17–23 October is Anti-Poverty Week.

Activities throughout the week aim to strengthen communities’ understanding of the causes and consequences of poverty and hardship, globally and here in Australia.

Poverty and severe hardship affects more than two million Australians (see other statistics below). Poverty is caused not just by individual experiences but by major inequalities built into the structure of Australian society, such as access to work and income, education and housing, as well as health and community services.

The Salvation Army’s research reveals that the most disadvantaged people in society, many of whom The Salvation Army has regular contact with, face the worst of the current economic situation. The negative psychological impact is greater on them. In a recent survey, data indicated this group is more likely to feel depressed about their current situation (52%) than other members of the Australian community.

Research also shows that poverty has a direct impact on the economic, social and spiritual aspects of people’s lives. Once begun, the ‘poverty and disadvantage’ cycle can be difficult to break; it diminishes the individual and the society in which it occurs.

People living in poverty remain a significant concern for The Salvation Army, given that they are not participating fully in the nation’s prosperity.

We must never forget the heartbreak reality for people experiencing poverty and disadvantage: knowing that your children are missing out on the things other people take for granted; sitting in a cold house in winter because you can’t afford the heating costs; deciding between paying for a pair of much-needed glasses or buying food; sending your children to school without shoes.

From a faith perspective, poverty is a betrayal of what the world was intended to be. It demeans individuals, destroys families, fractures communities and diminishes each and every one of us.

As someone who belongs to a faith community I must commit myself, along with The Salvation Army, to building a fairer, more inclusive Australia where we offer more than programs for people living in poverty. Will you join me in this? After all, a fairer Australia will bring our world more in line with what God intended.

Major Robyn Fernihough
territorial social programme secretary

Break the cycle of poverty

Australia and poverty

Poverty impacts all Australians, regardless of ethnicity, background, religion or creed. Almost two million Australians—one in 10—live in poverty. Those most at risk of living in poverty include:

58% of indigenous people / 28% of jobless people / 28% of people renting / 22% of single parents / 7% of older people

More than half a million children (15% of Australian children) live in jobless families. Adequate support for families would result in higher rates of employment and skill levels in mothers, better school performance, decreased welfare dependency, lower rates of criminality within families, reductions in child abuse/neglect and a decreased need for community support services.

Indigenous Australians:

- experience homelessness at a rate four times higher than non-indigenous Australians;
- are 3.2 times more likely to be unemployed and 11 times more likely to be imprisoned;
- are 10 times more likely to live in an overcrowded home and 12 times more likely to be hospitalised due to assault;
- are more likely to commit suicide and six times more likely to be murdered;
- die earlier than non-indigenous Australians (67.2 years for males, as compared to 78.7 years for non-indigenous males; 72.9 years for females, as compared to 82.6 years for non-indigenous females);
- will need aged care services between 11 and 17 years earlier than non-indigenous citizens;
- are between 1.8 and 2.4 more times likely to suffer a disability;
- are much more likely to live without an employed parent and suffer from child abuse;
- are twice as likely as other children to grow up to be unemployed.


Others

William Booth, sending a telegram to encapsulate the mission of The Salvation Army simply said, ‘Others’. It helps us remember our purpose and inspires us to do the most good for others.
Perceptions of Poverty

The Salvation Army has released an impact report on poverty this week, titled ‘Perceptions of Poverty’.

People living in poverty experience a daily struggle trying to make ends meet on a limited income. They often have to deal with negative and misinformed attitudes of people within the broader Australian community towards them and their situation. They often feel excluded or isolated because they can’t afford to participate in social activities. Children living in poverty often miss out on things their peers take for granted; parents may be unable to pay for excursions, school camps, or sports/recreation.

Poverty has negative impacts on self-esteem and confidence. People who have to turn to charities for help during times of financial crisis often feel ashamed and embarrassed. The stigma associated with welfare benefits can erode a person’s sense of self-worth and personal dignity.

Perceptions of Poverty provides an insight into poverty’s contributing factors and examines real-life experiences of people helped by The Salvation Army. It encourages us to look deeper into their situations and to consider the causes of poverty in a ‘wealthy’ country like Australia.

Creating a better understanding of what it’s like to experience financial hardship, Perceptions of Poverty challenges stereotypical views that we might hold about people who receive Centrelink payments. Hopefully it will help us all develop a more compassionate attitude to people who struggle financially.

