primarily focussed on the association between mental health issues and unemployment, I have chosen to use 'disadvantaged' as an umbrella term. This enables a wider consideration of issues facing young people, including intergenerational and inherited inequality, poverty and the social determinants of health and wellbeing.

The choice to examine the Australian population aged 16-24 years was determined at the beginning of my earlier Masters research. I had originally considered looking at the 16 to 40-year-old age group, but I ruled this out as presenting challenges of complexity and unwieldiness. The chosen cohort represents the critical transitions of adolescence and young adulthood and, as has been described in the previous chapter, this is the age group with the highest prevalence of mental health distress. It is also relevant to consider that transition to adulthood in Australia, and indeed in most developed and still-developing countries, is prolonged by young people undertaking more years of formal education and training. Economic trends have also contributed to young people being much less likely to be financially independent – these forces include the very low level of income support payments, stagnant wages, precarious employment and high housing costs.

In late 2020, I gave a presentation to postgraduate colleagues in my university college. This discussed the challenges I have experienced in developing and finalising this thesis regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. A preliminary finding was that the pandemic has exposed many inequalities. In Australia, the immediate lockdowns which commenced in March 2020 disproportionately affected people in precarious and casual employment, especially women and young people. Although the strict lockdowns imposed in Australia in early 2020 prevented widespread contagion, several outbreaks occurred, notably in aged care facilities. In many cases these were attributed to casual staff, such as cleaners, having to work across several locations including quarantine hotels established for travellers returning from other countries.

The Commonwealth Government's responses to the pandemic have been discussed earlier in this thesis, with the temporary increases to JobSeeker and Youth Allowance payments and the introduction of the JobKeeper subsidy to some, but not all, employees who were stood down while businesses ceased to operate. JobKeeper ceased at the end of March 2021 and, as noted in the previous chapter, the JobSeeker supplement, at that time $150 per fortnight, was also discontinued and replaced by a permanent increase of just $50 per fortnight.

The 2020-2021 Australian Budget was handed down in October 2020, having been delayed from the usual date in May of each year. In its initiatives in response to the pandemic, the

Commonwealth Government focussed on tax cuts, business incentives and major infrastructure projects. In my college presentation, I identified how this Budget missed opportunities to address increasing unemployment and inequality. Direct spending on social housing, social and aged care, local government and environmental projects would not only create jobs, but also rapidly provide stimulus and spending in local economies.

By late 2020 the first vaccines for the coronavirus were being released across the World. Australia emerged as one nation that had successfully contained the virus, admittedly at some economic cost. As might be expected, ideas have been developed about how Australia might recover post-pandemic, and how different policy settings can address longstanding problems. One of the first publications on this theme was a collection of essays titled 'What Happens Next?' (Dawson & McCalman Eds., 2020). In early 2021, the economist, Ross Garnaut, published 'Reset – Restoring Australia after the Pandemic Recession' (Garnaut, 2021). Another book, published well before the pandemic, is 'Utopia for Realists' by the Dutch social historian, Rutger Bregman (Bregman, 2017). Each of these publications discusses many of the principles and institutional conditions identified by Ruth Levitas and are useful contemporary resources for the discussion in this chapter. Bregman's work is written in a journalistic style but is well referenced with data and academic research. However, I noted that, despite its title and focus on the construction of different policies and social conditions, this book does not reference Levitas' earlier works.

In Chapter 9, I explored some of the dangers and limitations of utopian ideas. Ideas, even those proposing gradual and incremental change in policies, will be described by their opponents as wishful thinking. Increases in expenditure by governments are characterised in the dominant neoliberal paradigm as unaffordable or unsustainable. What I aim to demonstrate in this chapter is that proposals for change can involve redeployment of existing resources or modest increases in funding. Furthermore, investments in prevention, early intervention and alleviation of hardship can result in long-term savings. These are important factors considering the high costs of inpatient hospital treatment, crisis intervention, and incarceration. If the social and economic participation of young Australians can be improved, there will be benefits to productivity, prosperity and social capital.

11.2 Ideas for change and improvement – Theme 1, mental health

In April 2021, the head of mental health for the Central Adelaide Local Health Network (CAHLN), John Mendoza, resigned from his post. Mendoza has been a long-time advocate for the need to substantially reform mental health services across Australia, having previously served as the chair of the National Mental Health Commission. The issues which prompted the resignation were specific to CAHLN, the regional division of the South Australian Government health department which includes the State's largest hospital, the Royal Adelaide Hospital (RAH). They related to the rapid increase in emergency mental health presentations at the RAH during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the subsequent pressures on clinicians at the RAH and in community mental health teams providing preventative and post discharge follow up and care. Although emergency and crisis mental health services are not the focus of this thesis, Mendoza's parting comments to the online journal, InDaily, provide a pertinent introduction to the discussion in this section:

> Mental health reform has been one of those policy areas in Australia where we have repeatedly laid out very good plans for what we intend to do as a nation – as states and territories and as a whole nation – since 1992.
>
> There have been over 150 reports and reviews of national mental health service issues since that grand commitment back in 1992 (Chapman, 2021).

Here I will discuss two recent investigations into mental health, and their recommendations for change relevant to young Australians experiencing common mental health distress in the form of anxiety and depression. The first is the 2020 Commonwealth Productivity Commission report which has been cited in the previous chapter (Productivity Commission, 2020). The second is the Victorian State Government Royal Commission into Mental Health Services which was conducted from 2019 to 2020 (Government of Victoria, 2021). In Commonwealth constitutional monarchies – Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United Kingdom - Royal Commissions are established by governments under the auspices of the British Crown's representatives (Governors or Governors General). They are substantially different from parliamentary inquiries, such as those conducted by the Australian Senate, in that they are separate and independent from parliaments and politicians and can exercise considerable judicial-like powers, including compelling people to appear as witnesses (the

actual establishment of a Commission and its terms of reference can be nevertheless highly political and partisan).

The Victorian Royal Commission report contains 65 recommendations. Many of these relate to people living with severe mental health conditions or illnesses as these are the responsibility of the State Government public hospitals and community mental health services. However, some recommendations are highly relevant to the needs of the broader population requiring some form of mental health support or care in their local community. The report identifies major problems in access to primary mental health care due to location and financial disadvantage. Proposed solutions include the development of person-centred models of care, which also recognise the involvement of families and carers. A state-wide Mental Health and Wellbeing Division would be created within the State Department of Health, with responsibilities to work with other government services such as public housing. Eight regional Mental Health and Wellbeing governance boards would be established to develop and coordinate government, nongovernment and private practitioner services.

The Royal Commission report contains a recommendation (Recommendation 20) which addresses the mental health needs of young people:

1. By the end of 2022, establish a dedicated service stream for young people, consisting of Youth Area Mental Health and Wellbeing Services, within the 13 Infant, Child and Youth Area Mental Health and Wellbeing Services…
2. Ensure Youth Area Mental Health and Wellbeing Services are available for young people aged 12 to 25 (until a person's 26th birthday), with age boundaries and transitions to be applied flexibly by services in partnership with young people and their families, carers and supporters.
3. Support the development of formal partnerships, step-up and step-down referral pathways, shared staff and infrastructure and co-location between headspace centres and Infant, Child and Youth Area Mental Health and Wellbeing Services.
4. Work with the Commonwealth Government, headspace National and Primary Health Networks to ensure that Infant, Child and Youth Area Mental Health and Wellbeing Services become the preferred providers of headspace centres where they exist or are established in Victoria (Government of Victoria, 2021, p56).

This recommendation provides a clear timeline for implementation. It also proposes a blueprint for service integration. This appears to address the lack of coordination between

government and government funded services and headspace centres. This could also address some of the inconsistencies and perceived shortcomings in clinical outcomes of headspace operations. In May 2021, the Victorian Government handed down its 2021-2022 Budget, which included a significant financial commitment to implementing the recommendations of the Royal Commission over several years. Some of the proposed changes to programs will be discussed later in this chapter.

The Productivity Commission report on mental health understandably has a different focus to the Victorian Royal Commission, as it covers national issues and has a greater focus on economic aspects of mental health. There are nevertheless some common elements in both reports. These include recommendations for more person-centred approaches to services, prevention and early intervention, and for services to be commissioned and managed at local and regional levels to reflect and address community needs. Both reports also acknowledge the importance of social determinants, such as secure housing and income support, to assist people in recovery and maintaining good mental health and wellbeing.

The Productivity Commission report includes a chapter on youth economic participation. This acknowledges the circumstances of 16 to 24-year-olds and the higher prevalence of mental health distress compared to older age groups. The importance of participation and successful transition to independence are concisely summarised:

> The years between 16 and 24 are an important transition point in a person's life. Many people in this age group are leaving school and moving on to tertiary education and/or work. Their economic participation during this period can affect their outcomes in later life. Many people also experience mental ill-health during this period. About three-quarters of adult mental health disorders emerge by the time people are 25 years old. Mental ill-health can negatively affect a person's ability to participate economically and socially and disrupt their transition from education to work (Productivity Commission, 2020, p255).

