

Does Receiving a Breach Penalty from Centrelink Coerce Unemployed People to Comply with the Government's Wishes?

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ABSTRACT

In the past three years, the number of breach penalties applied by Centrelink to welfare recipients have more than trebled, with some 349,000 incidences initially reported for the 2000-2001 year. Based on research undertaken for a Masters Degree in Social Science, this paper examines the reported lived experience of a sample of individuals who have been breached by Centrelink in the Brisbane area. The paper discusses whether those experiences accord with the stated policy expectation and intent of the Howard Coalition Government.

Over its three terms, this Government has increasingly sought to introduce policies that increase surveillance, obligations and breach penalties that can be brought to bear on unemployed people. More recently other welfare recipients, including Disability Support Pensioners and Sole Parents are to be included in this process. This paper compares the Government's stated intentions for its 'Mutual Obligation' policies with the lived experience of a sample of 56 respondents.

Introduction

Central to the whole issue of breaching penalties is the entrenched high level of unemployment (Borland, 2000; Burgess, Mitchell, O'Brien, & Watts, 1998; Edwards, Howard, & Miller, 2001; Mitchell, 2000; Quiggin, 2001), together with the political ideology of Mutual Obligation (Kinnear, 2000; Hartman, 2001; Hammer, 2002; McKenna, 1999). The large majority of people who receive breaches from Centrelink are unemployed, receiving payments under either the New Start Allowance program or the Youth Allowance program (Sleep, 2001, p.2) which include 'activity test' conditions with which beneficiaries must comply in order to avoid incurring breach penalties.

This paper outlines the current unemployment situation and escalating Mutual Obligation requirements. Breach penalties are defined and their increased usage set out, along with some reasons for that increase. The basic methodology of *the survey* (italicised to denote this Brisbane survey) is briefly discussed, together with some findings from *the survey* that are evaluated in terms of the Howard Government's stated *expectations* and *intent*. Discussion then follows, based on the findings of *the survey* and literature review, about the ethics, morality and Human Rights aspects of the Mutual Obligation breaching policy.

The Howard Government's expectations and intentions for Mutual Obligation policy

An understanding of the current breaching regime requires recognition of what Burgess, Mitchell, O'Brien and Watts (2000) called the "entrenched long-term unemployment" levels in Australia (p. 177), because the majority of people who receive Centrelink breach penalties receive unemployment benefits. By 1994 it was obvious to many commentators that there were simply not enough jobs (Langmore & Quiggin, 1994). In this climate Prime Minister Howard asserted that the Government should assist people in genuine need. He also noted "it is the case that – to the extent that it is within their capacity to do so – those in receipt of such assistance should give something back to society in return, and in the process improve their own prospects for self-reliance" (Howard, 1999, p.10). 'Giving something back to society' was termed 'Mutual Obligation' and could include specified volunteer work, study to improve employment prospects or participation in 'Work for the Dole' programs and other compulsory job search activities.

The Howard Government *expected* that a robust Mutual Obligation regime would ensure that unemployed people would actively seek work and move 'off-benefit' quickly (Centrelink, 2001a; DEWSRB, 2001; Moses & Sharples, 2000). By openly disciplining those who 'fail' in their obligations, the accent would shift "from one of a lack of employment, to a problem with unemployed individuals" who could be blamed (Lauritsen, 2001, pp.13-14). Policy makers well understood 'blaming' which could absolve governments from responsibility for fulfilling any 'full' employment target (Titmuss, 2000, pp.47-48; Quiggin, 2001, p.12; Watts, 2001 p. 5; Windschuttle, 1980). Burgess et al. (2000) observed that unemployed people are now "subject to more surveillance, duties, and punitive measures than previously" with payments no longer a right, but conditional on compulsory participation in employment programs (pp. 174-186).

Breach penalties defined

Centrelink breach penalties are part of a compliance control strategy (DEWSRB, 2001), whereby Centrelink is authorised to temporarily withhold partial or total payment from a welfare recipient who is deemed by a Centrelink officer to be in breach of an 'administrative' or 'activity test' requirement imposed under Mutual Obligation. Activity test breaches are costlier, and are applied more often than administrative breaches (Sleep, 2001, p.2). There were 56 listed "reasons" to impose breach penalties in 1998 and there are now more (Moses & Sharples, 2000, p.6). The activity test program extends to breaches of requirements of the Job Network group of publicly funded, privately owned employment training and placement providers contracted to Centrelink (Centrelink 2001b, p.1).