The Salvation Army interacts with approximately one million people each year; some of these people have complex needs, some are homeless, some are in financial crisis, some have experienced violence, some are impacted by substance abuse, some are having temporary financial difficulties and need a hand.

All of them want a better life for themselves and their loved ones. Some of them may only connect with The Salvation Army for assistance once in their lives. For others, life experiences and some of the hard knocks they have felt have left a bitter taste. They need to experience love and acceptance.

Our perceptions of poverty are shaped by our own experiences and our place in life. Some of us may have experienced poverty and can empathise with people who are doing it tough. Others just can’t understand what it’s like to go without. There are even some people who might tend to judge people and blame them for their own plight.

We all respond differently to the things that life throws at us. A caring society tries to support people when they are down. William Booth, the founder of The Salvation Army, coined the phrase ‘the Cab Horse Charter’. This related to his observation of horses that pulled London cabs in the late 1800s.

‘When in the streets of London a Cab Horse, weary or careless or stupid, trips and falls and lies stretched out in the midst of traffic, there is no question of debating how he came to stumble before we try to get him on his legs again,’ he noted.

‘When he is down he is helped up, and while he lives he has food, shelter and work.’ This was a useful analogy for how the early Salvation Army supported people struggling with poverty and disadvantage.

Booth’s compelling words motivated his team to ensure people submerged in poverty could access the same basic essentials of life afforded to beasts of burden. The Cab Horse Charter still speaks to us. It encourages us to help people up when they are down, not sit around debating as to why or how they came to be there. We look to create a society where everyone has access to food, shelter and work, and the opportunity to achieve their hopes and dreams.

For a copy of Perceptions of Poverty email: socialprogramme@aus.salvationarmy.org

**Bella’s story**

Bella* grew up as a poor child and teenager in an Australian country town. She knew what it meant to go to bed hungry. But life wasn’t always that way. For the first years of their lives life was often joyful for the little girl and her siblings, until their parents’ marriage broke up.

Bella grew to know the misery of exclusion; of being teased by classmates for being ‘poor’. She missed out on several school excursions and camps. ‘I was acutely aware that I was different; we just didn’t have the money to send me on extra activities like camps,’ says Bella. ‘Mum did her best but they were hard times.’

It was as a young teenager that Bella, her siblings and her mother came into contact with their local Salvation Army corps. Bella’s mother gained some much-needed emotional and material support from caring people. Things really began to change for Bella and her family. The practical help from The Salvation Army was important, Bella says, but the main difference was ‘that someone really cared about our future’.

Discussing poverty can seem unreal to many members of Australia’s wealthy consumerist society. It can be hard for middle-class, ‘well-off’ Australians to relate to the shame and blame that Bella experienced as a ‘poor’ child. The Salvation Army is committed to fighting against poverty for children like Bella.

*Name changed to protect privacy.

**Peter’s story**

Peter*, a boat builder by trade, took over the family business from his father. He was good at it. Peter built pleasure boats fitted out with all the latest navigational equipment and passenger comforts. The larger, ocean-going vessels could cost well in excess of $1 million.

Peter’s success brought with it many rewards—his two-storey home, with inground pool and spa, home entertainment centre and expansive living spaces. Things were going so well for Peter that he refurbished and expanded his business, expecting to recoup the investment in one to two years.

But as the Global Financial Crisis worsened, Peter’s orders fell by 60%, especially in high-end luxury boats. ‘I thought it would be a short downturn; we just had to wait it out,’ he said.

What had seemed a great investment a few months previously led to the business failing. Peter struggled to salvage anything from the business. He took to easing his anxiety with a few drinks at night, which quickly got out of control. ‘I lost everything,’ Peter says. ‘I got to a point where I just didn’t care anymore. I was an alcoholic.’

The next year, a chance meeting with a mate led to Peter being assisted at his local Salvation Army centre. Peter received help for the real issues that troubled him—self-worth and self-respect. He also received help for his addiction.

‘Success is about who you are, not material possessions,’ he realises now. Peter is slowly rebuilding his life. He is working for another boat builder and enjoys doing what he does well.

*Name changed to protect privacy.

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**Dial for direction**

South Australia divisional Community Support Services network director Margaret Davies says the statewide financial counselling hotline service assists more than 10 clients a day, a figure that is likely to rise to more than 20 clients per day. ‘Our service is more than a simple referral to other services,’ she explains. ‘We help over the phone, as well as arranging for some clients to come in and meet with us.

‘These are not the people we traditionally think of as experiencing poverty. Some of the people we assist have never had to ask for help in their lives. These new clients are well-educated and come from middle-class families.’