The report describes and addresses many of the issues discussed in this thesis, which affect different groups of the younger demographic. The discussion includes students in higher and vocational education, unemployed people and those in work, although the recommendation (Recommendation 6) only proposes improving mental health support for university students and trainees and apprentices undertaking vocational education and

training (VET). The report highlights how mental ill-health can adversely affect other groups and lead to loss of work or failure to complete education. The IPS trials are discussed, and the report notes that the outcomes of these are somewhat mixed.

The Productivity Commission report considers that young unemployed people not in education, employment or training (NEET) are much more likely to experience lifelong disengagement and disadvantage, including poor mental health. A new approach is suggested, with which I concur:

> As a first step, being able to capture data on those who left school early and an understanding of why they did so would enable a more targeted and responsive approach to better support these young people. The next step would be to access and identify those youth not in education or employment to be able to direct them to support. The only point of contact with government for these youth is likely to be Centrelink and this may provide the best opportunity to reach out and direct them to appropriate programs (Productivity Commission, 2020, p591).

As John Mendoza has said, over three decades, numerous blueprints have been developed for reform and improvements in mental health. So, why has reform not happened faster, even within discrete jurisdictions such as the State of Victoria? I believe a significant problem is the complexity of health systems in Australia, which I have described in Chapter 5. The State and Territory Governments administer local health networks (LHNs) which are responsible for hospitals and community health services. Other primary health care services are commissioned and coordinated by Commonwealth Government funded primary health networks (PHNs). Additionally, there are mental health services provided by general practitioners and other private providers – psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, occupational therapists and mental health nurses.

To illustrate the complexity of health systems, I will describe the current situation in my home state, South Australia (SA), which in 2020 had a population of 1.77 million – approximately 6.9 per cent of the national population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021). The State Government health department (SA Health) has five health networks, three for metropolitan Adelaide, Country Health SA (CHSA) which covers rural and remote areas, and the state-wide Women's and Children's Health Network (WCHN), which among other functions is responsible for child and adolescent mental health services. There are two

PHNs, one covering metropolitan Adelaide and the other covering rural SA. Within both CHSA and the PHNs there are additional regional and local administrative structures.

It is difficult to ignore the potential inefficiencies and additional costs caused by these labyrinthine structures, with each organisation having its own governance and management executives. I can attest to this from professional and family experience. Some years ago, I worked for WCHN as a project manager for the Commonwealth Government funded National Perinatal Depression Initiative. The role included developing information and communication strategies, and training midwives at the Adelaide Women's and Children's Hospital (part of WCHN) and two of the large Adelaide public hospitals providing birthing services, each of which were in different LHNs. I was disconcerted to learn that each site had its own legacy electronic patient records, so if any pregnant woman or new mother transferred from one system to another (a not uncommon event), she would have to be accompanied by a paper file. More recently in 2019, my daughter, a Registered Nurse, transferred from one public hospital to another in a different LHN. She was required to provide original or certified copies of all her documentation to human resources in the new LHN.

Both the reports discussed in this section have identified problems regarding inequities in mental health and the lack of clear pathways to accessing services. The Productivity Commission suggests that piecemeal 'renovating' of mental health is likely to have limited efficacy, and proposes that each State and Territory establish Regional Commissioning Authorities (RCAs) to allocate pooled funds for mental health services:

> In this final report, the Productivity Commission recommends a flexible approach that would allow each jurisdiction — States, Territories and the Commonwealth — to determine as a priority reform, if, and how, planning and service delivery at a regional level can occur cooperatively with current PHN–LHN groupings. If this can occur, then it should be tried and tested. If such cooperation is not possible, or if it is tried and proves unsuccessful in driving improved consumer outcomes, then the Productivity Commission considers that the creation of RCAs (under the State or Territory Government), with no involvement by PHNs in mental health commissioning, offers the best chance for getting people the services that they need at a regional level (Productivity Commission, 2020, p56).

This recommendation appears much like the regional services model proposed in Victoria. It may well be that Victoria will implement the model sooner as there is a specific implementation date of 2022. It is possible that the Productivity Commission recommendation could be adopted across Australia. The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that the two levels of government can work together through the National Cabinet process, which replaced the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), and which during 2020 and 2021 has managed emerging crises with relatively quick responses and a high degree of cooperation. There would be initial implementation costs with such a reform, but in time these should be repaid with savings and efficiencies. More importantly, a higher level of accountability can be applied to services and users would only have to navigate one system rather than multiple systems.

11.3 Ideas for change and improvement – Theme 2, inequality

In Chapter 6, I described aspects of inequality in Australia that particularly affect the lives of young people. Inequality is a global issue, as demonstrated by the data that show wide differences in social and economic equality even in developed (OECD) countries and the general correlation between high levels of inequality and poorer physical and mental health. In the previous section, I have suggested how inequities in provision of mental health services might be addressed. In this section, I will discuss how three facets of inequality experienced by young people could be addressed in Australia. These are income, housing and opportunity.

11.3.1 Income inequality

In Australia, the framework for setting minimum wages is administered by the Commonwealth Government Fair Work Commission, with rates adjusted annually. In 2021, for a worker over 21 years of age, this is typically approximately $20 (AUD20) per hour. For comparison, New Zealand has a similar rate (NZD$20), equivalent to AUD$19 per hour (Retail NZ, 2021). In the United Kingdom, the national minimum wage for 18 to 20-year-olds is GBP6.56 (approximately AUD12), rising to GBP8.91 (approximately AUD16) for workers aged 23 or older (Advice, Conciliation and Arbitration Service, 2021). In the United States, minimum wages can vary across states from as little as USD7.25 (AUD10), up to USD15 (AUD19), in a small number of states (Labor Law Center, 2021).

There is a longstanding narrative from conservative politician and employer groups in Australia that minimum wages are too high, and that this is a causal factor in high youth unemployment. What is rarely stated is what should be an appropriate living wage to enable a person to maintain a decent, if basic, standard of living. The comparisons above need to be considered with caution, as there will be differences in living costs even within countries, as well as taxation rates. Not everyone will receive only the minimum rates and could receive other allowances or benefits, such as health insurance. For example, in Australia a 21-year-old casual worker will generally receive a 25 per cent casual 'loading' in lieu of sick and holiday pay.

Let us consider a hypothetical example of a young Australian worker in retail or hospitality (where most young people under 25 are employed), working 30 hours per week for a casual wage of $25 per hour, which includes the 25 percent loading. His or her gross weekly pay would be $750 per week, which roughly equates to the pay of a non-casual employee working 38 hours per week on the minimum wage. From this gross amount, $90 will be payable in income tax, and the person would be most unlikely to receive any government concessions for public transport or health costs. We can see that, with an after-tax income of $640 per week, the young worker is approximately $90 above the Australian poverty line of $548 in 2020.

In this example, while the young worker is somewhat above the poverty line, they may just be getting by. Housing costs in Australia are high. According to property information firm, SQM Research, the average rent in Australian capital cities is $559 per week for a three-bedroom house and $410 for a two-bedroom flat (Dabu, 2021). So even if this worker is sharing accommodation, which is not a suitable option for many people, they would be likely to be paying $150 to $200 per week in rent, or approximately a quarter to one third of their after-tax income (NB: this firm does not clearly identify the sources of these data, but I have no reason to doubt that the dollar figures are fairly accurate).

This case study suggests an optimistic scenario – that the young worker has consistent and regular hours of work. However, as has been discussed earlier in this thesis, many young people are likely to be casually employed, with fewer and irregular hours. This situation has

been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. In an update on their 2020 national youth survey, Mission Australia reported effects on employment:

> When the COVID-19 pandemic hit Australia in early 2020, one of the most immediate effects was lockdowns, followed by substantial job losses. However, these effects were not felt uniformly. Women, young people (15-24 years old) and low-wage workers were more likely to be working in industries affected by the COVID-19 lockdowns. Further, individuals and families experiencing disadvantage prior to the pandemic were more likely to face risk of poorer outcomes related to COVID-19. (Tiller et al, 2021, p11).

