



BROTHERHOOD
of St LAURENCE

Poverty in Australia:

Developing community dialogue
Report of a qualitative research study

Jeannette Johnson

February 2002

The Understanding Poverty project

Other Brotherhood of St Laurence publications from the Understanding Poverty project:

Jeanette Johnson, *The invisible Australians: community understandings of poverty* (2000)

Jeanette Johnson, *Poverty in Australia: measuring community attitudes* (2000)

Denis Muller, *Poverty in Australia: listening to journalists* (2000)

Janet Taylor, *Poverty in Australia: listening to decision makers* (2000)

Janet Taylor, *Australian conceptions of poverty: reviewing the literature* (2000)

Jeanette Johnson & Janet Taylor, *Growing apart: a new look at poverty in Australia*
(summary of the five above reports) (2000)

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1. Background

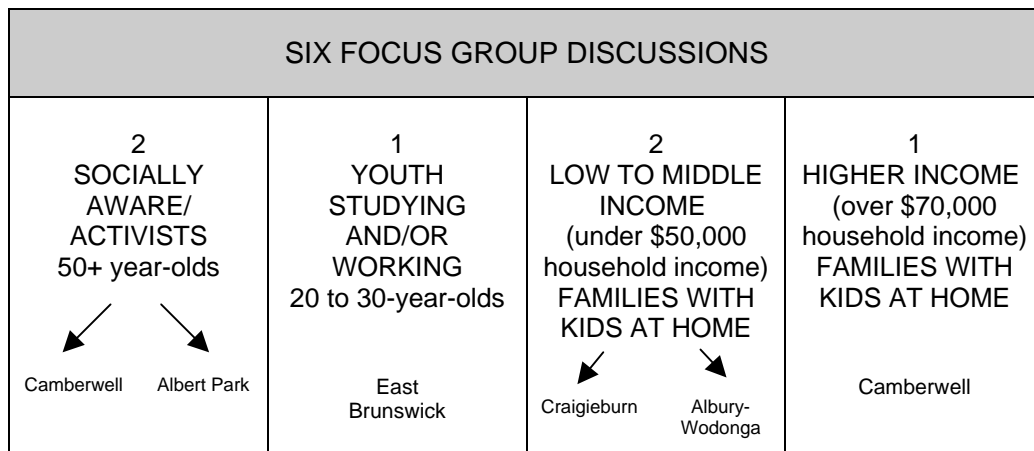
The Brotherhood of St Laurence has a vision for an Australia free of poverty. Following on from findings of the *Understanding Poverty* research conducted in 1999-2000, the Social Action and Research department of the Brotherhood undertook a small-scale qualitative market research study aimed at exploring ways of developing dialogue about poverty. The notion of ‘dialogue’ extends to:

- a two-way conversation between the Brotherhood and the community, including an exchange of ideas and opinions about poverty, with the aim of some agreement
- encouraging debate and discussion within the community
- encouraging the public to communicate with and put pressure on the federal government to take action on poverty.

This study was concerned with developing dialogue in the general community and was guided by the following research objectives:

- to explore reactions to the call for ‘an Australia free of poverty’;
- to explore how the Brotherhood can best communicate with specific general public target groups about its vision for an Australia free of poverty;
- to determine which ideas and themes are most likely to invite debate and/or a call to action on poverty and also to understand the barriers to such debate; and
- to evaluate which information sources or media are most appropriate in communicating with target groups.

In order to address these objectives, six focus group discussions were conducted in June 2001. The groups were structured as follows.



The groups comprised a mix of males and females, with seven to nine participants in each. Focus group participants were recruited with the assistance of community groups and also via ‘snowballing’ or personal referral. As a result, within each group there were at least a few participants who were known to each other.

The focus groups were moderated using the conative style or approach, which is participatory and free flowing. Participants were exposed to a series of concepts or positioning statements around poverty. Their reactions to these statements were probed and discussions facilitated to broaden to attitudes to poverty, levels of knowledge about poverty, and responses to it. In this way the moderator was able to tease out the shared experiences and values of the groups as well as triggers which were likely to stimulate action on poverty. The perspectives of four discrete groups were explored—older socially aware activists, youth, low to middle income families and higher income families. These are compared and contrasted, where appropriate, in this summary report.