Margaret says, following the global financial crisis, that new clients are using The Salvation Army’s services including ‘people who are under-employed, those suffering from mortgage stress, people who have had working hours reduced, and those battling with increasing rises in tenancy or who are at risk of having their tenancy terminated’.

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**~ A prayer ~**

Our compassion is known by our love for the least

When justice and equity remain elusive,
And wealth does not trickle down,
Can we believe the myth makers and spin doctors
Or reflect... we have failed those most in need.

When church charity ensures nothing changes,
And the poor view life through a chemical haze,
Can we say, duty done, sleep well, be at ease,
Or reflect... we have failed; our sister in need.

When generation on generation fails,
And we blame those at the end of the line,
Can we feel secure in the knowledge we are fine,
Or reflect.... We have failed our brother in need.

Lord, forgive us our indifference;
Our poverty of soul,
Moments of smug self-interest;
Failure to challenge gross inequity,
Battlers, bewildered and broken,
Door shut tight in their face,
And ‘Let justice roll down like a river,
Righteousness, a never ending stream.’

~ Major Graeme McClimont
In the past 40 years or so, there has been a growing rediscovery and appreciation of what has been called God’s ‘preferential option for the poor’.

A survey of the Bible, looking for references to the poor, the widow, the orphan and the resident alien (read ‘refugee’), reveals a multitude of examples of this subject. We are constantly encouraged, exhorted, even legislated to care for those who are vulnerable in every society throughout the ages. God’s apparent siding with the poor reaches a peak when Jesus, in the judgment scene in Matthew 25:31–46, tells us that ‘whenever you did it to the least of these you did it to me’.

This message, that Jesus is incarnate in the poor, brings to light a new connection between the text of Matthew 26:11 (‘You will always have the poor with you’) and the Immanuel declaration in Matthew 28:20 (‘I am with you always’). This isn’t just abstract theologising. Jesus of Nazareth was born poor. He lived among the poor and the marginalised, and died having been judged a as a criminal. His identity is tied from beginning to end with the struggle of the poor. To understand Christianity from outside this context is to risk creating a conquering messiah at the expense of the suffering servant.

Dorothy Day, one of the founders of the Catholic Worker Movement, talks about this ongoing incarnation as part of our motivation for mission: ‘It is no use saying that we are born two thousand years too late to give room to Christ…now it is with the voice of our contemporaries that he speaks, with the eyes of store clerks, factory workers, and children that he gazes; with the hands of office workers, slum dwellers, and suburban housewives that he gives. It is with the feet of soldiers and tramps that he walks, and with the heart of anyone in need that he longs for shelter. And giving shelter or food to anyone who asks for it, or needs it, is giving it to Christ.’

It’s this understanding of a Christianity rooted in the experience of the poor that calls all people into God’s mission in the world—a mission of justice, equality, and radical sharing that anticipates God’s kingdom.

Captain Jason Davies-Kildea
social programme secretary
Melbourne Central Division

*Dorothy Day, On Pilgrimage, p.35.

The Salvation Army was born in a time when poverty, as a response to the changes of the Industrial Revolution, was creating havoc in England and much of Europe. The Booths believed that the Christian gospel was for ‘the whosoever’ and so were the resources of our social programs. It is little wonder that Christians with such a heritage continue the fight against poverty. They are not alone.

Jewish prophets often judged their kings not on economic or strategic military success, but on their treatment of the poor: people such as widows, orphans, strangers, migrants and refugees.

Jesus told stories highlighting the message that it was those on the margins who were the guests at God’s banquet.

Any faith-based organisation that stands within the Judeo-Christian tradition must have justice at its heart. What does that mean for our commitment as a faith-based organisation as we confront poverty in the 21st century?

It means we must pursue effective partnerships with governments and other agencies to ensure we develop an inclusive and equitable society. We must advocate for refugees and migrants to promote justice and acceptance. We must move away from welfare dependency to pursue ongoing justice through real jobs, real futures and real access to community resources. As a faith-based organisation we must agitate for commitment from governments and corporate organisations to build inclusive communities. More than ever, faith-based organisations need to be major contributors to building opportunity and potential-rich communities.

Australia has been seen historically as a ‘positive social experiment’. We had a sense of expectation about the lucky country, holding a place for all. It’s time to rediscover that vision and attack poverty with renewed determination.

Major Robyn Fernihough
territorial social programme secretary
Elli McGavin
territorial social policy and programme development manager