Activity test penalties reduce payments differentially. Typically the first penalty attracts an 18 per cent reduction in payment for 26 weeks, a total penalty of \$863. The second penalty increases to 24 per cent for the period, a total penalty of \$1,151, whilst the third and following penalties mean no payment for eight weeks, a penalty of \$1,476 (Brotherhood of St Lawrence, 2002, p. 2). ACOSS (2001b) pointed out that a third time activity breach represents a total "fine" or loss of benefit of \$3,384, a higher "punishment" than is applied for many criminal offences (pp. 3-11).

Government rhetoric increases acceptance of Mutual Obligation ideology, encouraging a willingness to apply breach penalties

The Howard Government continues to announce initiatives, including improved computer driven, automated “paperless breach processes” (Moses & Sharples, 2000, p. 10), designed to compel people to urgently look for work and engage in workfare programs, such as Work for the Dole. These activities are politically expedient (Quiggin, 2001, pp.11-12) and Government rhetoric plays an important part in justifying and promoting the Mutual Obligation compliance process to bureaucrats and the public, by inciting opprobrium against welfare beneficiaries of working age. Windschuttle (1980) noted a similar phenomenon during the Fraser Government’s crackdown on unemployed people (pp. 218-219).

Deputy Prime Minister Anderson stated that people accepting welfare payments but not looking hard enough for work were “deliberately shirking work” which was “not the Australian way” (Parnell, 2002, p. 2). Various Ministers, using derogatory terms, implied that many welfare recipients are “welfare cheats” and “dole bludgers” (Brough, 2001; Vanstone, 2002b). Their thinly veiled “it is their own fault” and “flush out dole cheats” type rhetoric, with connotations of human bodily waste disposal, were followed up with statements implying that some of these people obviously “couldn’t be bothered finding a job” (Anthony, 2000; Newman, 2000; Odgers, 2001, p. 8;).

At a bureaucratic level, Government rhetoric influences Departmental and Centrelink staff attitudes toward the treatment of customers, as evidenced particularly by the diminution of fair treatment and due process (Ombudsman, 2002). From within the Department of Family and Community Services, Moses and Sharples (2000) conceded that “significant rises” in the breach rate had coincided with Mutual Obligation initiatives resulting from Centrelink staff becoming “more willing to impose breaches” (pp. 11-12). The Howard Government instructed Centrelink to increase compliance surveillance, and contractually obliged Job Network members to increase breach recommendations to preset target quotas (ACOSS, 2001b, p. 2; Hannon, 2002, p.5; MacDonald & Abello, 2001, p.3; Ombudsman, 2002; Pearce, Disney & Ridout, 2002). ACOSS expressed concerns about high breach rates, fairness and due process, after obtaining a copy of INTRALINK, Centrelink’s internal policy manual which included the succinct edict that “job seekers **must not** be given benefit of the doubt” (ACOSS, 2001a, pp. 6-7, bolding in original). Nevile (2001) observed that “penalties have come to dominate the entire system” (p. 3).

The quantum of increased beach penalty incidences

Consequently the compliance system is “already among the toughest in the world” (ACOSS, 2001a). In this high unemployment environment, breach penalties issued by Centrelink trebled during the past few years. ACOSS (2001b) produced an interim extrapolation of expected breach numbers for 2000-2001 in Table 1 (below).

Table 1: Centrelink breaches from 1997 to 2001.

	1997-1998	1998-1999	1999-2000	2000-2001	2000-2001
Type of Breach	(July-June)	(July-June)	(July-June)	(July-Feb)	(July-June)
Activity Test Breach	60,981	88,751	177,759	166,485	250,100
Administrative Breach	59,737	76,741	124,735	65,915	99,000
Total	120,718	165,492	302,494	232,400	349,100

Source: Sydney Welfare Rights Centre as cited in (ACOSS, 2001b, p.5).

The Senate Community Affairs References Committee Inquiry into participation requirements and penalties for welfare recipients was able to provide Departmental figures confirming that total breaches for 2000–2001 were in fact **386,946** (DFACS, 2002; ACOSS, 2002, p.2). This is an extraordinary number of penalties when compared with the total of 722,000 people reported in receipt of unemployment benefits throughout 1999-2000 (Newman, 2000, p. 9).

When the magnitude of these numbers became clear, several peak welfare bodies published papers criticising the Government, and combined to set up the Pearce “Independent Review” into breaching (ACOSS 2001a). Minister Anthony hurriedly announced that Centrelink would inquire into breaching internally (Anthony 2001). The Commonwealth Ombudsman had disparaged Centrelink’s quickness to breach (McCleod, 2001, p. 51) and he was now prompted to undertake his own inquiry (Ombudsman, 2002). This intense focus on the breaching regime obliged Minister Vanstone to admit that breaching “could be too harsh on vulnerable people” whilst announcing a minor relaxation of the rules (Vanstone, 2002a).