The focus groups were of 1½ hours’ duration and were moderated by Jeannette Johnson. Sally Jope, Research and Policy Officer with the Brotherhood of St Laurence, observed all groups.

We thank the Community Centres in Albury and Craigieburn; Borderlands, Camberwell; the City of Boroondara; and the Save Albert Park group for their kind assistance with recruiting participants and providing venues for the focus group discussions.

Qualitative research is designed to explore attitudes, and generate and test ideas. It is not intended to be a precise or definitive index of what happens in the segments represented by group participants. This report should be interpreted with that constraint in mind.

2. Setting the context

Exposure to the concept statements confirmed previous findings about some of the barriers to a full and participatory debate about poverty. When we ask Australians—as represented in these focus group discussions—to talk about poverty we are almost invariably confronted by two overriding sticking points:

- the lack of a clear definition of what poverty is in Australia today; and
- the belief that society attaches increasing importance to the pursuit of individualism at the expense of community.

It is therefore necessary to place reactions to the various concept statements within the context of these two factors.

The definition of poverty

As found in previous research, the word ‘poverty’ does not, at face value, describe the situation of those living below the poverty line in Australia. All four socio-economic groups participating in the study struggled with the terminology. Poverty in Australia is often presented in the form of statistics rather than the visual imagery of the Third World or of U.S.–type ghettos, for example, and people tend to be cynical about statistical information:

*How was it arrived at? And, how do people become part of that statistic?
(Socially aware/activist)*

People in poverty often don’t *look* poor. Poverty can be more geographic or spatial than it is physically apparent. Poverty in Australia may be more relative than absolute. High profile images of homelessness and street begging are usually the only ones available to the community and these can result in disbelief and annoyance rather than empathy. As a society, we have adopted a ‘blame the victim’ mentality. Some see this as having been made possible by the use of economic rather than social indicators to describe poverty.

For many people, ‘poverty’ is simply too big a word:

‘Poverty’ is used for every part of the world where there are economic, food and political problems... maybe we have to discover a new word for poverty.

(Socially aware/activist)

As will be seen later, it is only by the use of human stories and imagery that many can begin to come to terms with what poverty is in this country. There was some reference to recent Smith Family TV advertising that provoked thoughts about the dimensions and nature of Australian poverty.

The Smith Family advertising gets to me—the black and white images—because it shows you the reality for a lot of families out there.

(Low to middle income earner)

I always thought that sort of stuff was from countries that are much poorer but there it is in your own backyard and you are actually looking at it on TV.

(Low to middle income earner)

Strong responses are elicited to words such as ‘struggle’, ‘homelessness’, ‘inequality’, ‘unemployment’ and other descriptors that could relate to poverty although, in themselves, they do not necessarily define

poverty. The word ‘poverty’ tends to evoke reactions of confusion, disbelief, hopelessness or denial. The significance of terminology such as ‘wealth divide’ was explored. While this is a term that the socially aware/activists appear to understand and respond to, others see it as clichéd and lacking any true portrayal of what it means to live in poverty.

Group participants believe it is ultimately the role of welfare organisations such as the Brotherhood to describe situations that reflect poverty and allow the community to draw their own conclusions:

Build a case for poverty by talking about kids who miss meals, haven't got a house to live in... then come to the conclusion that we are talking about poverty, rather than hitting them with poverty up-front.

(Socially aware/activist)

Individualism versus community

Very different perspectives were at play in this study but a common thread that emerged was the perception of a trend away from community toward individualism. Some groups expressed strong concern about this perceived rising individualism, while others appeared to accept it—albeit with some concern—as the inevitable result of a faster pace and changing pressures in life today.

Today there is conflict between individualism and feeling part of the community. There has been a tremendous growth in the stresses on the individual at the expense of community interest.

(Socially aware/activist)

While unable to be definitive in terms of how the fragmentation of community and move towards individualism has come about, study participants often illustrated this by developments in the workplace, which they see as probably reflective of wider changes in society. Whereas once jobs were long-term and relatively secure, and mutual loyalty between employer and employee was the norm, today—they say—both the jobs market and the workplace have become highly competitive. The move to casualisation and contract work is in large part held responsible. The demands placed upon workers for high productivity and performance, to some extent underpinned by a perceived large pool of unemployed ‘waiting in the wings’ for their jobs, means that many workers are feeling less secure. Not only are they required to work longer hours to prove their worth, but also they see the workplace as becoming harsher and far more competitive. They refer to the stresses and strains of a more challenging and, even hostile, workplace as one reason for the perceived intensification of individualism at the expense of community.

