



My Five Solutions to end poverty in SA Anti-Poverty Week Event, 19 October 2010

Anne Bainbridge
Executive Director, Youth Affairs Council of SA

Contextual education

Inadequate education and training is a common factor in Australia's most disadvantaged communities and may increase their risk of social exclusion. However, what is often missed when considering the "more education, less poverty" dynamic is that people need to be engaged in their learning and have the opportunity to utilise their education in the workforce – it's no good being well-educated if there are no jobs.

Young people often express that they don't see the connection between what they're learning and the real world. Education and training providers need to ensure learning is engaging and clear links between education and employment are demonstrated.

We must also ensure that education and training is accessible and affordable so that young people don't feel they need to drop out to pursue a job that may pay well in the short term, but have little long-term prospects.

Jobs, jobs, jobs – fulfilling, secure and sustaining

Full-time entry-level positions for graduates and school-leavers, which were once an important feature of the labour market, have sharply declined in number. The majority of employment growth is now in part-time and casual employment. This has given rise to a new concern for young people, who are increasingly experiencing the often hidden issue of under-employment, in which workers are employed for fewer hours or in less desirable jobs than they would prefer and are qualified for.

A greater awareness of this issue, coupled with continued investment in new jobs for young people, perhaps in keeping with SA's professed desire to become a leader in sustainable industries and new technology, would go a long way towards eradicating these sources of poverty.

Redress the disparity in income between young people and the wider population

We talk a lot about pay equity for the community sector, and for women, and with good cause, but the gap between what young people earn and what other workers earn is equally unfair. Young people are economically disadvantaged by being paid youth wages and training wages, which in many instances situate them below the poverty line. Such disadvantage often negatively impacts on young people's access to education, training, employment and housing.

Closing this gap is vital to addressing poverty experienced by young people in SA – after all, a litre of milk costs the same no matter how old you are!

Increase young people's financial literacy and hence decrease the high levels of debt incurred by young people

Young people are increasingly being targeted by financial institutions to take up credit cards and personal loans, and the telecommunications industry strongly targets young people to purchase mobile phones and phone contracts. Young people are also more likely to go into debt through the purchase of a first car, or by being left with or incurring debt from rent arrears or unpaid utilities bills through share-housing arrangements. For young people living in rural and regional areas, there are often higher costs associated with the purchase of food, clothing and petrol.

The answer may be to compel businesses that deal in debt – phone companies, credit card providers, ISPs – to provide consumer information to young people in a culturally appropriate and accessible format, with an explicit emphasis on how to avoid accruing debt. This should be accompanied by the provision of financial counselling and support services specifically for young people, by Government or community sector agencies.

Income support for young people

The creation of a state-wide concession card, similar to the Senior's Card, would go some way to redress the economic disadvantages experienced by young people in accessing common goods and services, as would streamlining payments into a single, adequate, integrated income support payment for young people, including add-on payments according to individual need and circumstance.

Suspending payments to young people on low incomes as a tool for enforcing participation requirements can have a strongly adverse effect on housing and health outcomes, particularly mental health, and on young people's ability to pay for basic necessities such as food and medication. It may also impact on young people's ability to look for work. Youth Allowance recipients are more likely to be breached than recipients of other activity-tested income support payments and in many instances, young people are breached in response to circumstances that are beyond their control. Appropriate alternatives need to be identified to ensure young people aren't further disadvantaged.