The report also notes that while economic conditions in Australia had substantially improved by late 2020 there are still issues with unemployment and underemployment:

> In November 2020 Australia saw a record high number of jobs available, yet for every job vacancy there were four unemployed people vying for the position, leaving a majority of those jobseekers without paid work - a burden more heavily felt by people experiencing long-term unemployment. When also considering underemployed workers, the number of people competing for jobs increased to around 12 people per vacancy. Underemployment is defined as someone who desires, and is able to work additional hours. Since 2010 underemployment has risen from 7.8% to 9.0% in January 2020. While the COVID-19 pandemic saw underemployment surge to a record 13.6% in April 2020, this was almost exclusively driven by the reduction of hours in full-time employees. By December 2020, the underemployment rate had returned to near pre-COVID levels, a reflection of full-time employees returning to their original hours. However, in December 2020 there were still more than 1.25 million people underemployed, 1 million of whom were in part-time employment (Tiller et al, 2021, pp8-9)

Unemployment benefits in Australia have historically represented a safety net and can provide financial support for people in casual or part-time employment. One of the positive design features of the current system is that the JobSeeker payment, $620.80 per fortnight in April 2021, allows recipients to earn up to $150 per fortnight, with reductions in the allowance of 50 to 60 cents in the dollar for earnings above this amount (Services Australia 2021). This is substantially different from, for example, the UK, where an unemployed single person under 25 can receive GBP344 Universal Credit (UC) per calendar month with a 'Work Allowance' of GBP293 per month. Any earnings above this allowance reduce UC by GBP0.63 (Department of Work and Pensions 2021). The comparative amounts in Australian dollars, calculated fortnightly, are AUD295 UC with a Work Allowance of AUD250 before UC is reduced. It can be seen that the basic benefit in the UK is very low, but there are greater

incentives to work. However, as I have discussed, minimum wages in the UK are considerably lower. So perhaps conditions for many unemployed people in Australia, while not great, are not as dire as they might be.

JobSeeker Allowance is not payable for a fortnight where an individual earns more than $1,217. If we reconsider the hypothetical case study, the young worker earning a gross of $750 per week is clearly not eligible for any additional income support. If they had been receiving JobSeeker Allowance prior to starting their job of 30 hours per week, then they would be able to remain on the Centrelink payment system for 13 weeks, even if not actually receiving income support. They would also meet Mutual Obligation requirements as they are working 30 hours a week.

If this person's hours of work subsequently reduce, then they would be entitled to reclaim JobSeeker Allowance, subject to the income test as described in this section. However, they would also need to re-register with a Jobactive provider and would most likely be subject to the Mutual Obligation regime requiring additional activities with no financial benefit. They may also wait several weeks while their claim is being processed, which can place them in financial hardship if they do not have savings or support from family and friends. Such circumstances can lead to people being trapped in a cycle of poverty. How could these situations be addressed?

11.3.2 'Build Back Fairer': the 2020 Marmot Review

In late 2020 the UK Institute of Health Equity published a blueprint for a post-pandemic future (Marmot, Allen, Goldblatt, Herd & Morrison, 2020). The report contains detailed data on how the pandemic had increased health and social inequality, with recommendations about how these can be addressed. The prevalence of COVID-19 and mortality was far higher in the UK than in Australia and poorer people and minority groups were disproportionately affected. Although social circumstances in the UK are different to Australia, for example wages and benefits as cited in the previous section, there are many parallels in the facets of inequality, such as how the pandemic affected precarious workers in regard to income and higher risks of infection.

One chapter in the report argues for 'Creating fair employment and good work for all' (Marmot et al, 2020). Among the recommendations relevant to Australia are increases to minimum wages, a better social safety net, and a reduction in precarious and poor-quality employment. The report also advocates for improvements in labour market policies and support for unemployed people affected by the pandemic, technological change and the UK's decision to leave the European Union:

> In many cases the geographical areas and groups of people who have experienced higher rates of infection and mortality from COVID-19 are now at risk from the health impacts of unemployment, poverty and low wages – the social care workforce being a case in point. Targeted support for wages and employment as part of a universal approach to fostering good quality and adequately paid employment will support health as well as livelihoods (Marmot et al, 2020, p39).

I suggest these proposals would address physical health and wellbeing, for example people will be able to afford better quality food and housing. They would also improve mental health and wellbeing negatively affected by precarity.

11.3.3 Income inequality – a case for universal basic income?

The concept of a universal basic income (UBI), also called guaranteed minimum income (GMI), has been around for some time. Ross Garnaut points out that among its early proponents were Milton and Rose Friedman, who had suggested a 'negative income tax', which would replace traditional social security and welfare provisions. I was surprised to learn from Rutger Bregman that another enthusiastic supporter of the idea in the 1960s was former US Republican President Richard Nixon, with two iterations of legislation he proposed being defeated by the opposition Democratic Party in the Senate.

I have a sketchy memory of doing a tutorial presentation on GMI during my undergraduate studies in social work. My recollection is that my conclusion was equivocal, based on prevailing social attitudes about 'money for nothing' (those pesky dole bludgers!) and the probability that middle- and high-income earners would see no actual benefit to themselves, as whatever they received in GMI would be taken back, and more, through increased income taxes. While I remain sceptical, I will discuss UBI in this section and how a version of it could be introduced and integrated with the Australian social security system.

Before outlining how UBI might be applied in Australia, it is worth summarising the views of Rutger Bregman and Ross Garnaut, who are strong advocates for it. Bregman provides case studies, where he argues that 'free money' not only benefits individuals and families but also communities. A small pilot program in inner London gave grants of up to GBP3,000 to homeless men. These were administered by social workers, with money provided for specific items such as training, mobile phones, dental treatment and accommodation. Nearly all the participants were able to make long-term improvements in their circumstances and evaluations indicated that there were large savings in policing, criminal justice and crisis services. These represented many multiples of the original 'investment'.

Bregman also discusses several large-scale pilot GMI programs that were conducted in North America during the 1960s. These had provided the impetus for President Nixon's proposed welfare reforms. A striking result of these was that there were little reductions in participants undertaking paid work and, when these did occur, it was usually because people were taking more time for parenting, education or setting up self-employment enterprises:

> One of the perks of a basic income is that it would free the poor from the welfare trap and spur them to seek a paid job with true opportunities for growth and advancement. Since basic income is unconditional, and will not be taken away or reduced in the event of gainful employment, their circumstances can only improve (Bregman, 2017, p44).

Ross Garnaut's proposed UBI is contained within prescriptions for economic reform in post-pandemic Australia. These include policies for full employment which would be generated by renewable energy projects, better funding of vocational education and training, mitigation of greenhouse emissions and substantial changes to taxation. The UBI would be facilitated by the integration of the social security and taxation systems.

Garnaut outlines a model for what he calls Australian Income Security (AIS) that would pay individuals the equivalent of JobSeeker Allowance, which is currently approximately $16,000 per year. There would be additional amounts for older people and those living with disabilities, to assist people with job search or training, as well as for dependent children. Any income above the AIS amounts would not be reduced but will be taxed. Garnaut suggests this tax rate should be between 32.5 and 37 percent, rising to 45 percent for

people with earnings over $180,000 per year. In the proposal, AIS is not entirely universal, it would not be paid to individuals earning more than $250,000 per year or with assets/wealth above $2 million.

Garnaut's proposal is persuasive, as it also identifies considerable savings in administering what are currently complex systems. I think there would be challenges in gaining public support, especially considering prevailing attitudes to the 'undeserving poor', i.e. unemployed young people. However, we already have a similar form of payment in the Australian social security system, the Family Tax Benefits (FTB) which are payable for dependent children.

The Commonwealth Government provision of a payment for children was part of the 1940s social service legislation. It was originally called Child Endowment and was paid to all families/parents, albeit at quite low levels. This changed in the 1980s, with Family Income Supplement (later Family Allowance Supplement) paying higher amounts to low-income families, whether the parent(s) were working or not (Daniels, 2009).

The current form of FTB was introduced in 2000, as part of a broad range of changes to taxation, including the introduction of a national goods and services tax. Most low- and middle-income families receive the payment fortnightly, but it can also be paid annually via the taxation system when the parent or carer lodges their income tax return, hence the title of the payment. It is not entirely universal, being income tested and conditional on shared care arrangements. A separated parent or carer with primary care of children is also required to seek child support from the other biological or adoptive parent.

The mechanism of the payment is simple and FTB can provide substantial support for the cost of raising children. For example, in the 2020-2021 financial year, a family with a total income of $55,628, with one child aged under 12 years and another aged between 13 and 19 years could receive FTB Part A totalling $12,000 per year. A separate FTB Part B of up to $3,200 can also be paid to sole parents and couple families where one partner has a low part-time income (Services Australia, 2021).

Proponents of UBI may do well to cite the FTB system as an acceptable form of how such payments could work. As with Ross Garnaut's proposed AIS, basic payment is made up to

relatively high levels of income, the tapering (reduction) of payment is only 20 percent of each dollar earned above the family income test limit, and payments are integrated with the income tax system. Perhaps even more important is the potential for UBI/AIS to redeploy resources from the compliance regime, instead helping the participation of young people in work or training:

> The AIS would greatly simplify administration of taxation and social security for most Australians. Compliance costs would be reduced – both for taxpayers and the bureaucracy. There would be no work-search tests. This would save the time of officials, the unemployed and those businesses having to deal with artificial applications for non-existent jobs. The role of Centrelink officials would be to assist people in finding jobs, rather than policing failure to search hard enough (Garnaut, 2021, p174).