I work in the software industry. They will give you lots of money but they will turn around and sack you in a heartbeat... That loyalty between employers and employees is not really there and that filters through to your outlook on the rest of the world.

(Higher income earner)

At my work if the boys don't pack 150 boxes per hour, the next day they are out. I saw a bloke pack 1,000 boxes one day and then he was flat on his back in pain. They never got him back.

(Low to middle income earner)

They talk about the demise of many Australian ‘icon’ employers feeding the pool of unemployed as another media-driven image that heightens insecurity.

You see big places closing down and you see people who have been there for years saying I'll never get another job... Places like Arnotts, the big corporates.

(Higher income earner)

Where I work, because everyone is losing their jobs we have what is called a morale committee and we have get-togethers and dress-ups... We had a farewell for our manager who left last week.

(Low to middle income earner)

Lifestyles beyond the workplace also require individuals to compete more sharply than may have been the case in the past. This is not the preserve of higher income earners only. The low to middle-income segment (including some unemployed study participants) also spoke of their desire for training and skills acquisition to 'get ahead'. A common factor is the aspiration to achieve 'something better' for their families.

It's a 'dog eat dog' world now. There is probably less of a sense of community. You've got to do what you can to make it for yourself and your family.

(Higher income earner)

We have a right as parents to think of a better future for our children... That's what I'm striving for, to give my kids a better life than I have had.

(Low to middle income earner)

The imagery conveyed in much of today's television advertising also centres on the importance of the individual:

Like AMP says in its TV ad, the most important person is me.

(Socially aware/activist)

The (relatively older) socially aware activists who participated in the study also lamented the growing individualisation of society. In comparison with younger participants, they have had more time to observe this perceived fragmentation of community. They refer to the days of the Great Depression and the Second World War as examples of a time when Australians pooled their resources to help others in need. Now, they perceive Australian society to be separating on the basis of income. While not having reached the stage of U.S.-style 'gated communities', they believe that the signs are that Australia is moving in the same direction as the 'rich' strive to protect themselves from the 'poor'.

[Poverty] makes it a society that nobody would want and you will find the rich barricading themselves up in enclaves... Beacon Cove is already set up for that.

(Socially aware/activist)

In spite of the acknowledgement of a current trend away from community to individualism, a number of participants provided encouragement that people may be receptive to messages which invite people to value others for the sake of a more harmonious society with a more promising future.

3. The concept statements

Statements that define poverty

While the order of exposure to the various statements was rotated within the focus groups, the following statement was usually used as a starting point to focus discussions:

- In 1996, 1.6 million people in Australia, 11% of the population, were living below the poverty line.
Can we afford to treat them as ‘statistics’?

This statement tends to evoke one of two reactions:

- What is the poverty line? How is it calculated?
- or
- That embarrasses me.

While the statement does place some boundaries around the issue of poverty, it does little to define what it means to be ‘poor’ in Australia today:

I'd like to know what they classify as the poverty line. They can twist statistics to get whatever they want.

(Low to middle income earner)

The poverty line has a dollar value that somebody has decided and it is probably not always necessarily correct.

(Low to middle income earner)

My first thought is ‘What is the poverty line?’ How do you define that? What sort of conditions are these people living in?

(Higher income earner)

One point six million people is a lot of people and, living in the comfort that I live in, I would find it hard to believe. It doesn't prompt me to act.

(Higher income earner)

The statement leads to long discussions about a better way to present the facts. Comparative data of the average Australian wage and the poverty line, or the income level of a family with two children which meets the definition of poverty would go some way towards allowing others to contrast their own economic situation. This kind of information, they say, would be more motivational than a bald statement of percentages and proportions.

I think it is important to know the poverty line because then you can relate to it. You can say I am this far above or below the poverty line.

(Youth)

The human element of poverty is missing from the statement and thus while it can help define the problem it can also be easily dismissed. One higher income earner contrasted this method of information provision with a recent direct mail approach from the Brotherhood of St Laurence which presented the story of ‘Claire’, a heroin addict.

That story got to me. I was there with the credit card straight away. It was the story of somebody and it could have been anybody... it was only because of her circumstances that she was in that position.

