

## Measuring Australian attitudes to poverty

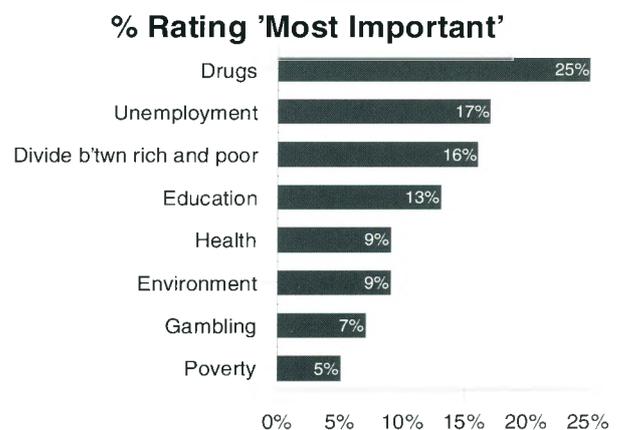
In late 1999 the Brotherhood of St Laurence undertook a wide-reaching qualitative exploration of Australians' attitudes towards and understandings of poverty. This research, spanning New South Wales, Victoria and Tasmania, was undertaken in the light of service experience and other research data which indicated the emergence of a hardening of attitudes towards poverty.

The qualitative research revealed that notwithstanding their limited understanding of the nature of poverty in Australia, the community was very concerned about a perceived widening divide between rich and poor and its implications for society as a whole. The current survey was undertaken with a view to measuring the strength of viewpoints in relation to poverty and how these differ between demographic groups.

Four hundred random telephone interviews were undertaken in January 2000 with people aged 18 years or more, spread across metropolitan and rural New South Wales, Victoria and Tasmania. Age and sex quotas were applied to the sample and the data was weighted to ABS census data at the analysis stage. A summary of the key study findings is set out below.

### Top three issues: drugs, unemployment and growing divide

In the context of eight prompted issues, poverty *per se* is not identified as the 'most important issue facing Australian society today'. Indeed, only 5 per cent of the sample identify it thus, with 22 per cent overall placing it in the top three importance positions. The drugs problem overwhelms responses, with 25 per cent of those sampled citing the issue as the 'most important' one facing Australia. However, unemployment (17 per cent) and the divide between rich and poor (16 per cent) are also issues which are at the forefront of people's thinking. The only other aspect reaching double digit 'most important' figures is education (13 per cent).

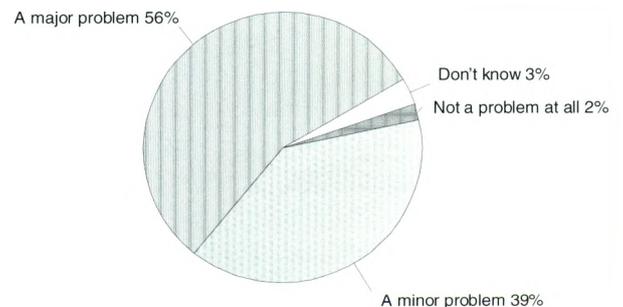


### Poverty is a problem

Although poverty does not emerge as the top issue in a hierarchical sense, more than one-in-two people (56 per cent) think poverty in Australia is a major problem.

A further 39 per cent describe it as a minor problem and only 2 per cent dismiss poverty out of hand.

### Poverty in Australia is...



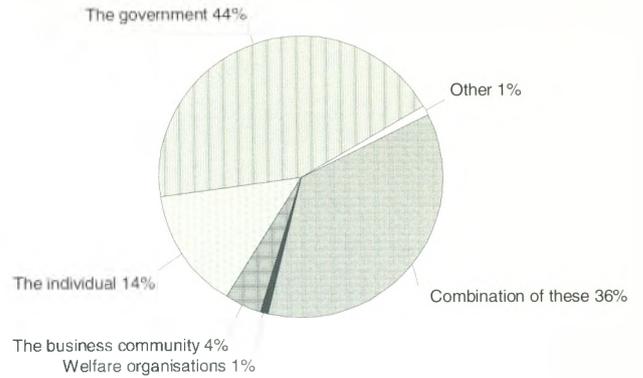
This survey of Australians' attitudes to poverty is part of the Brotherhood's Understanding Poverty project supported by funding from the Myer Foundation, the Hector Waldron Pride Trust, the Morris Family Trust and the G. Brooke Hutchings Bequest.