11.3.4 Housing inequality

In discussing income inequality earlier in this section, I identified the high cost of housing in Australia and how young people reliant on income support or on low wages will have difficulty finding and maintaining accommodation. Each year, Anglicare Australia, a national faith-based charity and service provider, conducts a 'snapshot' survey of all rental vacancies across the country. The most recent survey, published in April 2021, found listings for a total of 74,266 properties. Based on affordability calculated as no more than 30 percent of income, the survey found no properties that were affordable for a single person receiving Youth Allowance and only three, all share houses, that would be affordable for a single person receiving JobSeeker Allowance. This situation is only slightly less dire for other low-income groups, for example the survey found only 97 properties that would be affordable for a sole parent with two children. It should be noted that the survey was conducted in March 2021, just before the Coronavirus Supplement of $150 per fortnight ceased and was replaced by the rise to Youth Allowance and JobSeeker payments of $50 per fortnight.

The survey argues that the private market has not worked to provide affordable housing, in spite of the very generous tax concessions provided to landlords:

> Governments must again take up their responsibility to ensure affordable homes for every Australian. This is highlighted by the plight facing people on the minimum wage, who have seen affordability plummet this year and are likely to see it continue to shrink. Wages have been stagnant for years now, and with no growth in incomes, a

> guaranteed supply of affordable rentals will be critical to those in low-paid and insecure work – as well as those on government income support.
>
> The shortfall of affordable homes across Australia is massive. The Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute has shown that we need 433,400 social and affordable rentals just to make up for that shortfall. To get ahead of that shortfall for the future, the Everybody's Home campaign is calling for 500,000 social and affordable rentals (Anglicare, 2021, pp15-16).

Anglicare also make a case that investment in social housing would provide much needed economic and employment stimulus in the post-pandemic era. It is important to remember that public housing was not always designed as a form of welfare. For example, in South Australia, the State Government Housing Trust (now called Housing SA) was established after World War 2, to build housing for workers who were needed to fill jobs in the rapidly expanding manufacturing industries. The Trust also provided housing for government employees in regional towns.

Here I will present a scenario which shows how affordable housing could be funded. Due to economic factors, including the COVID-19 pandemic, interest rates for borrowing are at historic lows in Australia. The 'cash' rate set by the Reserve Bank of Australia (the central bank) in 2021 is 0.1 per cent per annum. This means that governments and government agencies, which enjoy solid credit ratings, can borrow money at low rates of, typically, less than 2 per cent.

This table is based on construction of a basic one-bedroom flat or townhouse suitable for occupation by a single person. Some assumptions and variables are discussed below the table.

Table 11.1: A hypothetical costing for social housing

Capital cost	**Interest payable per year**	**Fortnightly cost of interest**	**Local government rates $520 per year/water rates $520 per year = $,1040**	**Total**	**Rent assessed as approx. 30% of JobSeeker ($620pf)**	**'Surplus'** **(less $26pf for maintenance and administration)**
$150,000	@1% $1,500	$58pf	$40pf	$98pf	$186pf	$62pf
	@1.5% $2,250	$87pf	$40pf	$127pf	$186pf	$33pf
	@2% S3,000	$116pf	$40pf	$156pf	$186pf	$4pf
					Rent assessed as approx. 30% of JobSeeker ($620 pf) + $150 pf earned income	**'Surplus'** **(less $26pf for maintenance and administration)**
$150,000	@1% $1,500	$58pf	$40pf	$98pf	$231pf	$107pf
	@1.5% $2,250	$87pf	$40pf	$127pf	$231pf	$78pf
	@1.5% $2,250	$116pf	$40pf	$156pf	$231pf	$46pf

The capital cost is estimated and based on cheaper one-bedroom dwellings in metropolitan Adelaide. An assumption is made that flats or townhouses are newly built on government-owned land, either redeveloped single houses on larger blocks, repurposed facilities or greenfield sites. The actual costs of building could be reduced by multiple prefabrications, but equally these could be higher in rural and remote areas. In South Australia, Housing SA pay local government and water rates for each property they manage and, in most cases, water bills are passed on to tenants (SA Housing Authority, 2021). The estimate of rates is based on typical capital value rates in metropolitan Adelaide and minimal water consumption for a single occupant. The assessment of rents is based on Anglicare's calculation that they should be no more than 30 per cent of household income. In practice, for Housing SA tenants, rents are assessed at 25 per cent of all household income. The 'administration etc. fee' is somewhat of a guess, but it can be assumed that maintenance for new properties would be minimal for several years.

I have no doubt that the financial accuracy of these scenarios could be challenged, particularly regarding other towns and cities where land and development prices are much higher. What I have attempted to show here is that building social or public housing need not be a financial black hole and, at worst, can break even. The estimated 'surplus' could be reinvested in further construction or to subsidise tenants with lower incomes.

New dwellings represent both financial and social capital. They can provide a financial stimulus from manufacturing and employment, indeed builders could be required to hire and train young people as part of their contracts. I suggest that the social capital would be great. As the Productivity Commission and others have argued, stable and secure housing is an essential element in maintaining peoples' mental health and wellbeing.

I believe that there is a strong case for the expansion of affordable housing. In Australia, the low interest rates cited above have led to constantly rising house prices. There are high transaction taxes for property purchasing in the form of stamp duties levied by State and Territory Governments, which can add thousands or even tens of thousands of dollars to the cost of purchasing a dwelling. Commonwealth Government taxation policies currently favour landlords who buy properties to rent, in the form of negative gearing. This allows

owners to offset 'losses', including loan interest against income received from rent, as well as any other taxable income including earnings.

In Australia, the level of popular support for reforming housing policy would appear to be high. In 2017, Rebecca Huntley conducted qualitative research across Australia, which examined peoples' experience of the housing market and their attitudes to public housing being expanded:

> I met men and women in different cities and states, living in regional and suburban areas. The responses were remarkably uniform. Despite some continuing stigma, there is strong support for more investment in public housing. There is concern that renters are being exploited by landlords. To provide essential services, we need affordable housing for essential workers. We need to rethink both stamp duty and negative gearing. We need pathways to housing security that aren't just about owning or short-term renting. And we can't let the market be controlled by developers, real estate agents and landlords. We need all levels of government to play a bigger, more effective role in making the housing market more equitable (Huntley, 2019, p25).

11.3.5 Increasing opportunity

In Chapter 6, I discussed the work of Dan Woodman and Johanna Wyn, which examined issues of generational change and intergenerational inequality. A notable change over four decades has been the increasing numbers of young people engaging in university education, from roughly 5 per cent in the 1970s to 26 per cent in the 2010s (Woodman & Wyn, 2015). The Mission Australia surveys also show that attending university remains an aspiration for a large minority of high school students (Tiller et al, 2020; 2021).

The expansion of university places can generally be considered as representing career and employment opportunities for young Australians, as well as creating a more skilled workforce. Unfortunately, as both Woodman and Wyn and the surveys show, there are fewer entry-level unskilled and semi-skilled jobs for young people, and these are often precarious. This is confirmed by the work of Anglicare on jobs availability (Anglicare, 2020). A further consideration is the evidence that young people from more disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to consider tertiary education as an option. This, over time, is likely to lead to perpetuation or widening of inequalities.

In the previous section, I outlined how increased construction of social housing could provide training and employment opportunities for young people. There are many other areas, such as health and social care, where government funding can also provide these opportunities. In the next chapter, I will briefly discuss the May 2021 Federal Budget. Although it did not provide for any new social housing, the Budget announced a large increase in funding for staffing of residential aged care facilities, with up to 30,000 associated training places. Other measures announced in the Budget included continuation of the Transition to Work program, increased subsidies for apprentice wages, and an expansion of free or low-cost training. These measures could be seen as belated responses to long-term and structural problems, but at least there appears to be some shift towards improving opportunities for young peoples' participation.

11.4 Ideas for change and improvement – Theme 3, conditionality

> What's remarkable is that economists have denounced the unemployment industry all along. Some return-to-work programs even *prolong* unemployment, and the caseworkers appointed to help claimants find a job often cost more than unemployment benefits. Taking a long view, the costs of the surveillance state are higher still. After all, spending a work week attending pointless workshops or performing mindless tasks leaves less time for parenting, education, and looking for a real job…
>
> The current tangle of red tape keeps people trapped in poverty. It actually *produces* dependence. Whereas employees are expected to demonstrate their strengths, social services expect claimants to demonstrate their shortcomings; to prove over and over that an illness is sufficiently debilitating, that a depression is sufficiently bleak, and that chances of getting hired are sufficiently slim. Otherwise your benefits are cut. Forms, interviews, checks, appeals, assessments, consultations, and then still more forms – every application for assistance has its own debasing, money-guzzling protocol (Bregman, 2017, pp95-96).