(Higher income earner)

If a statement about the proportion of Australians living below the poverty line is to be used, however, a more positive reaction can be elicited from a simplified claim, such as ‘One in ten Australians are living below the poverty line’.

The use of the word ‘statistics’ in the second part of the longer statement is confronting. It may serve to shock people into taking notice. Even the third person ‘them’ grates:

Who is ‘them’? The 11 per cent?

Overall, though, while the statement goes some way towards defining the problem by presenting the dimensions of poverty, it needs to be accompanied by further information—whether pictorial or verbal—to which people can relate:

I think there is a place for both [statistics and stories]. The individual human story can be too easily dismissed as an aberration. The only way you convey the size of the problem is in terms of how widespread it is.

(Socially aware/activist)

Caution is needed however, in the way personal stories are presented to the public. The human story also carries the risk of attributing fault—a tactic that can be used by government and others to acquit themselves of responsibility, according to some study participants. They offered the example of the work-for-the-dole scheme, which some see as a ploy to imply that there are jobs available for those who *want* to work.

- Poverty means that not all Australians are getting a fair go.
How would you feel if you couldn’t give your child three meals a day and an untroubled sleep every night?

Previous research indicated that the notion of the ‘fair go’ may be important in the way Australians see themselves. This premise was explored further in the current study.

To both the socially aware/activists and the youth participating in this study, the term ‘fair go’ is spurious and not descriptive of how Australian society is, or was in the past:

‘Fair go’ is just one of those throw-away Australian things.

(Youth)

While egalitarianism has long been part of Australia’s self-described identity, some see this as a false claim based on isolated examples, such as the successes achieved by post-war migrants. They add that a ‘fair go’ has never been apportioned to some minority segments, citing Aboriginal people and early Chinese migrants as examples.

I think that’s why we as a nation have difficulty coming to terms with poverty. We’ve always had a lot of poverty... it’s embarrassing. We can’t culturally come to terms with poverty in our own country... if we did we’d probably deal with it much better.

(Socially aware/activist)

Youth, in particular, tend to dismiss terms such as ‘fair go’ as too generalist:

*Why can't you be specific and say something about education or jobs?
(Youth)*

And people from families on lower incomes see little change in the way society is structured:

*Has it changed from the old days? It was always a class system.
(Low to middle income earner)*

Nor does the term ‘fair go’ have mileage with the higher income families; they see themselves as ‘struggling’—at work, to provide for their families, to ‘get ahead’. Finally, those from a migrant background can easily dismiss it.

*I identify myself as Australian but because of my immigrant background I don't really identify with that 'fair go'... that's not necessarily where I'm coming from.
(Higher income earner)*

Essentially the notion of a ‘fair go’ does not sit well in the context of the previously discussed climate of individualism and struggle. Higher income earners, too, are playing out their lives under what they say is increased stress, albeit of a different nature.

It is the second part of this statement, however, that has some pull. Children who are regularly going without food is a side of poverty that not only has emotional impact, it is also viewed as a credible consequence of poverty in Australia.

*I don't believe in stealing things but I'd be tempted to if my children were going without food.
(Socially aware/activist)*

*If you get rid of the 'fair go', it's a very impactful statement because it talks about the needs of children.
(Low to middle income earner)*

*You bring children in and it's a new ballgame.
(Low to middle income earner)*

But, while children without food can tug at the heartstrings and promote interest in poverty, this is not the case for children without shoes.

- **Poverty in Australia is... mothers who can't afford to buy shoes for their children**

For the higher income earners, this claim is either too ‘out there’, vague, or—because it emphasises the mother’s role—sexist:

*I can't imagine that there are people out there who can't afford to buy shoes for their kids. That's just too far from my reality.
(Higher income earner)*

I think it's vague because shoes could cover Reeboks to school shoes. It's putting the responsibility back on the female side – you also need to recognise it is the man's responsibility.

(Higher income earner)

Statements about the future

- Can we move forward while we still have poverty in Australia?
An Australia free of poverty will mean a better future for everyone.

This statement provokes considerable debate on the idea of an Australia free of poverty. The initial reaction is almost invariably that it is an unachievable aim, a 'fairy tale', to the low and higher income earner alike:

I think it's a bit of a dream to believe we will never have poverty particularly now that there are more people reaching retirement age without any savings behind them. There is going to be a far bigger proportion of people needing help in the future than what there is to support them. I think poverty is going to increase.

