

Catholic Social Services Annual Conference

“The distribution of social disadvantage in Australian communities”

I am pleased to be invited to deliver this address at the Annual Conference of Catholic Social Services Australia which is being held at Parliament House Canberra.

The topic that I have been asked to address: “The distribution of social disadvantage in Australian communities” is one of numerous presentations and workshops that are being held throughout Australia as part of “Anti-Poverty Week”.

One could well ask the purpose of such a week, given the great economic growth that Australia has been enjoying over the last fifteen years. Perhaps Anti-Poverty Week, you might suggest, is focused on world poverty and the poor distribution of wealth and opportunity across our globe.

Many of the workshops will indeed address this topic. But my address this morning is focused on the distribution of social disadvantage **within** Australia.

Despite substantial economic growth within Australia, there is a growing awareness that there is great disparity in the way in which that growth has been shared across our country. We are now coming to acknowledge that despite significant economic growth, there is an increasing divide that exists within our

Australian nation, and much of that divide can now be identified and measured according to location.

I was pleased to note the recognition of this fact by the Primer Minister, John Howard, in his speech to the 10th Anniversary Dinner of his government on 2nd March of this year. The Prime Minister noted:

“We need to find innovative ways to break the vicious cycles of poor parenting, low levels of education, unemployment and health problems that can afflict some individuals and communities. We need to find ways of restoring order to zones of chaos in some homes and communities ... zones of chaos... that can wreck young Australian lives”.

Catholic Social Services Australia has now joined as a partner with Jesuit Social Services in a major national research project which is mapping disadvantage according to postcode.

Professor Tony Vinson has already completed two studies for Jesuit Social Services, focusing in the two previous reports on New South Wales and Victoria alone. The joint project between Catholic Social Services and Jesuit Social Services, due to be released publicly in February of next year, will encompass all the States and Territories.

Through this research we have the capacity to detail the extent of entrenched poverty and disadvantage

and lack of opportunity that exists in every community in Australia.

We do this by gathering data, some of which is readily available from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, but a great deal of which can only be obtained through the cooperation of the States and Territory governments.

In our third study, covering all of Australia, we have increased the number of disadvantage factors that have been used and as a consequence the picture that we are able to present is all the more detailed.

More than twenty social disadvantage factors are used to gather a profile of each postcode area, or local government area, for every community in Australia.

Beginning with low birth weight, we combine information on such factors as pre-school attendance, confirmed cases of child neglect or abuse, serious child injuries and early school leaving.

We go further and add information on those who have left school and fail to engage in further education and training, those who fail to obtain post-school qualifications and the rate of unskilled workers in each locality.

In addition, we measure each community in terms of unemployment and long-term unemployment, the intervention of mental health services, the adult suicide rate, and adult mortality rates.

A further grouping of measures of disadvantage are added, including rates of domestic violence, disability and sickness benefits, criminal court convictions and imprisonment rates for each postcode area.

Such information clearly gives us a very detailed picture of the comparative wealth and disadvantage of each community or location within Australia.

For example we can immediately identify how many postcode areas in Victoria are needed to count for 25 per cent of the State's prison population or confirmed cases on child neglect. In each of these cases we find that one quarter of the State's prison population or one quarter of the total number of confirmed cases of child neglect come from only ten or fifteen postcode areas out of six hundred.

Similarly for other factors such as unemployment or early school leaving. We can see where these factors are more concentrated in comparison to the rest of the State or Territory, or in comparison to the rest of Australia.

While this information is significant for those planning and administering the delivery of services, such as

health, education and welfare, and programs for the unemployed or disabled, it becomes of enormous significance for those wishing to address such disadvantage or to plan interventions that could prevent such entrenched disadvantage in the future.

In addition to calculating individual measures of disadvantage in this way, our research also produces detailed evidence of the relationship that exists between one factor and another.

For example take limited education and low birth weight, or early school leaving and imprisonment, or unemployment rates and imprisonment, or early school leaving and unemployment, or low work skills and imprisonment rates for each postcode area.

We can show the correlation, the statistical relationship, not necessarily the causative relationship, that exists between each of these factors.

We have established correlations of 0.5 and 0.6 for each of these relationships. That means that we can show for each of the geographical areas of measurement, mostly postcode areas, but in some parts of Australia local government areas, that if there is a high level of early school leaving there will also be a high level of unemployment, or if there is a low level of work skills across the location there will be high levels of imprisonment.

A few years ago, I attended the National Conference of Catholic Charities U.S.A. in Chicago. At that conference a paper was given by Catholic Church researchers from the State of Louisiana that showed that that State was using the reading scores of ten to twelve year olds to predict how many prison cells the State authorities needed to construct in ten years time.

We are rightly shocked to hear such fatalistic planning and such a shocking failure to intervene at an early stage in order to prevent the treadmill towards early school leaving, low work skills, unemployment and eventual imprisonment.

But given the knowledge and the data that we have available from our research mapping social disadvantage according to location and the statistical relationships we have already established between such variables as early school leaving and imprisonment, are we doing any different in Australia?