In imagining a future version of services and benefits for unemployed young Australians, a fundamental issue is what purpose should these serve? As I have discussed in Chapter 9, the evidence from many reports and inquiries, in Australia and elsewhere, is that regimes that emphasise compliance appear to do little to actually help people into work. Activity programs such as job search training and Work for the Dole do not demonstrate strong evidence that they are able to increase either the motivation of unemployed people or employment outcomes. As Rutger Bregman argues, these are costly, and may in fact reduce individuals' capacities and opportunities. This is reflected in recent research by Ruud Gerards and Riccardo Welters, which has examined 18 years of Household and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) data on unemployment and employment outcomes (Gerards & Welters, 2021). The authors contend that the increased application of Mutual Obligation (MOs) from 2001 to 2019 has, even allowing for other variables, decreased positive labour market outcomes for unemployed people over time and these policies are out of step with less conditional policies applied in other countries:

> Using Australian panel data, we find evidence suggesting that the unemployed subjected to MOs sustain their job search intensity, yet take longer to become re-employed and spend less time in employment compared to otherwise identical unemployed searching without MOs. If they find employment, those with MOs are in comparatively lower quality jobs…As breaching MOs is punishable by (partial) withdrawal of income support, MOs constitute a stress inducing eligibility requirement that advocates of 'trust experiments' argue should be eliminated to improve labour

> market outcomes. Our results accord with this view that supports more unconditional trust relations with benefit recipients (Gerards & Welters, 2021, p3)

In regard to the many issues that have been raised over years about the failings of the existing models of employment services and conditionality, the current Commonwealth Coalition Government appears to have conceded that change is needed. In 2018 an expert panel was convened under the auspices of the (then) Department of Jobs and Small Business, with the task of consulting widely about how employment services should change when current contracts with providers were due to end in mid-2020. The consultations with communities and service providers were widespread, with a final report of the panel, titled 'I want to work, Employment Services 2020 Report' (Department of Jobs and Small Business, 2018). A number of regional trials were conducted, which included new digital services and a focus on more individualised support for unemployed people. However there appears to have been no changes to the Mutual Obligation regime, apart from temporary suspensions of MOs in areas affected by COVID-19 outbreaks. The Government has announced that the 'New Employment Services Model' is scheduled to commence in July 2022.

The Government claims that the new system will simplify the administration of income support payments and clarify existing and complex rules about participation requirements. It is also claimed that moving most unemployed people onto digital 'self-service' platforms will free up resources for employment service providers to provide better personal support to more disadvantaged jobseekers. The Transition to Work Program', which has proven to be relatively effective, will be continued and expanded as the employment program for most young unemployed people (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2021b).

Unfortunately, the design of the digital platform means that users will not have income support backdated to the time that they applied, it will only be paid when the jobseeker plan is completed. At present, Youth and Jobseeker Allowances are usually backdated to when a claim is first lodged, with time allowed for the claimant to meet with the employment service provider. This will add to the disadvantage of people who do not have access to information technology. Simone Casey has examined the existing digital interfaces of the Online Employment Services and the Targeted Compliance Framework and noted that:

> The role of employment services workers is now limited to assessing if a demerit point should apply based on an assessment of whether the job seeker had a reasonable excuse as defined in the Targeted Compliance Framework guidelines. This decision making is further limited by the hard-wiring of a drop-down list of fields on the job seeker management system (ESS) from which workers must select from a predetermined list of values (Casey, 2021, p7).

The establishment of the New Employment Services Model was contained in legislation presented by the Government in June 2021, which proposed many amendments to Social Security Legislation. Most of these amendments were uncontroversial and were intended to clarify and simplify administration, however, issues of concern were referred to the Senate Employment and Education Legislation Committee, with one day of public hearings and a two-week timeframe during which public submissions could be accepted. The minority Labor and Green Party Senators expressed concerns about the hasty process and whether the legislation as proposed was an excuse to impose budget savings at the expense of unemployed people and, more ominously, to implement legally dubious policies:

> Existing rules and protections have been maintained within consolidated provisions. The intention is to improve the clarity of the rules and support existing policy. However, given the number of pages of social security law deleted it is unclear whether this is in fact the case. Labor is not clear if this is simply a statement that the Government has not yet changed their policy, and that the new provisions of the bill would give them the delegated power to do so. The very short Committee process has not allowed Labor time to review these deleted provisions. We note that the many episodes of the Government justifying the certainty of its legal and moral position on Robodebt, including before Senate Committees, does not instil confidence in the absence of a proper process (Parliament of Australia, 2021, pp35-36).

It will be unfortunate if the result of the new model will be to merely automate and make more punitive Mutual Obligations and to further reduce individuals' income support. This would seem to be an opportunity missed to undertake the broader reforms recommended by the expert panel in 2018.

As I have argued earlier in this thesis, there is a case for some elements of conditionality to be included in income support systems. For example, even if some version of universal basic income were adopted, this would still require individuals to be registered with the taxation system and complying with declaring earnings and other income and assets.

While conditionality might be associated with conservative and right-wing politics, this is not necessarily the case. For example, welfare to work policies have also been implemented by Australian Labor Party Governments. These have included restricting eligibility for the Disability Support Pension and moving sole parents from the relatively unconditional Parenting Payment to Newstart Allowance. Conservative politicians, such as US President Nixon, also advocated for universal basic income. How could a case for reduced conditionality and an increased level of useful support be promoted as politically acceptable?

A case for change, based on pragmatics rather than politics, is made by the British political philosopher, James Mumford. In his book 'Vexed – ethics beyond political tribes' (2020), he addresses the vexatious and polarised nature of much of contemporary politics, where being on the right or left implies that one subscribes to a complete suite of values and beliefs with little room for nuance. In one chapter, he argues that social conservatives who espouse 'family values' should support raising the incomes of poor families, and that such ideas should not be just the province of supporters of left-wing politics and policies.

Mumford recounts once being a member of a conservative political think tank. He does not name this, but I suspect it was Iain Duncan Smith's Centre for Policy Studies which was discussed in Chapter 9. He discusses one initial premise of this group, which was that the increased number of sole parent families, either single mothers or separated parents, has been due to changed liberal social attitudes about marriage and the nuclear family, one result being children being raised by sole parents in poverty and insecurity. In his subsequent examination of precarious work and income insecurity, Mumford appears to have had something of an epiphany:

> Financial pressure affects families. Scarcity taxes bandwidth and erodes agency. Low wages stress marriages. Poverty does not simply result from family breakdown but often causes it.
>
> …For if it's purely people's lack of commitment that causes the family breakdown so clearly associated with poverty, then deal with that. Contend with the cultural issues. If, on the other hand, not having enough money really does threaten marriage, then you need to reckon with reasons why the economy is failing the poorest families (Mumford, 2020, p58).

This argument can be applied to the situation of many young people who are unemployed or working in low wage and insecure jobs. The regime of conditionality is based on assumptions that precarity and hardship will somehow motivate people to strive harder, while there is little evidence that this is the case. What might a different system achieve, which would provide living wages and a genuine income support safety net? This could increase the wellbeing of individuals and society, as well as enabling a flourishing and more equal economy.

11.5 Ideas for change and improvement – Theme 4, Policy innovation

In Chapter 8, I discussed IPS as an example of positive policy innovation. There appear to be benefits for young people participating in the trial programs, but as the independent evaluation noted the average cost for each individual participant was high. I will discuss the implementation of services based on IPS principles in one of the recommendations in the next and final chapter.

11.5.1 A social guarantee and redesigning employment services

In an essay in the collection 'What Happens Next' John Falzon suggests a framework argues that social provision should not be constructed as a residual safety net, as it mostly is at present, but reconstructed as a social guarantee:

> The implementation of a social guarantee means equitable access to housing, employment, income security, health and education, and the broadening of democratic institutions…
>
> 'What is neoliberalism?' asks French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. 'It is a program for destroying collective structures which may impede the pure market logic.' And what, we may counter, is a social guarantee? It is an architecture for supporting and empowering collective structures by subordinating the logic of the market to the twin logic of social capacity and social need (Falzon, in Dawson & McCalman, Eds., 2020, p222).

Falzon proposes that an integral part of a social guarantee would be re-establishing a national employment service that would be linked to training providers and TAFE colleges. Julie Connolly develops this argument in more detail in another essay in the book. She suggests the abandonment of activation and conditionality policies, with a new model for employment services based on private/public partnerships, which recognises that people

frequently transition in and out of paid employment, and which focuses on early intervention and support for unemployed people. This support would include access to free training and retraining (Connolly, in Dawson & McCalman, Eds., 2020). As I have discussed elsewhere, there is little evidence that the current employment service market is a model of efficient competition, nor does it provide much real support to jobseekers. Redesigning employment services as suggested by these authors can be achieved by redeploying the current level of Commonwealth Government funding, as was suggested in the 2018 Commonwealth expert panel report discussed in the previous section.

11.5.2 Health for all?

In 2021 the Medical Journal of Australia published a supplement to its May edition, titled 'Australia in 2030: what is our path to health for all?' (Backholer, Baum, Finlay et al, 2021). This is collection of articles which imagines how, in less than ten years, a concerted effort in public health will prevent and reduce common diseases and illnesses and enable healthier lifestyles. The supplement exemplifies utopian thinking as architecture, with specific proposals and plans. Topics include how the wellbeing of Indigenous peoples and communities can be improved, addressing health inequalities, building healthier living environments, recognising also the impacts of climate change, and reforming health funding.