(Low to middle income earner)

You have more homelessness now and the rental market is pushing people further into debt.

(Low to middle income earner)

By contrast, the reaction of the socially aware/activists is that economically the country will move forward, particularly in view of the perceived widespread acceptance of a level of unemployment, underemployment and wage poverty that fits the current economic model. But, while the country may progress in economic terms, they see a section of society being left further behind.

There is strong acceptance now that you need to have a degree of unemployment to move ahead.

(Socially aware/activist)

This raises the question amongst this segment of the need for a more accurate measure of the nation's growth. While gross domestic product (GDP) may measure economic progress, it is not in itself a measure of a country's wellbeing and does not take into account social indicators.

Perhaps they could work out an equation whereby the 11% [living below the poverty line] is divided into the growth pattern and you could then see we are not going forward at all, we are moving backwards.

(Socially aware/activist)

The notion of 'a better future for everyone' taps into some powerful triggers. It causes people to reflect on the impacts that poverty has, or will have, on their own lives and on the consequences of *not* doing something about poverty.

I don't think society should ignore poverty because we will all end up paying the price – having people who are poor and angry.

(Higher income earner)

- Poverty in Australia is seen to be bottom of the rung, permanent, inescapable.

Can you imagine an Australia free of poverty?

This statement is a very challenging one, touching at the core of definitions of poverty and inviting comparisons with overseas images of poverty. Is poverty in Australia bottom of the rung, inescapable? Many have difficulty coming to terms with this definition, highlighting their need for a new image of Australian poverty today.

I think we are the lucky country and everybody is lucky.
(Higher income earner)

I don't think Australians imagine there is poverty.
(Higher income earner)

The statement invites judgements and discussions on relative poverty; and this occurs across the income spectrum.

I see poverty in their lack of esteem, that makes them not want to achieve. It's not just that you haven't got a penny in your pocket, it's a result of not being able to keep a penny in your pocket.
(Low to middle income earner)

The questions it provokes among higher income earners tend to be egocentric; nevertheless an Australia free of poverty does promise a better way of life for all...

If we ignore it what will be the price that society pays in terms of security, in terms of health... is that the sort of thing that Australians will have to look forward to if we don't do something about it?
(Higher income earner)

This, then, leads into exploration of the concept:

- An Australia free of poverty.

In a sense, the strength of this statement or vision is its ability to encourage people to ask questions:

It's a really good vision but I do question how.
(Youth)

That's the point, in a sense—the questioning.
(Youth)

It also asks them to think beyond the square. For the first time, it is offering a positive approach—something that may be a pipedream but something that also represents a goal that everybody can work towards. And, most importantly, it promotes debate around 'What can I do?'

That appeals to me... but what do you want me to do? Don't tell me wishy-washy things. How could I use my skills?
(Higher income earner)

Tell me what to do – if I think I can do it, I'll do it.

(Higher income earner)

'An Australia free of poverty'...I love that. I know all those other things need to be done but I don't see anything happening until we all change.

(Socially aware/activist)

In the final analysis, all agree that such a vision is admirable:

It gives people hope.

- The poor are always with us.
The richest nations on earth can't get rid of poverty. Why should Australia be any different?

Initial reactions to this statement were usually to discount it as:

- a cop-out
- blaming the victim
- defeatist
- a 'give-up' statement
- puts it in the 'too hard basket'
- passive acceptance

The statement is implicitly negative. What it does do, however, is shock some people into seeking arguments against it. While it is harsh and somewhat demeaning, in some sense it is a strong statement.

There are always going to be poor for a whole range of reasons... the issue is how you deal with it.

(Socially aware/activist)

The more we ignore poverty, the more we contribute to the problem.

(Low to middle income earner)

To many, this statement reflects a reality and that's how it derives its strength.

- Growing poverty... the major cause of the social divide in Australia. Australia is heading for a dangerous two-class system—the haves and the have-nots.

The story about the haves and have-nots, the social divide, is not a new one. While the sentiments the statement expresses are relevant, the mode of delivery is often dismissed as hackneyed and clichéd.

That's not news, it's a fact.

(Low to middle income earner)

People don't think we have that huge difference in Australia—the rich and the poor—but it has become a rhetorical statement now.