Simultaneously, however, she announced a draconian new rule that could allow arbitrary decision making to impact on all recipients. Centrelink is now empowered to suspend all payments totally, and subsequently restore them (or not restore them), from people judged to be “at risk” or “likely” to be breached. Such payment suspension is designed to oblige people to come into Centrelink to “face additional scrutiny” in tough new face-to-face psychological assessments “to ensure that...a robust mutual obligation system still exists” (Centrelink, 2002; Vanstone, 2002a, pp. 2-4). The temporary spotlight on breaching policy had one beneficial effect; breach incidences fell for the 2001–2002 year, but so did the number of unemployment beneficiaries (DFACS, 2002; Vanstone, 2002c).

Expansion of Mutual Obligation and the breaching regime to other welfare groups

The Howard Government is continually amending legislation to extend the Mutual Obligation breach penalty system to a wider range of welfare beneficiaries. Minister Brough announced “all jobless up to the age of 50 will be targeted for Work for the Dole programs” (Jackman, 2002, p. 5; Moscaritolo & Keim, 2001). Ministers Vanstone and Abbott introduced a Bill extending Mutual Obligation requirements to single parents with school age children and mature aged unemployed people up to retirement age (McKenna, 1999; Vanstone & Abbott, 2001, p.4). Minister Anthony has canvassed the notion that single parents on welfare must undertake compulsory “parenting training”, ostensibly to avoid welfare dependence across generations (Queensland Times, 2002).

Minister Vanstone recently introduced legislation whereby some people who have disabilities will lose Disability Support Pension eligibility, have their payments cut by \$26 per week and be placed on the New Start unemployment program. Such people will be obliged to job search and meet activity test requirements mandated under Mutual Obligation (Lawrence, 2002). Due to a refusal of the Senate to pass this Bill in Parliament, Minister Anthony has introduced a revised Bill. This Second Amendment Bill, yet to be passed, provides for existing recipients of the Disability Support Pension to keep their pension when able to work for 15 hours per week, without Mutual Obligation requirements. However, future applicants will not be so protected (Anthony, 2002).

Minister Vanstone has also introduced into Parliament the Family and Community Services Legislation Amendment (Special Benefit Activity Test) Bill, designed to “expose holders of Temporary Protection Visas (TPV)” to Mutual Obligation. A Senate Committee is inquiring into this Bill because it applies *only* to TPV holders on Special Benefits who are refugees. Refugees had to prove that they suffered persecution in their homeland in order to qualify for the temporary visa and will be especially vulnerable to being breached (Senate Community Affairs Legislation Committee, 2002).

Introduction to *the survey* and methodology

A qualitative questionnaire type survey was undertaken in Brisbane as part of a Masters Degree in Social Science, hereafter referred to as *the survey*. Designed specifically to compare the lived experience of people who had been breached with the stated policy expectations of the Howard Government, thirty-three questions were prepared, including four on demographics. Remaining questions were framed to elicit data about breaching experiences and outcomes for individual respondents. The literature review and survey data derived from large research studies such as ACOSS (2001b) together with published Government studies, facilitated preparation of the questions to reflect and test Government policy statements. It was considered that larger existing studies could serve the function of a control group, with greater reliability and validity, than that which a limited sample size control group could provide within *the survey*.

The responses gathered from 56 respondents are essentially people’s accounts of their individual perceptions of what has been happening to them. *The survey* included an element of field research, intended to strengthen perspective, because the researcher met the respondents, liaised with various authorities and conducted correspondence, meetings and discussions with a variety of Centrelink managers. Anxious rather than curious behaviour exhibited by Centrelink personnel toward the researcher suggested an acute awareness that Mutual Obligation breaching is resented by Centrelink ‘customers’. Several branch managers spoke about fearing protests and the “*nature*” of their Centrelink customers in derogatory terms.

Some stand out findings of *this survey*

The findings of *this survey* reflect what happened to the 56 respondents when they were breached. Such findings, on their own, do not establish that being breached causes these things to happen. In Table 2, below, the number of people breached are shown, from 1999 through to the first four months of 2002, enumerated by gender, age and breaches issued before or after one year of benefit receipt.

Table 2: Analysis of breach numbers from *this survey* respondents by age, gender and time.