The survey was made possible through the generous contribution of Millward Brown Australia, who provided their services in the collection and analysis of the data, as well as Bill Callaghan of RMIT University who assisted with extra statistical analysis.

### Whose responsibility?

Forty-four per cent of those surveyed believe the government has the major responsibility for reducing poverty. The next most common response—at 36 per cent—is a combination of government, individuals, the business community and welfare organisations. While 14 per cent attach primary responsibility to the individual, 4 per cent believe the business community has the major responsibility.

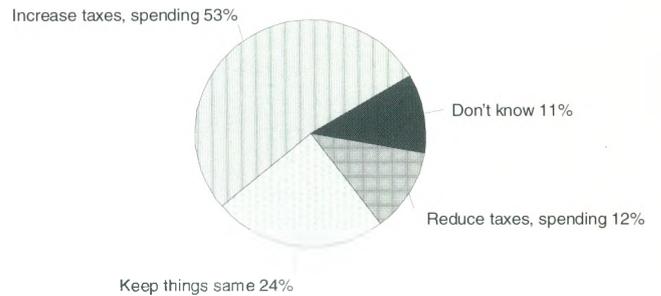
### Major Responsibility for Reducing Poverty



### Taxation and spending on poverty

Most people—53 per cent of the sample—favour a slight increase in taxes along with increased spending on poverty. One-quarter vote for maintaining the status quo and 12 per cent favour reducing taxes slightly and reducing spending on poverty. A rather high 11 per cent of respondents declined to answer this question.

### Preference re Taxation and Spending on Poverty



### Attitudes to poverty

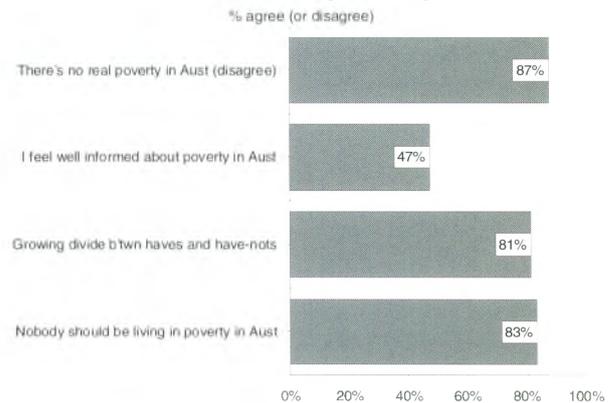
People's attitudes to poverty were gauged via agree/disagree responses to a series of statements developed in the qualitative research phase. The following charts present the levels of agreement (or disagreement) with each statement.

#### Perceptions

While people know that poverty exists—a very high 87 per cent *disagree* there is no real poverty in Australia—they are less certain about what this means. Only 47 per cent feel well informed about poverty in Australia (47 per cent do not feel informed).

They are more definite that there is a growing divide between the haves and have-nots in Australia—81 per cent of those interviewed agree that this is the case. And, equally, there is a strong view that no-one should be living in poverty in a country like Australia (83 per cent agree).

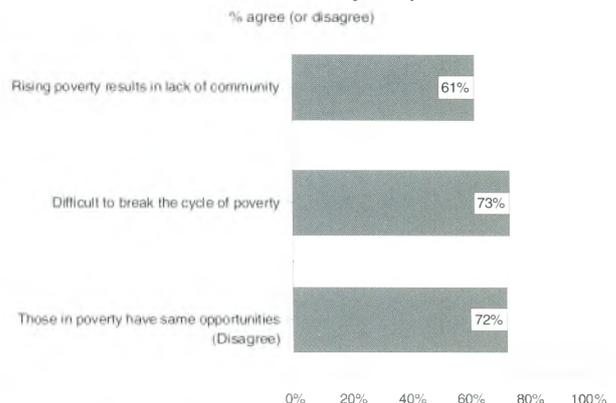
#### Attitudes to Poverty: Perceptions



#### Impacts

The qualitative research (*Growing apart: a new look at poverty in Australia*) revealed a high level of concern about community meltdown. In this survey, six out of 10 people agree that the rise in poverty has lead to a lack of community cohesion. Almost three-quarters of the sample believe it is difficult to break the cycle once you are living in poverty. While much public discourse has centred on the opportunities afforded to those in poverty, this survey shows 72 per cent of respondents *disagree* that people in poverty have the same opportunities as other Australians.