(Youth)

Likewise, the phrase ‘a dangerous two-class system’ can be dismissed as an advertising shock tactic that’s not fresh or new.

While ‘the haves and have-nots’ may not be news, this statement does tap into some more deeply held concerns in the higher income segment. It starts to describe a more negative society that both groups will ultimately share. It provokes discussions about the wealth divide although, for most, the take-out is a sceptical one:

Will the wealthy be prepared to spread it around?

(Low to middle-income earner)

Statements about the hidden nature of poverty

- Poverty in Australia... it’s there but you can’t see it.
There are desperate families near you with only a few dollars to see them through the week.

Most agree with the truth of this statement and say it confirms their attitudes about the definition of poverty in Australia:

That fits with my experience...I can’t see it.

(Higher income earner)

It does allow them, however, to look for reasons: do people choose not to see poverty or, alternately, do those in poverty strive to hide it?

A lot of people don’t want you to see them...They feel ashamed and degraded.

(Low to middle income earner)

To some, the statement is a self-defeating one:

If you are told you can’t see it, you’re inclined not to look for it.

(Socially aware/activist)

Others see it as directed at higher income people only; it shuts out other sections of the population.

It’s not really talking to me. Maybe it’s talking to South Yarra instead.

(Youth)

It just makes me think what is it that I can see if it’s not poverty.

(Youth)

The second part of the statement—‘desperate families with only a few dollars to see them through the week’—is not sufficiently hard-hitting to provoke action. Any call to action needs to go further than that, with more penetrating examples of poverty.

Ultimately, the concept is vague; to some, this is a positive in that they are disinclined to listen to ‘all those horror stories about poverty’. But simply saying ‘You can’t see it’ is insufficient to inspire the public’s imagination.

- Poverty in Australia... if you take off the blinkers it's all around you. You and I don't ignore poverty. We're usually just too busy to think about it.

According to the lower income earners in our study, there is a certain amount of trepidation in the community when it comes to confronting poverty:

Some people won't acknowledge it because they are too scared they might have to get involved.

(Low to middle income earner)

They see the statement as irrelevant to them and talking to the higher income segment. It is interesting, though, that these people are prepared to acknowledge that 'they probably don't know what poverty looks like'.

This statement provokes an angry reaction among some sections of the community, who claim they are aware of poverty and are not overlooking it. The fact is that they feel helpless and lacking in answers or ways to tackle the problem.

I'd like to know how. Show me how. I'm a fast learner.

(Socially aware/activist)

There are no easy solutions to poverty. It is recognised as an extremely complex area and, therefore, people are looking for ideas and leadership. A bald statement such as this one is seen as providing an easy 'out'.

The higher income segment view the statement in much the same light:

'We're too busy'—whoever has written this is telling people 'You're too busy'. It's not open enough for people.

(Higher income earner)

People might say 'yes that's my excuse, I'm too busy.

(Youth)

Statements about actions on poverty

- Poverty isn't a crime: ignoring it is.

This statement has been used in some of the Brotherhood's direct mail material and it was included for testing in the current study.

This statement is viewed as simple and to the point, because it

- says being poor is not a crime
- doesn't confuse with facts and figures
- shifts the association with crime from the poor to the wealthy
- says 'it's our responsibility'

By saying 'ignoring it', it's getting people to start thinking about it.

(Youth)

When I see that statement, I see a beggar on the street and someone turning away, turning a blind eye.

(Youth)

It tells you a bit about what you should be doing.

(Socially aware/activist)

The statement does cause some discomfort among those who are better off. While this can allow them to switch off, it can also provoke a call to action.

That's a very strong statement.

(Higher income earner)

It's emotional blackmail... if you're living in a middle class suburb you just don't see it.

(Higher income earner)

I like the fact that it's making me feel uncomfortable... With some of the other statements you are too far removed. This one prompts me to think outside my comfort zone.

(Higher income earner)

- We can all work together to rid Australia of poverty. We can put on the best-ever Olympics. Why can't government, companies and individuals cooperate to win the battle against poverty?

This is another message that implies a degree of guilt because it carries no information about steps that can be taken.

It just makes me think 'How?' How do you work together to rid Australia of poverty? The answer is impossible for me to envisage.

