

# Symposium on Social Inclusion: Introduction

Peter Saunders\*

This Symposium contains a selection of the invited and contributed papers presented at the Australian Social Policy Conference held at the University of New South Wales in July 2003. The biennial conference provides a regular forum for academia, government and non-governmental social policy agencies to discuss research findings relevant to policy makers and practitioners. Its interdisciplinary character and the broad range of topics discussed have encouraged informed, critical dialogue about the strengths, weaknesses and directions of social policy in Australia.

The theme of the 2003 conference, *Social Inclusion*, reflects the increasingly importance that inclusion – both as a process and as an ideal – is now seen to play in the attainment of equity and social justice, as well as personal fulfilment and autonomy. The papers included in this Symposium draw on a range of national and international ideas and experiences relating to how social inclusion has been discussed and implemented in Australia and elsewhere, and how it relates to other important goals such as employment promotion and poverty relief.

The paper by Hugh Stretton is based on his Opening Address to the Conference and serves as a valuable introduction to the topic by focusing on what inclusion means in contemporary Australia and the kinds of strategies that are needed to combat the different manifestations of exclusion. This is followed by an illuminating paper by Jonathan Bradshaw that discusses recent research and policy developments in the United Kingdom that draws on his immense experience working on poverty, needs and related issues. There are many important lessons to be drawn for Australia, not the least of them being the need for political actions

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\* Social Policy Research Centre, University of New South Wales

that support programs that seek to identify and eradicate social exclusion. The UK is still immersed in this task, but it is one that Australia has yet to come to terms with – at least in the policy domain.

In line with the interests of readers of this journal, the other three papers focus specifically on how the labour market and its institutions interact to exclude certain groups. Rosanna Scutella and Mark Wooden draw on data from the new Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey to explore the characteristics of jobless households. The article attempts to fill the gap that currently exists in our knowledge of jobless households in Australia, focusing on the incidence of jobless households, the characteristics of individuals that are associated with membership of a jobless household and some of the financial consequences of living in a jobless household. The authors find that household joblessness in 2001 remains pervasive with strong associations with factors generally thought to influence individual joblessness such as age, education, ethnicity, illness and family background, and that poverty and financial stress are more of a function of household joblessness than individual joblessness.

In their paper, Bruce Bradbury and Jenny Chalmers ask whether people receiving unemployment-related income support are more likely to exit from income support if they live in a stronger labour market. They examine this issue using data from the Department of Family and Community Services Longitudinal Data Set (LDS) and find that, after controlling for other observed characteristics, living in an area with a one percentage point lower unemployment rate is associated with a 5 per cent increase in the probability of exit. This implies a 9 per cent decrease in the mean duration of benefit receipt. The authors argue that these estimates represent an upper bound to the impact of regional labour market characteristics as they partly reflect the fact that people with low skill levels can only afford to live in high unemployment regions. After controlling for unobserved characteristics (such as skill levels) that are constant over time, the authors look at changes in income support among people who move location, and find a much lower, but still significant, impact of local labour market conditions on unemployment benefit receipt.

Finally, Wendy Stone, Matthew Gray and Jody Hughes argue that although a great deal of the research into the determinants of labour market outcomes has focussed on the role of human capital and the structure of the labour market, relatively little attention has been paid to the role of social capital. In addressing this imbalance, their paper draws on research conducted at the Australian Institute of Family Studies to investigate the extent to which an individual's social capital relates to their la-

bour market outcomes. The relationship between social capital and labour force status and social capital and job search method is explored using data collected from a national random sample of Australians. Using both a network and a typological approach to measuring social capital, the authors demonstrate that social capital type exerts a strong impact on labour market outcomes, but there are few relationships between trust and reciprocity in social networks and labour force status. Because these effects operate in both directions, it is difficult to determine the extent to which social capital causes better labour market outcomes, although the analysis indicates that both formal and informal channels contribute to successful job search.

Overall, the papers included in this Symposium utilise a range of frameworks and draw on a range of ideas, practice and data to explore the notions of inclusion and exclusion and investigate the factors that contribute to the different manifestations of social exclusion in the Australian labour market. Together, the papers represent an important contribution to research and policy in what is a much discussed but relatively under-examined issue.