The introductory chapter of the supplement discusses Government responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and questions why some emergency measures, such as increasing income support and housing homeless people cannot be made permanent. The concluding chapter argues for major changes in policy in areas such as income support, job creation, housing and the governance of health systems.

> Here we are back in 2021 and we can hear many voices saying the visions we have provided are "pie in the sky" and those of dreamers rather than realists. However, all of these suggestions have been tried in other places. They all have evidence behind them suggesting that they could result in a more healthy, equitable and sustainable society. COVID- 19 has laid bare the inequities we have learnt to tolerate and has therefore given us a warning that all is not right with our world. COVID- 19 has also given us a chance to stop and think how we can create a better society. Envisaging a better governed future is an important way of doing this (Backholer et al, 2021, p.39).

Such ideas align with the issues I have canvassed in this thesis. I believe the most persuasive element of such arguments is that investment in prevention will provide long-term economic and social benefits, improve physical and mental health and repay initial costs many times over.

11.5.3 The 2021 Victorian Government mental health Budget

In May 2021, the Victorian Labor Party Government handed down its budget for the fiscal year 2021-2022 and beyond. This involved large increases in spending as part of recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, including building public infrastructure and providing more social and community housing. But by far, the largest single item in dollar terms was the reform of mental health services, in line with the recommendations of the 2020 Royal Commission.

The Budget commits to 3.8 billion dollars additional funding over ten years for redesigned and expanded mental health services. In response to the Royal Commission recommendations, there is a strong focus on improving crisis care and establishing services in regional and rural areas. These will include outreach services for young people, with acute care integrated with prevention and recovery-based models of care. Regional service hubs will be established for families and carers of people with mental health disorders, with new support programs for young carers of parents and adults.

Many of the Budget proposals address shortcomings in acute mental health care, as the Royal Commission identified that people with complex mental health disorders cause high demand on ambulance and hospital emergency departments. A consequence of this is that the care of people with critical physical health needs can be compromised and the care of mental health patients is less than optimal.

Regarding sub-acute care, the Budget includes measures specific to children, adolescents and young adults. This excerpt from a ministerial media release illustrates the justification for and aspirations of these measures:

> We all want our kids to grow up happy and healthy. And with around three-quarters of common mental health problems emerging before age 25, the early years are critical in ensuring lifelong mental health and wellbeing. But right now, our mental health system is failing young Victorians – and their families. It's why the Andrews Labor

> Government is investing $842 million in mental health and wellbeing support for children and young people – ensuring we're supporting them and their families as early as possible. This investment will see two separate streams of care established – one dedicated to infants and children (aged 0 to 11) and their families, and one dedicated to young people (aged 12 to 25). Support will be delivered through 13 reformed Infant, Child and Family Mental Health and Wellbeing Services, providing care specially designed around the needs of children and their families. At the same time, this investment will also support 13 dedicated Youth Area Mental Health and Wellbeing Services across our state – again, offering support specifically tailored to young people aged 12 to 25 (Merlino & Spence, 2021).

As I have discussed in this chapter and elsewhere, there are chronic shortcomings in access to mental health services, either because of the limited workforce capacity of government and community services, or the location and affordability of private practitioners. The Victorian Budget includes funding for 3,000 training placements and scholarships for doctors, nurses and allied health workers.

As might be expected, the spending on these ambitious measures is not without its critics, as some of the funding will involve a levy on large companies calculated as 0.5 per cent of total wages paid above a threshold of $10 million. The Opposition Liberal and National Parties and lobby groups have stated that the measures are anti-business, while the Victorian Government has, in my view quite correctly, argued that this levy is a small fraction of the economic and productivity losses that result from not investing in improved mental health care. From my perspective, it is pleasing to end this chapter describing initiatives which aim to tackle longstanding and wicked problems with practical and adequately funded solutions.

12. RECOMMENDATIONS AND SUMMARY

12.1 Introduction and recommendations

The previous three chapters represent the findings of this research, categorised within the three modes of Utopia as method. In this final chapter I will condense the findings into specific recommendations for change. These are aligned with the key argument of this research, that the mental health, or otherwise, of young Australians is inextricably associated with social determinants. These include unemployment and underemployment, precarity, poverty and inequality, conditionality and housing affordability. Inequalities in access to mental health and social support and the types of supports available to young people also require consideration.

I hope it is apparent that throughout this research, I have taken an approach which reflects a concern with human rights and social inclusion. I suggest that the systems that young unemployed people are obliged to deal with, particularly employment services and Centrelink, rarely consider these factors and instead are explicitly and implicitly punitive.

Another factor that I suggest this research demonstrates is that the 'wicked problems' afflicting a significant minority of young Australians are already well-documented. Reports from Senate Committees, the Productivity Commission and many nongovernment organisations have identified common problems, with many areas of congruence on how these might be addressed. The findings from inquiries, research projects and surveys are numerous and detailed. I believe that, apart from governments choosing to ignore or dismiss recommendations for ideological reasons, complexity can result in them being relegated to oblivion, as simply too big or too hard. A notable and refreshing exception is the Victorian State Government's commitment in 2021, to fund structural and program changes recommended by its mental health Royal Commission.

What I will suggest in this chapter is that what is not needed are further inquiries and investigations. Rather, what is needed are a relatively small number of specific overarching policy proposals and attendant blueprints for how these might be enacted. In the preceding

chapter, I have outlined proposals for improved services, and I have argued that in many cases improvement can be made by redeploying existing resources.

I acknowledge that there are limitations of this research, for example I have discussed a range of policy issues and what might be changed, but not focussed on the processes of policy making and change. The literature on policy in modern Australia, for example the work of Hal Colebatch and his colleagues (2006), illustrates the complexities of policy development due to the many layers of government and the multitude of interest groups. To which one could add governments' increasing outsourcing of policy work to large multinational consultancy firms. I have discussed policies affecting young people, such as the low level of income support payments and the high level of conditionality. I suggest these show deficits in policy development keeping up with modern times, as they do not reflect the circumstances of young people experiencing lengthy periods of unemployment or precarious employment. Such policies also reflect outdated and unfair prejudices about young people and the realities of inequality and disadvantage.

I hope that what I have achieved is building rational arguments for changes which, in an ideal (utopian?) world, should be considered outside of partisan politics. In the following sections I will describe seven proposals and recommendations for what can be done. In doing so, I am mindful of the limitations of what could be considered as utopian imaginings. I will therefore make proposals based on structures which already exist or have been proven to be effective in the past, thereby linking the archaeology of policy to the architecture of a better future.

Recommendation 1: Establish a Social Security Commission

This commission would be an independent body which would review the adequacy of all primary income support payments, which include unemployment benefits, pensions and student allowances. The establishment of such a body was proposed in 2018 by Cathy McGowan, an independent (non-party affiliated) Member of Parliament. A draft Bill was rejected by the Government and was not supported by the opposition Labor Party. It was referred to a House of Representatives Committee, however this body was dissolved following the May 2019 Federal Election (Parliament of Australia, 2019f).

Opponents of the proposal, including the then Social Services Minister, Dan Tehan, claimed that the Commission would effectively outsource the roles of Government and the Parliament in setting policies and levels of payments. Supporters of the Commission, which included ACOSS, Anglicare and other national welfare providers, argued that there are already two independent bodies which exercise such powers without much controversy. These are the Fair Work Commission, which reviews and sets minimum wages, and the Commonwealth Remuneration Tribunal, which sets salaries and allowances for politicians, judges, and senior officials (Australian Government Remuneration Tribunal, n.d.). I think the supporters make a good case. I cannot imagine a Commission selected from policy experts would be likely to suggest changes to levels of payment that are economically or politically unreasonable.

Recommendation 2: Implement social impact statements

Kristy Muir and Stephen Bennett propose that measuring social impacts are essential to policy and program development:

> Our social progress has arguably been stymied because we haven't concentrated enough on outcomes. Together we've created a social purpose system that has good intentions, but more often focuses, counts and funds what and how much we do, rather than whether we are making a difference. We need to know whether people are really any better off (Muir & Bennett, 2014, p5).

At first glance, social impact statements may seem radical, but we already have mechanisms such as environmental impact statements (EIS) which are routinely conducted for proposed urban developments, infrastructure projects and mines. Although I would note that a negative EIS will not necessarily modify or prevent a development, as governments and businesses can and do choose to ignore scientific evidence. Through the National Cabinet processes, Australian Governments are required to consider the effects of new legislation and prepare Regulatory Impact Statements (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2021).

Social impact measures would enable thorough and evidence-based examination of current and proposed policies. For example, any increases to social security payments would not just be considered as a matter of cost, but also from the perspective of benefits, such as economic stimulus and spending in local communities. The same approach could be applied

to the expansion of social and public housing. And, as the Productivity Commission has argued, improving the design and delivery of mental health programs can deliver economic and social benefits.