(Socially aware/activist)

The statement does bring up thoughts of what is seen as a relatively new notion—that the government, the community and companies can work together to address poverty. It suggests a move from the welfare sector providing support and opens up the prospect of a bigger charter. It is thought important that corporates are brought into the debate, particularly in terms of their employment practices and the perceived generous tax rates that are seen to apply to them.

Ultimately, though, mentioning the Olympics is a bit of a distraction: they created a lot of employment and, some say, resulted in the homeless being moved off the streets. The analogy is not particularly relevant. It is the notion of 'working together' that has currency. It does not go far enough in offering a solution, however.

- By tolerating poverty in Australia, we are saying some people don't count.

The lower income study participants could identify with this statement:

It says you are an embarrassment.

(Low to middle income earner)

That's how I felt when I went in to Uni, trying to improve myself... that I didn't count.

(Low to middle income earner)

Others, however, see this as a helpless statement. It provides no information on what the community can do about poverty, only that they are 'tolerating it'.

I just get a sense of helplessness.

(Socially aware/activist)

Statements about poverty and policy

- Do you have a poverty blindspot?
Do you feel enough has been done to create jobs in Australia?

The first part of this statement—the poverty 'blindspot'—works to make some people feel a little uncomfortable; others, however, can readily dismiss it due to the guilt element.

When the subject of jobs is introduced, it gives the community something concrete to work with. Reactions to the latter part of this statement are generally that not enough has been done to create or maintain jobs. Only a section of the community, however, is able to make the link between poverty and the acceptance of unemployment that appears to fit a particular economic agenda.

While some continue to struggle with the idea that there are simply not enough jobs to go around, others are concerned about a declining manufacturing industry and traditional 'blue collar' jobs:

I don't think they are promoting apprenticeships and positions for people who are not educated... Manufacturing is dying in Australia and that used to provide a lot of work... What is Australia building?

(Higher income earner)

The government has to be the catalyst for job creation.

(Higher income earner)

The socially aware study participants took this argument further to include the working poor:

We have the working poor—people who are obviously not paid enough for the work they do but they are just over the line so they can't get any benefits and they don't have enough to live on.

(Socially aware/activist)

Representing the older age groups, these socially aware/activists also pointed to the declining level of available jobs since the post-war days.

We have a long history of work being freely available and that's where the seventies was the great turning point, when things started getting worse. The notion of the 'fair go' was always based on the belief that anyone who wanted to get work, would [do so]... One of our problems now is that we are still grappling with the fact that there is not full employment.

(Socially aware/activist)

This leads them to seriously question the direction Australia is heading:

There is strong acceptance now that you need to have a degree of unemployment to move ahead... Certainly award rates and the protections for the working poor have been removed... Do you go for the American model or do you go for the European social contract model?

(Socially aware/activist)

Others, however, do not appear to be able to think through the situation to this extent:

- **Poverty in Australia is a result of poor government policies. The government needs to take the lead on eradicating poverty.**

All agree that it is important for the government to take a lead on poverty, particularly with the systemic issues such as education, employment and housing. While this statement provides some answers or actions, it can also serve to let the public 'off the hook'.

I prefer that. It takes some of the blame off us...It's the government's problem and they should be doing more.

(Youth)

You can blame someone else and you don't have to be part of it.

(Youth)

At worst, this statement simply says 'It's the government's problem'. It is not particularly likely to stimulate action on poverty on the part of the community. Moreover, the statement is seen as weak because it fails to say something about the future. Finally, the statement is rejected because some think it will allow people to align themselves with the government's position.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

This study confirms the findings of the *Understanding Poverty* project that poverty in Australia is poorly defined and understood. The word itself continues to describe a situation that is more likely to be beyond our shores. Despite this, there is no other word that is capable of embracing the emotional and physical dimensions of that state of disenfranchisement that is poverty. The study also confirmed that people are becoming more concerned with their own survival in an increasingly competitive society—a pressure that forces them to be more individually than community motivated.

Notwithstanding these two large barriers in the quest to promote debate and discussion about poverty, the research revealed that people are prepared to consider the problem, to varying degrees and in different ways. Not surprisingly, it is only at the most socially aware level that people do not need to compare and contrast their own situation with that of others. Therefore, in communicating about poverty, it is important to steer clear of what could be termed universal arguments—those that imply only small degrees of difference between the struggles of those in poverty and of others.