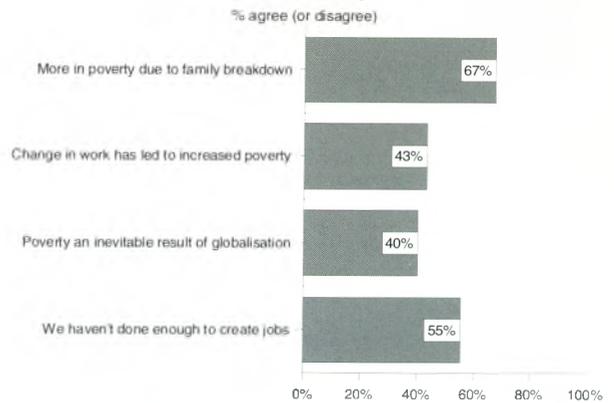
#### Attitudes to Poverty: Impacts



## Causes

The qualitative research revealed a perceptual association between family breakdown and poverty. In this survey we found 67 per cent agreement that more people are living in poverty these days due to family breakdown. However, people are less convinced that the change in work patterns to more part-time and casual jobs has led to an increase in poverty: 43 per cent agree and 47 per cent disagree that this is the case, with 11 per cent remaining undecided. Likewise, people are fairly evenly split regarding the contention that poverty in Australia is an inevitable result of globalisation: 40 per cent agree, 45 per cent disagree and 15 per cent are undecided. However, 55 per cent of the sample believe we haven't done enough to create jobs in order to reduce poverty (30 per cent disagree).

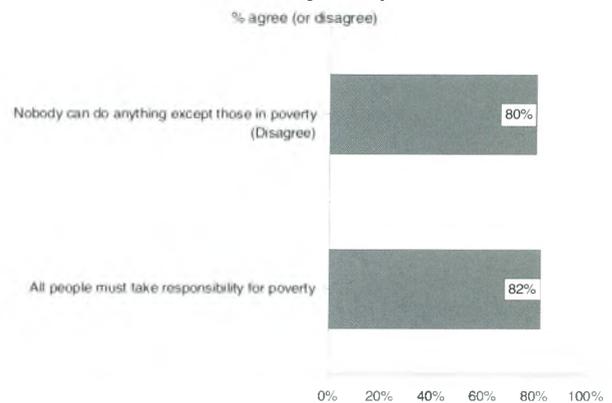
### Attitudes to Poverty: Causes



## Responsibilities

The potential within the community to address poverty is highlighted by the finding that 80 per cent of people *disagree* that nobody can do anything about poverty except the people who are actually experiencing it. What's more, 82 per cent of the sample agree that all people must take a personal responsibility for overcoming poverty.

### Attitudes to Poverty: Responsibilities

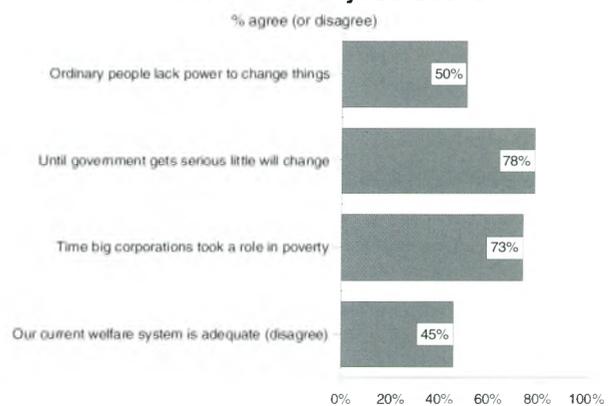


## Solutions

Not everyone feels empowered when it comes to resolving poverty, however, with 50 per cent agreeing that ordinary people lack the power to change things (44 per cent disagree). A desire for leadership from policy makers is indicated by the 78 per cent agreement level that until the government gets serious about poverty very little will change.

For almost three-quarters of the sample it is time that big corporations took a more active role in alleviating poverty. Respondents are polarised as to the adequacy of our current welfare system to cater for the needs of low income people—44 per cent agree and 45 per cent disagree that this is the case.