A further aspect of our research is its capacity to detail how a small number of postcode areas in each State and Territory of Australia have the highest scores on not just one or two but on several of the social disadvantage factors that we are measuring.

In New South Wales for example, where there are around 580 postcode areas, a small number of postcodes end up in the most disadvantaged quintile on several of the disadvantage factors. This

information clearly establishes the nexus that exists between several social disadvantage factors.

What implications do these findings have for government authorities? They clearly establish the complex task facing government authorities, if for example they wished to intervene to lower imprisonment rates or criminal court convictions or long term unemployment.

It is quite clear that there is no point in attempting to intervene in one of these problem areas such as child protection, or mental health or criminal justice without taking into account the complex nexus that exists between many of these expressions of social disadvantage.

We can, and have identified, to the Federal Education Minister, for example, several postcode areas in each State that have the highest levels of early school leaving. In these areas, we have recommended intensive programs of literacy training for Grades two and three. In addition we have identified a small number of postcode areas in each State which represent the most disadvantaged, as areas that might well be the target of incentive payment schemes to retain experienced teachers, in this way avoiding the drift of good teachers that often occurs from such intensely disadvantaged high schools.

A final area of our research that I wish to outline this morning is our measurement of social connectedness, social cohesion, social capital that exists in each postcode area.

In our previous report in 2004, *Community Adversity and Resilience*, we were able to obtain only a small number of measures of social cohesion at a postcode area from within Victoria alone. Our current research greatly enhances the information available, and in other parts of the country.

In *Community Adversity and Resilience*, Professor Vinson, used three social cohesion factors: participating in organized recreation and sporting groups; the rate of volunteering in each locality; and the level at which local residents felt they could obtain informal help when they needed it at a neighborhood level.

This enabled us to establish three groupings of social cohesion: low, medium and high, each representing about 90 postcode areas in the State that obtained more than ten positive responses to each of the three questions.

We then examined the relationship that was found to exist in that grouping of postcode areas and compared the correlation that existed between two distinct variables, comparing the grouping of low

cohesion postcodes with the grouping of high social cohesion postcodes.

What we found was nothing but extraordinary! A dramatic, and statistically significant, change was present in almost every comparison.

In this presentation today, I will examine just five of these relationships and examine how that relationship changed when we compared the total number of 277 postcodes on which we could obtain the completed data with the grouping of low cohesion areas and high social cohesion areas.

As can be seen from the visual presentations, in each case, the expected correlation that was found between such variables as limited education and low birth weight, early school leaving and imprisonment, unemployment rates and imprisonment, early school leaving and unemployment, and low work skills and imprisonment changed dramatically when we separated out the low social cohesion areas and compared them to the high social cohesion areas.

These findings are significant when government seeks to determine how to proceed with interventions that are intended to prevent the growing entrenchment of social disadvantage and social exclusion that exists in a number of Australian communities.

This is the task that the Prime Minister identified in his recent address that I quoted earlier:

“We need to find innovative ways to break the vicious cycles ... that can afflict some individuals and communities”

As Mr Howard said in that anniversary address:

“We need to find ways of restoring order to zones of chaos ... that can wreck young Australian lives”.

Our research has established that there is little hope for bringing about change in such disadvantaged communities unless the community itself is successfully engaged in a collaborative effort with government and with the non-government sector.

We see evidence of this in the unsuccessful attempts in the past to bring about change in the health and life prospects of Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander communities. Many substantial government initiatives came to nothing because of the failure to develop partnerships at the local level.

Similarly in more recent attempts to intervene to bring about change in the life prospects of the long term and very long term unemployed. It is the experience of Jesuit Social Services in our privately funded Gateway program over the last four years that a

holistic approach that addresses the multiple levels of need concurrently is critical.

Housing, health, income, education and job skills must all be addressed in a coordinated way to effectively intervene to change the life prospects of young Australians who are living on the edge.

This evidence that has been obtained from our investigations over the last ten years has provided confirmation of what government has begun talking about in recent years: there is a need for a whole of government response to effect change.

In looking forward to the challenge facing Australia in the coming decade, I believe that the data that is now being prepared in this joint research endeavor between Catholic Social Services and Jesuit Social Services has much to offer in two respects:

Firstly, in understanding exactly what the situation is that we are facing in a growing number of communities that could be characterized as “black holes” of entrenched social disadvantage;

And, secondly, in helping to determine how to proceed with interventions that engage the local community, programs that have some hope of successfully intervening to bring about change.

As representatives of many of the member agencies of Catholic Social Services Australia, you have the opportunity of applying these findings to your own localities, to your own States and Territories and to your own regional areas.

You are the practitioners that know the nature of the problems that exist in different parts of Australia. This research simply confirms that practice experience.

But it does more than that. It presents evidence to State, Territory and Federal government authorities that in the words of the Prime Minister calls us to find innovative ways of breaking such vicious cycles of disadvantage.

During Anti-Poverty Week, it is appropriate that the agencies of Catholic Social Services address this challenge as part of our Annual Conference, in the corridors of our Federal Parliament here in Canberra.

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