Recommendation 3: Reform the administration of payments to unemployed people

As has been discussed, young Australians experience high levels of precarious employment, which have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. This recommendation is separate from arguments about the adequacy of payment, rather it is about how income support can be better designed to reflect modern circumstances and better utilise technology. Earlier in this thesis, I gave an example of how decades ago, I was paid unemployment benefits within two weeks of making a claim, even though the social security system was barely automated. At present, jobseekers can wait weeks for payments to be processed, while immediately having to comply with Mutual Obligation requirements. There are various waiting periods, one of the most archaic perhaps being the six-month preclusion period that can be applied to anyone moving to an area with lower employment prospects. These areas would constitute much of rural and remote Australia. Given the effect of the pandemic on the availability of temporary migrant labour, mainly backpackers and Pacific Islanders, to work in agriculture, this policy would appear to be completely unfit for purpose.

Anyone receiving income support, and who subsequently gains substantial periods of part-time or full-time work, will have their benefits stopped. If they are not paid these for more than three months, then a full new application is required if they become unemployed again, including job plans and Mutual Obligations. They will then most likely experience delays in receiving this support and financial hardship. There would seem no particular reason why these individuals could not stay registered on the Centrelink system for a much longer period, such as twelve months. As I discussed in the previous chapter, it would also be possible to design a system similar to the Family Tax Benefit that could provide flexible and adjusted payments over a financial year. Such a system already applies to full-time students receiving Youth Allowance and Austudy payments, who are allowed to 'bank' earned income credits. Consequently, they are able to keep all or most of their income support if they work in holiday periods. However, the design and administration of such a

system would require careful consideration, so as to avoid a repetition of the Robodebt debacle.

Recommendation 4: Reform the requirements and contracts for employment services

The promise of greater competition and user choice in the privatised employment services does not seem to have been realised. As has been discussed, the 'market' has become increasingly dominated by large corporate firms, and even where an unemployed person may have a choice of provider, they will still be subject to the conditionality imposed by the Government. The evidence suggests that the focus on compliance does little to help people into jobs, especially where they have significant personal barriers, such as mental ill health, that make it hard to compete for jobs. As Mark Considine and his colleagues have found, over time the staffing profile of Australian employment services has changed, with a greater proportion of quite young and relatively older staff, with overall lower levels of education and skills (Considine et al, 2015).

This situation is not immutable, and I suggest that it could be changed quickly, allowing for a period of transition. The compliance regime can be modified and consideration of any sanctions should be returned to Centrelink staff. The *jobactive* providers must be required to demonstrate competencies in the assessment of more disadvantaged clients, both in regard to understanding issues such as mental health distress and caring commitments and being able to make appropriate referrals to local community support and health services.

A well-designed employment services system would also empower its staff to identify issues, including local labour market conditions and the needs of particularly disadvantaged job seekers. A contractual requirement could require that each local service will regularly report on intelligence provided by staff and that the organisations report frankly to the employment department without jeopardising their contracts. This would represent a positive application of Dorothy Rice's 'Micro-Institutionalist Theory of Policy Implementation' (Rice, 2012). The data could include identification of problems and challenges, as well as information on successful programs and service innovations. Such a structure would provide for evidence to be included in the cycle of policy reform. Lest this seem Utopian or harebrained, I can attest from professional experience that such programs actually occurred in the latter era of the Commonwealth Employment Service, including a

national 'Innovation for Employment Strategy'. Here, community groups and employers were consulted about how the CES and Department of Social Security networks could better address local employment needs, training and job creation.

Recommendation 5: Rebuild public services and a public/private model for employment services

Here I will consider what a new structure for employment services could look like if the reforms proposed in the previous section were enacted. As Ross Garnaut has suggested, the removal of the compliance regime would free up staff, including Centrelink officials, to provide a greater level of personal support to individual unemployed people. This would include local services creating empathic relationships with their clients and working with employers to match people to vacancies and training opportunities.

Reports on employment services in Australia, including the 2018 Senate Committee Inquiry on jobactive, have indicated deficiencies in their ability to meet the needs of both unemployed people and potential employers. For example, it is difficult to see that setting a quota for job search applications represents a productive use of time for either the applicant, or employers inundated with unsuitable candidates. As Considine et al have shown, employment services staff have progressively spent decreasing amounts of their working hours building relationships with employers and brokering job placements, while increasing reporting on Mutual Obligation requirements.

I do not think that the current situation shows that the privatisation of employment services was a complete failure, but it does represent the failure of how policies and procedures are set. As Michele Brady has shown in her examination of the experience of sole parents in Welfare to Work, that some providers were able to effectively engage with clients and agree on participation activities that allowed for parenting and caring responsibilities (Brady, 2011). The notable difference observed with these providers was that they were the not-for-profit organisations, whereas the corporate for-profit providers were far more rigid in the application of compliance. My interpretation of these findings is that there is no inevitable reason that for-profit agencies cannot be flexible if they are given the ability to exercise discretion to better assist clients.

I think the problem is that the domination of corporate providers commodifies their unemployed clients, which Considine and O'Sullivan describe as 'Buying and Selling the Poor' (Considine & O'Sullivan, 2014). There is therefore an argument for a diversification of this 'market', with competition provided with a greater involvement of not-for-profit and government employment service providers. The competition here would not be based on price for services, but on outcomes and consumer satisfaction.

As with the other arguments in this chapter, such ideas are neither new nor Utopian. The mixed market of government, corporate and not-for-profit providers established in the late 1990s provided genuine opportunities and choices for unemployed people. In its early incarnation, Centrelink provided an efficient and compassionate service for registering newly unemployed people and streaming them into programs where they required additional support. The creation of new Centrelink Personal Adviser positions, as part of the 'Australians Working Together' initiative in 2000-2001, showed that positive outcomes can result from recruiting qualified and competent staff.

There are many parts of Australia where there is little incentive for private providers to provide services. The reasons for this will include remoteness, limited job opportunities, high rates of unemployment and underemployment, the high costs of establishing service delivery and attracting and retaining quality staff. I suggest a solution to these problems would be for employment services to be incorporated with Centrelink offices and agencies in rural and remote areas. NGOs could also be funded to provide such services, where they already have a presence and provide a range of support services in urban and rural disadvantaged communities.

Recommendation 6: Require youth mental health services to include a focus on participation

The IPS trials conducted in headspace services have demonstrated some success in placing and maintaining young people in employment. However, as discussed in Chapter 8, the independent evaluation was equivocal about the cost/benefit outcomes of these programs in the absence of being able to compare them with lower-level interventions. It would seem worth continuing with the current sites with a further evaluation of long-term outcomes for participants.

It is relevant to consider that IPS was originally developed to assist people with serious mental health disorders and is rigorous in the 'fidelity' of implementation. I suggest that for young people with anxiety and depression, it would be possible to adapt a few principles of IPS on a broader scale, with relatively little extra cost. The possibilities have already been demonstrated by the headspace Work and Study Digital Service, discussed in the previous chapter. In such scenarios, all or most young people using community mental health services would have an initial assessment of their current participation in work, education or training. A focus on improving and maintaining participation can then be incorporated in treatment and therapy plans.

Such an initiative would require mental health service providers to establish relationships with local schools, TAFEs and employment service providers. Both the Productivity Commission and the Victorian Royal Commission reports have stressed the importance of employment and education in helping young people improve their mental health. The reports have also recommended more rigorous commissioning of regional youth mental health services, either by government or Primary Health Networks. The commissioning and funding contracts could specify the participation assessment and require services to demonstrate their liaison with and referrals to local agencies.

As has been discussed in Chapter 5, many young people receive mental health support from allied health practitioners through the Better Access Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS). These practitioners – psychologists, social workers and occupational therapists – should all be able to conduct participation and capacity assessments. These could be useful in identifying individuals' current skills and capabilities and helping to set participation goals. Such an assessment could be provided as a dedicated MBS item with a 100 per cent fee rebate.

Recommendation 7: Training, job creation and the foundational economy

At the time of writing, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to wreak global havoc. Australia appears to have come through the crisis quite well, albeit with some groups, including young people, experiencing diminished employment and interrupted education. The effective closure of Australia's international border has ceased permanent immigration, as well as temporary migration of students and holders of working visas.

Over the past three decades, Australia has relied on a high level of net immigration as a mechanism for economic and employment growth, although some benefits of this are contested, for example congestion and high housing costs in the major cities. With international travel likely to be restricted for some time, there would appear to be many opportunities for improving workforce skills, particularly for younger Australians. For example, as I suggested in the previous chapter, increased construction of social and public housing can provide a big stimulus for employment and skills training.