YEAR	TOTAL NO. OF PEOPLE BREACHED	MALES	FEMALES	AGE <30 YEARS	AGE >30 YEARS	TOTAL NO. OF BREACHES	TIME ON BENEFIT LESS THAN ONE YEAR	TIME ON BENEFIT MORE THAN ONE YEAR
1999	17	9	8	7	10	22	8	9
2000	17	15	2	10	7	27	11	6
2001	25	17	8	16	9	37	16	9
4 MTHS OF 2002	28	20	8	18	10	40	23	5

From the response tallies, a few figures stood out:

- **95%** of respondents (53 people) thought that, when breached, Centrelink was unfair.
- **93%** of respondents (52 people) felt their self-esteem had decreased after being breached.
- **91%** of respondents (51 people) did not realise beforehand, that they were to be breached.
- **21%** of respondents (12 people) needed to move into less desirable accommodation.

The findings are discussed in four contexts relating to the Howard Government's policy *expectations*, policy *intentions*, *unspoken* and *unintended* policy outcomes.

Findings on Government *expectations* relative to coercive breaching policy and practice

The second reading of the 1997 *Social Security Amendment Bill*, legalising the Mutual Obligation breaching regime, noted that its main objective was "to maintain a strong deterrence for failure to meet reasonable requirements". The Howard Government *expected* that rigorous application of activity test requirements would encourage active job search by beneficiaries (Moses & Sharples, 2000, p. 4). Under Mutual Obligation ideology, coercion is expected to enhance the chances of people finding work by keeping them seriously engaged in job search (CPC, 2002, Sect. 6, p.17; Richardson, 2000). However Professor Pearce, the ex-Ombudsman and Chair of the Independent Review of Breaches and Penalties, considered that breaching created disincentives to seek work, reduced the ability to look for work, and thereby harmed the chances of individuals finding employment, contrary to the Government's policy expectations (Pearce et al. 2002). Pearce remarked that he personally believed that inducement by "beating up" is wrong and counterproductive (ABC, 2002).

Yet the Government *expected* that compulsory engagement in job search related activities would be accepted by unemployment benefit recipients as being "normal" and "useful" components of "reasonable" job-seeker responsibilities (DEWRSB, 2000; Howard, 1999; Lauritsen, 2001;). However *this survey* found that 73% of respondents, 41 out of 56 people, believed that **they were not more likely to get paid work because of any Centrelink compulsory activity undertaken.**

The Government *expected* that one breach would be sufficient to deter people from being breached again (ACOSS, 2001b, p.3; DEWRSB, 2001, p. 11; Burgess et al. 2000), which forms part of the rationale for tightening the breach regime (Atkins, 2002; Pearce et al. 2002). However, the majority of respondents to *this survey* reported that getting breached was of **no help to them in avoiding further breaches**. A majority (56%) **were breached more than once**, and 14% had third breaches, which accords with the literature (ACOSS, 2001b).

Finding on Government *intent* for breaching policy relative to coercive breaching

The widening breaching regime suggests that the Howard Government expected not all unemployment beneficiaries would view Mutual Obligation requirements "favourably", thus "further compliance measures" would be required (Burgess et al. 1998, p. 13). The increase in number and intensity of activity tests thus reflects Government *intent*. The assumption made was that people were not trying hard enough to find work, and as 'non-genuine' job seekers,

needed “coercive authority” (Atkins, 2002, p.1; Edwards et al. 2001; Kinnear, 2000, p.10; Moses & Sharples, 2000. p. 16).

The Government, under Mutual Obligation ideology, *intends* to coerce people to remain “active and connected” with the workplace in order to enhance their chances of finding work (Parnell, 2002, p.2; Richardson, 2000). Coercion includes the stated *intent* “to make it harder for people to choose welfare over work”, an intent Minister Newman called “tough love” (McKenna, 1999, p. 11). Yet most people want to work and actively look for it (ACOSS, 2001a, p.5; McKinnon & Dorries, 1999; Quiggin, 2001). Goodin (2001) argued that “most of those who want to work, but don’t”, are unemployed due to external circumstances, not ‘weakness of will’ arguments (pp. 196-197). Windschuttle (1980) had debunked the myth of ‘dole bludgers’ twenty years earlier (pp. 155-179) and Lawrence (2002) pointed out that there are “still ten job seekers for every one vacancy” (pp. 2-4). In *this survey* 32 out of the 56 respondents **felt they could not look any harder for work** and a further 9 **‘did not know’**.

Findings on Government *unstated* policy consequences of breaching.