### Attitudes to Poverty: Solutions

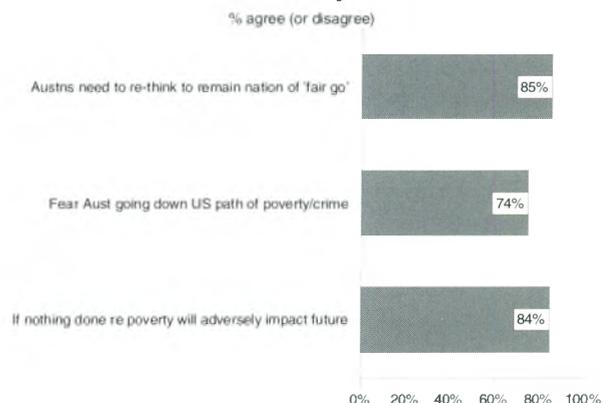


## The future

These final statements relate to the problem of poverty and Australia's future. Australians need to re-think their attitudes to poverty if we are to remain the nation of the fair go, according to 85 per cent of those surveyed. Three-quarters of the sample fear we are already going down the US path with increasing poverty and crime.

Perhaps the most telling finding is that 84 per cent of those surveyed believe if we don't do something about poverty now it will have an adverse impact on Australia's future.

### Attitudes to Poverty: The Future



## Demographic variations

As with any survey, the strength of opinion tends to vary between demographic subgroups. Analysis of demographic data reveals some interesting findings:

- Young people (18 to 34-year-olds) are less likely than their older counterparts to identify drugs as the most important issue facing Australia today; to them, the top issue is unemployment.
- In general, while women show greater concern about poverty, for men the real problem is the divide between rich and poor. Women more readily associate the social issues of family breakdown, lack of community and inadequate jobs creation with poverty. It is men, however, who are most likely to fear we are already going down the US path with poverty and crime.
- Each city or rural area studied tends to have its own way of looking at poverty. In brief, Melbourne is very concerned about poverty and rates it seriously. Sydney tends to stand a little apart from the problem: it is the city less likely to be aware of a growing divide or to feel well informed on the subject. Country Victoria is uncertain about the extent of real poverty in Australia and about equality of opportunity yet is most concerned that something is done about poverty in order not to impact on Australia's future. Country NSW takes a serious stance on poverty and assigns responsibility to governments, corporations and 'ordinary people'. Hobart and country Tasmania are the areas where concern about poverty, its causes and impacts is highest: both register a high degree of knowledge about the causes and impacts of poverty but tend to feel a little disempowered when it comes to changing things.

## The challenges

This study reveals that the vast majority of people know that poverty exists in Australia and believe that it should not. However, it also presents a number of challenges to the community's desire for an Australia free of poverty. One of the most important findings from the research is the lack of definition surrounding poverty in Australia.

Few dispute that poverty exists. Most are very concerned about it, whether for selfish or selfless reasons, but very often they fail to recognise it within their own community.

We ask Australians to stop turning a blind eye to the poverty that does exist in their streets, their suburbs, their towns, and to make it their business to become informed about poverty.

Further, a challenge is thrown out to governments to show leadership in the face of extensive poverty as well as developing practical measures to address it, and to corporations to adopt better citizenship practices in the way they run their business. It is necessary for all to understand that people in poverty do not have the same opportunities enjoyed by other Australians and to work towards redressing this imbalance.

This summary is based on the full report, *Poverty in Australia: measuring community attitudes*, written by Jeannette Johnson.

Other reports from the Understanding Poverty project may also be purchased from the Brotherhood of St Laurence:

Jeannette Johnson & Janet Taylor, *Growing apart: a new look at poverty in Australia*.

Jeannette Johnson, *The invisible Australians: community understandings of poverty*.

Denis Muller, *Poverty in Australia: listening to journalists*.

Janet Taylor, *Poverty in Australia: listening to decision-makers*.

Janet Taylor, *Australian conceptions of poverty: reviewing the literature*.

Contact the Publications Unit  
(03) 9483 1386  
publications@bsl.org.au

For further information about the project contact

Janet Taylor  
(03) 9483 1376  
jtaylor@bsl.org.au  
www.bsl.org.au

© Brotherhood of St Laurence, 2000  
Design and layout Andy Macrae



BROTHERHOOD  
of ST LAURENCE

Helping people build better lives