Emma Dawson has identified that about one third of Australian employees form the 'foundational economy', working in relatively low-paid jobs:

> …in the provision of health and social care, social services, retail, hospitality, transport or the production and provision of food (Dawson, in McCalman & Dawson, Eds., 2020, p188)

She notes that this group of workers were not able to work from home during the pandemic lockdowns in 2020 and were instrumental in keeping the nation functioning. Dawson argues that it is time to reconsider the wages and conditions of foundational workers and how improving these will contribute to social justice and post-pandemic recovery:

> …there are far too many jobs in our foundational economy that pay so poorly, and offer such insecure and insufficient hours of work, that those working in them are living barely above the poverty line. At the temporary increased rate of JobSeeker, many of them were literally better off on the dole.
>
> Lifting wages and conditions for these workers would not only increase their individual and family circumstances and make jobs in the foundational economy more attractive to men as well as women, it would boost economic growth, as every additional dollar earned by someone living just above the poverty line is spent back into the economy, lifting aggregate demand for goods and services.
>
> More fundamentally, though, investing in the foundational economy reaps benefits across society in more than monetary terms. Improving the quality of our essential services increases social and mental wellbeing, reduces ill-health and social exclusion, and strengthens community and social cohesion (Dawson 2020, pp189-190).

At the time that this chapter was being drafted, the Commonwealth Government handed down its Budget for 2021-2022. This was presented by the Treasurer Josh Frydenberg as providing stimulus for post-pandemic economic recovery and increasing employment and training opportunities (Frydenberg, 2021).

Measures announced in the Budget included providing an additional 163,000 free or low-cost training places (subject to matching contributions by the States and Territories) and extending wage subsidies for apprentices (The Treasury, 2021). A total of $2 billion additional funding over four years is allocated to new and expanded mental health services, including extending IPS to adult mental health services and creating new local adult mental health services (Department of Social Services, 2021).

It will be interesting to see how these proposals work out. The success of the training and apprenticeship support will be heavily reliant on the private sector providing employment opportunities. Regarding mental health services, I note that there does not appear to be any funding to expand the workforce. While the Budget has also increased funding for aged care and childcare, this does not incorporate policy for real wage rises for the foundational workers in these sectors.

There is nothing in the Budget that provides extra support to low-income renters or for building new social housing. As discussed in the previous chapter, the current jobactive services are to be replaced by new models of delivery in 2022, including a digital self-service platform for newly unemployed workers.

ACOSS has commented on other aspects of these proposed changes:

> The Government must ensure that Enhanced Services provided under the New Employment Services Model follows the Expert Panel's recommendations to improve the quality of services provided to people long-term unemployed and genuinely enables providers to reduce caseloads currently sitting at 140-200. Worryingly this budget shows there will be a saving of $860m over four years from 2021-22.
>
> At the same time an extra $197 million is spent to ensure compliance with tougher mutual obligations, including having to apply for 20 jobs a month and an 'intensive activity', roughly equal to the above cut to employment service funding, meaning more emphasis will be placed on ticking compliance boxes and less on positive help to secure employment (Goldie, 2021, p3).

This commentary suggests that major cuts are planned, with a reduction of personal service to the most disadvantaged jobseekers, including young people with mental health issues.

12.2 Limitations of this research

This thesis is based on four years of research and was mostly completed in 2020 and the first half of 2021. This has of course been the period of global pandemic, and perhaps also pandemonium. The effects of COVID-19 are likely to reverberate for some time to come. Although the Australian economy appears to have 'recovered', it is not at all clear whether the circumstances and problems of young unemployed Australians have changed from what they were prior to the pandemic. I anticipate that, as the Commonwealth Government will strive to address ongoing budget deficits, savings will be sought from social security spending. I fear that, however strongly I have argued the case for reform, short-term thinking and politics will perpetuate intergenerational inequality.

I appreciate that this thesis may be read as a left-wing polemic. In my defence, I will argue that the literature, surveys, inquiries and reports that I have used represent real and valid concerns about the wellbeing of young people. Not all of this material represents a partisan view – the Productivity Commission and Victorian Royal Commission reports being examples. I would like to have included ideas and commentary from conservative academics and researchers about the experiences of young unemployed people and how policies and programs can be improved. Unfortunately, there is a dearth of such material. Commentators such as Charles Murray and Lawrence Mead have proposed versions of welfare reform which I see as highly moralistic. Their works do not explore issues such as entrenched disadvantage, poverty, precarious work and other social determinants of mental health. I have lost count of the number of times in recent years, that conservative politicians have responded to arguments for more generous and compassionate income support with statements that 'the best form of welfare is a job'.

The establishment of the Individual Placement and Support trials in recent years has at least provided an evidence-based approach to improving young peoples' mental health and their participation in employment and education. As I discussed early in this thesis, I had hoped to conduct qualitative research with IPS services, and I regret that this was not possible. So, my initial thoughts and questions about how some of the principles of IPS could be applied more broadly will remain unanswered.

12.3 Ideas for future research

As I outlined in the introduction to this thesis, I have taken a reflexive approach to the structure and narrative – how we might think about problems differently and better represent those who lack economic and social capital. There is much recent and contemporary research into the issues I have explored, and I think the problems of policy and service delivery are well documented. The question therefore arises – do we need to do more research into the problems, or should research focus on solutions? I conclude that there are not major gaps in knowledge and research. The failures are in joined up service provision and those in the social safety net, through which far too many people fall.

I have discussed the Victorian Government's commitment to reform of mental health services, in particular prevention and early intervention with young people and community-based models of service provision. If and when these changes are implemented, I foresee many opportunities for research evaluating what works and how. Similarly, when the New Employment Services model is established in 2022, there could be opportunities to examine how redirecting resources to support the most disadvantaged jobseekers can be most effective. This might include how services jointly address vocational and mental health issues.

Since I commenced my research into the 16 to 24-year-old cohort in 2014, many in this group will have turned 25. The research of Mattias Strandh, Jeff Borland and others has clearly shown that early experiences of unemployment and social exclusion cause long-term 'scarring' in the course of adult life. Over recent decades, Australia has relied on skilled migrants and international students to meet the needs of the labour market and facilitate economic growth. With migration halted during the pandemic, and unlikely to resume in the near future, we can also anticipate a growing proportion of the population being older and retiring from work. Here then, is the possibility of building a new workforce, by reengaging and training long-term unemployed adults.

Another area of possible research, related to the above point, is about overall workforce participation and the high number of working age people (one third) who are not in the workforce. Participation was measured at 66.3 per cent in March 2021, an historic high. However, the trend over four decades has been a decrease in male participation rates, from

approximately 80 to 70 per cent, and an increase in female participation rates from approximately 45 per cent to 60 per cent (Gustafsson, 2021). This can be explained by many factors, including the decrease in traditional male jobs in manufacturing and primary production, and the increase in female participation in professional and service roles. What is not so clear, beyond the 'official' measure of unemployment around five or six per cent, is how many potential workers may be choosing not to work or look for work. Research could explore why this is so, regarding barriers such as ill-health, poorer skills and lack of work experience. Another factor that might be investigated could be the low pay in many foundational jobs, as described by Emma Dawson. A member of a couple or couple family, with one breadwinner earning a middle or low wage may find that it is simply not worthwhile to take on low-paid part-time work, due to cost such as transport and childcare, taxation, or reduction in Family Tax Benefits and Rent Assistance. Some might technically qualify for some level of JobSeeker Allowance, but find the requirements of application for payment, reporting of income and Mutual Obligations just too onerous.

A final comment: I have acknowledged in the introduction to this chapter that I have not examined the complexities of how policies might be changed. Future research may benefit from utopian methods and how they might be employed to address longstanding problems with fresh solutions, for example Bregman's argument about UBI being both practical and efficient.

12.4 Summary and final comments

Although I believe the 2021 Federal Budget had many limitations, there are at least some positive acknowledgments of the need to improve employment and training opportunities and expand the provision of mental health services. What I have argued in this thesis is that reform is desirable, affordable and sustainable. As a nation we need to see investment in the flourishing of young people as a benefit, not a cost on the budget bottom line.

The economist, Richard Denniss, has argued in many essays and books that most Australians want better services from their governments and are prepared to support these through taxes as long as they see quality, benefits and accountability. This would require a degree of transparency in politics and policy making, and a rejoinder to the apparent inevitability of neoliberalism as the natural state of things. The history of welfare states post World War 2

has demonstrated that they can be efficient, affordable and broadly accepted. As citizens of a prosperous nation, Australians can choose to revisit the post war policy for full employment, or the social accord of the 1980s:

> Living in one of the richest countries in the world, Australians can afford to design and build any public services or infrastructure that we want, but the budget deficits caused by decades of big tax cuts mean that our debates now revolve about what is cheapest to provide rather than what is best for the community. And rather than conduct broad debates about our national priorities in the plain English spoken by the majority, we now hold narrow public debates in the econobabble spoken by the minority (Denniss, 2018, p8).

In conclusion, I will quote the English novel 'Howards End' by E.M. Forster: 'only connect'. What we need to continue to do is to address the mental health issues for young people by improving social determinants. This requires joining up the dots: the associations, the causes and effects. We have more than enough information and we know potential solutions, we just need to consider how we can apply this knowledge in a clever way.

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