Poverty in Australia is ‘shocking’. The fact that one in 10 Australians lives below the poverty line is real news. Unfortunately, very few people understand what is meant by ‘the poverty line’. What is perhaps more confronting is the fact that *anybody* in Australia is living in poverty. While poverty – at least poverty in terms of their preconceptions about it – is hidden, there is also a growing sense of unease about the manifestations of poverty in Australia. And there are certainly fears about a future where poverty remains unaddressed.

In discussing the various concept statements about poverty, study participants provided some clear guidance as to approaches that are likely to heighten awareness and those that are not. Essentially, these are:

- Keep it simple and to the point, avoid wordiness.
- Don’t blame me but do encroach on my comfort zone.
- Provide information that is easy to unravel and difficult to dispute.
- Human stories always say more than statistics, but be selective in their use.
- Different levels of information are required for different socio-economic segments.
- Be positive and provide solutions.
- Put the audience in the picture (‘This is what you can do’).

Themes that work best include:

- One in ten Australians are living below the poverty line.
- Poverty isn’t a crime; ignoring it is.
- Poverty affects every one of us.
- How would you feel if you couldn’t give your child three meals a day?
- An Australia free of poverty will mean a better future for everyone.
- Imagine an Australia free of poverty.

The ‘working together’ theme also has credibility, although it needs more investigation to indicate how it could be used.

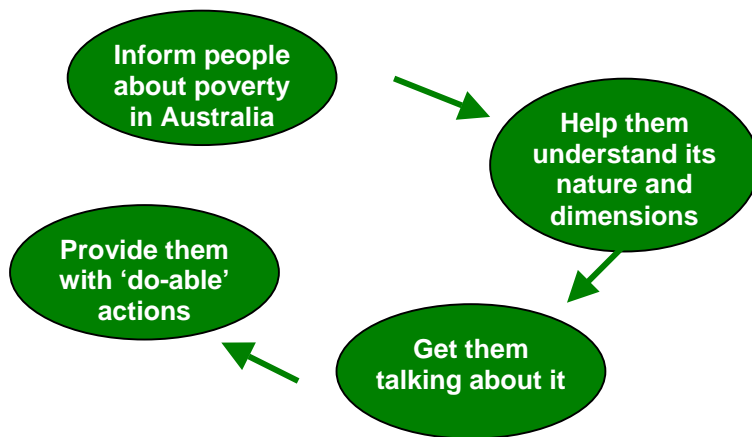
The study also highlighted the importance of ‘describing’ poverty rather than ‘announcing’ it. The public wants to know more about the causative factors such as unemployment, education, housing, and so on. This information, probably best presented in terms of ‘real’ stories, can arouse curiosity and lead them to understand the nature of poverty in Australia.

In terms of media, the general public has come to expect large-scale television, radio and press campaigns. Indeed, the impact of the Smith Family’s current TV campaign was seen in this study. This campaign not only benefits from corporate support but also appears to address some key concerns—the current situation, what may happen in the future, what you can do. It highlights the fact that all children

have potential and that *you* can do something to help them realise it. (The study also highlighted a positive response to a recent Brotherhood campaign centring on 'Claire', the heroin addict.)

There is potential for other media to be utilised in the poverty campaign. Bus sides and other public transport advertising approaches appear to have the potential to carry a cost-effective story to a wide audience. The Brotherhood's own direct mail base obviously cuts through to a segment of the community but it would probably be true to say that, they constitute a 'converted' target.

The study points to a fairly straightforward process of communicating about poverty in Australia. What we must do is:



It is only by entering the debate that the Brotherhood can expect to have a role in it and can work towards its vision for an Australia free of poverty. More work needs to be done in terms of actions that people can take on poverty. The discussions did suggest:

- the development of a poverty indicator that is more 'real' and easier to relate to (as far as the general public is concerned) than the poverty line;
- the conducting of seminars and workshops about poverty;
- bringing higher income earners into direct contact with those in poverty, whether personally or via Brotherhood communications; and
- building a group of supporters, who are fed information and who then work in well planned ways to achieve objectives, for example by writing letters to politicians.

This small-scale study provides helpful insights into some community responses. They are a useful starting point as the Brotherhood embarks on its wider dialogue with Australians and develops the messages which will engage them in working towards an Australia free of poverty.