

Section 1

Context and purpose

In this section ...

- Introduction
- Background
- Overview
- Aims
- Action following on from this report
- Sources of information

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Introduction

Over the last fifteen years, numerous reports and studies have highlighted substantial variations in the health and wellbeing of the South Australian population, and a widening of the gap between those who are 'well off' and those who are not ⁽¹⁾. These differences are readily apparent within the metropolitan area of Adelaide and across the rest of the State.

There is mounting evidence of the impact of both economic and social inequalities on the wellbeing of various groups in society, and government concern about the need to address them.

The South Australian Government has identified the area of inequality as a State priority. In July 2002, the then Department of Human Services (DHS) initiated the development of this report, *Inequality in South Australia – key determinants of wellbeing, Volume 1: The Evidence*, to highlight the extent and significance of some of the inequalities in South Australia, particularly those associated with the social and economic determinants of health and wellbeing.

It is intended that a companion volume be published later in 2004, containing examples of projects and programs that have been successful in addressing social inequality.

Background

The South Australian Government has a major focus on bringing together different sectors to find solutions to address the economic, social and environmental issues facing South Australia at the present time, and into the future.

To this end, a number of new initiatives have been established across government, and in partnership with local government, the non-government sector and private enterprise. For example, in March 2002, the Premier established the Government's Social Inclusion Initiative and appointed the Social Inclusion Board with the objective of 'recapturing South Australia's confidence and self esteem by tackling some of the most pressing social issues facing the State' ⁽²⁾.

In November 2002, the newly formed Economic Development Board presented the *State of the State Report* ⁽³⁾. This was a comprehensive examination of South Australia's current economic performance relative to other Australian States and Territories, and it identified that South Australia lags the nation in most key economic indicators.

"Over the past 20 years, South Australia's average growth rate was around 2.6% per year, while the national average was 3.9%. Our population has been stagnating and ageing, our business sector as a whole has been struggling to become export competitive, our infrastructure is becoming older and less reliable and many of our brightest young people have been leaving the State to find work opportunities elsewhere."

The follow up report, *A Framework for Economic Development in South Australia*, identified that South Australia needs robust economic growth to 'deliver the social outcomes that we all want: for example, protection of our natural environment and appropriate investment in schools, hospitals, police and key infrastructure that will maintain our high quality of life and well-being' ⁽⁴⁾.

These initiatives highlight the need to link social and economic policy, and these initiatives, and others like them, set the context for this document.

Overview

Our wellbeing is the product of many different factors. Some of these include individual characteristics such as the genes that we inherit from our parents, and aspects of our own beliefs, behaviours and coping abilities. Other significant effects operate within our families, neighbourhoods, communities, culture or kinship groups, and society as a whole. The social and economic environment is a major determinant of population wellbeing in South Australia.

The purpose of this first report is to deepen our understanding of the impact that social, physical and economic factors have on wellbeing, and to describe the distribution of these factors across the South Australian population.

Over the last two decades, there have been major social and economic changes in South Australia, especially in the areas of work, resources for families, community supports and the balance between them ⁽¹⁾. Some examples of these are:

- Marked alterations in the nature and amount of available work ⁽⁵⁾, and in opportunities for the employment of young people;
- Greater challenges in balancing work and family responsibilities ⁽⁶⁾;
- Reductions in affordable housing, particularly public housing;

- Significant economic hardship for many people, despite overall recent increases in rates of employment and a stronger economy ⁽⁷⁾;
- Dramatic changes in rural and remote communities;
- A rise in those affected by addictions to alcohol, drugs and gambling ⁽⁸⁾;
- A greater awareness of the effects of stress on children and young people as a result of serious family problems; and
- The persistence of significant disparities in educational, health, and other aspects of wellbeing across the population ⁽¹⁾.

These changes in society have been widespread and the ensuing disruptions experienced by individuals, families and communities, substantial. The rate of change has been rapid and without precedent in its scope and impact on different segments of the population ⁽⁹⁾. We are witnessing greater inequalities in economic and social outcomes, as individuals, families and communities attempt to adapt. The transitions appear to be continuing, and the long-term impact of such a rapidly changing society is unknown ⁽¹⁰⁾.

We need to understand better the complex interactions between individuals and their families, the pressures exerted by their environments and social structures over a lifetime, and how these factors influence the wellbeing of current and future generations of South Australians.

One way of doing this is to choose a number of indicators to describe the levels of different aspects of wellbeing of the population at the present time and, by using them, to highlight the extent of existing inequalities.

Indicators are useful for:

- Monitoring the level of wellbeing of a population to describe its current state and to identify change over time;
- Assessing progress toward targets or policy objectives; and
- Informing people about significant social issues.

The indicators used in this report have been selected because they represent areas of importance where considerable inequalities exist and because data are available for them. These indicators provide only a partial picture of the existing social and economic inequalities. However, it is hoped that this report will raise awareness of the extent of many social inequalities in South Australia and their impact on different sections of the population.

Aims

This report has a number of specific aims:

- To describe some of the factors that have an important influence on the wellbeing of South Australians;
- To identify significant differences (or inequalities) in wellbeing and their determinants in South Australia, and to assess possible trends in inequalities over time;
- To map and describe changes in a selection of indicators chosen for this report;
- To provide information in a form that will support discussion and action by agencies at local, regional and state levels; and
- To raise awareness in the wider community about the extent to which South Australia is an unequal society and the impact of this on the wellbeing of the whole population.

The report has been prepared for use by all those wishing to know the extent of inequalities in South Australia, and wanting to do something about them.

It is hoped that people will draw on the report:

- To understand the extent of inequalities across South Australia;
- To identify trends in social inequalities over time;
- To develop activities that will reduce these inequalities; and
- To track emerging issues of concern to particular communities or groups in South Australia.

Action following on from this report

This report, *Inequality in South Australia – key determinants of wellbeing, Volume 1: The Evidence*, will be distributed widely to South Australian agencies and communities to assist in the development of an understanding of the extent and impact of social inequalities across the State; and to encourage the direction of greater resources to reduce these inequalities.

A second volume, containing examples of projects and programs that have been successful in addressing social inequality, will be published later in 2004. The projects and programs to be included in this companion volume will be identified through sector specific consultation workshops by an across government advisory group.

The Department of Health and Department for Families and Communities will use these two documents to redirect financial and human resources towards this end.

Sources of information

The following resources were used to underpin the information presented in this Section.

1. Tennant S, Hetzel D and Glover J. *A Social Health Atlas of Young South Australians (2nd edition)*. Adelaide: Openbook Print, 2003.
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6. Pocock B. *The Work/Life Collision*. Sydney: Federation Press, 2003.
7. Gregory R. *Children and the Changing Labour Market: Joblessness in families with dependent children*. (Discussion Paper No. 406). Canberra: Australian National University, Centre for Economic Policy Research, 1999.
8. Productivity Commission. *Australia's Gambling Industries, Report No. 10*. Canberra: AusInfo, 1999.
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10. Keating DP and Hertzman C (eds.). *Developmental Health and the Wealth of Nations: Social, Biological and Educational Dynamics*. New York: The Guilford Press, 1999.

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