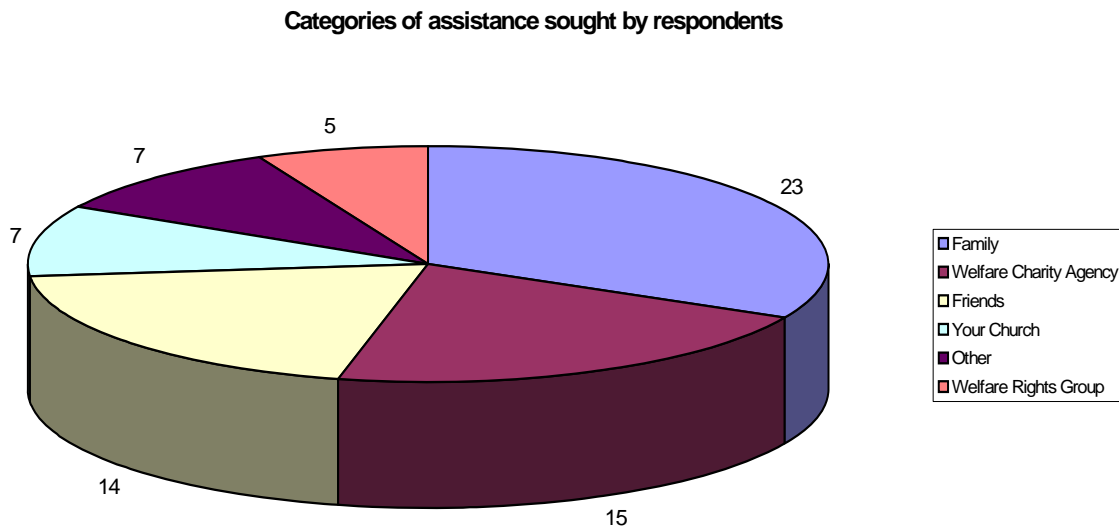
Prime Ministerial statements outlined the Government’s *intent* to exhibit “fairness” by providing “equality of opportunity” for unemployed people who comply with Mutual Obligation, because compliance improves their “prospects for self-reliance” and self-esteem (Howard, 1999, pp. 2-9). Compliance is *intended* to “leave people with a sense of pride and belonging” (Anthony, 2000, p.1). The Government also stated its *intent* is to provide a ‘safety net’ for people in ‘genuine need’. It is *unstated* that recipients need to be “deserving” of welfare support, and that those considered ‘unworthy’ would have their self-esteem attacked to deter their deviance (ACOSS, 2001a, p.2; Bryson, 1993; Tomlinson, 1999).

These attitudes raise the possibility that part of the Government’s *intent* in dealing with unemployed welfare recipients is also *unstated*. An intent to treat unemployed people in a different manner to other people (Hartman, 2001, pp. 5-6). The Commonwealth Ombudsman found Centrelink was applying breaches “without due process” (McLeod, 2001, p.51) and was ‘too quick to breach’ (Eldridge, 2001). Breach penalties often exceed the value of fines imposed for many criminal convictions ACOSS (2001b; pp. 3-11). The Ombudsman and ACOSS each criticised the inequitable nature of the breaching regime (McLeod, 2001, p.52; ACOSS, 2001b, p.3). *This survey* found most people (93%) **reported a loss of self-esteem and many felt Centrelink put pressure on them to go ‘off-benefit’**. An overwhelming majority (95%) **believed that Centrelink was being unfair to them**. *This survey* also found that most respondents (91%) **did not realise beforehand that they were about to be breached**, which suggests Centrelink displayed a lack of concern about customer rights.

It is implied but *unstated* Government policy that Centrelink breaching practices are intended to drive unemployed welfare recipients ‘off-benefit’. The literature suggests neo-liberal agendas seek to relocate responsibility for welfare back to individuals, their families, community welfare and religious organisations (Donald, 2000; Harris, 1998; Stilwell, 1993). Prime Minister Howard’s *stated* purpose is “to build a new social coalition of government, business, charitable and welfare organisations, and other community groups...to tackle more effectively the social problems...” (Howard, 1999, p. 6). In *this survey*, 23 people indicated that, once breached, they obtained assistance from family, 15 people **indicated being helped by charities and seven indicated that their church was of help**. Increased rates of charity support need are reported in the literature (ACOSS, 2001b; Horan, 2001; Nevile, 2001, p. 30;

Stavropoulos, 2000). Figure 1, following, illustrates the categories of assistance sought by respondents to *the survey*.

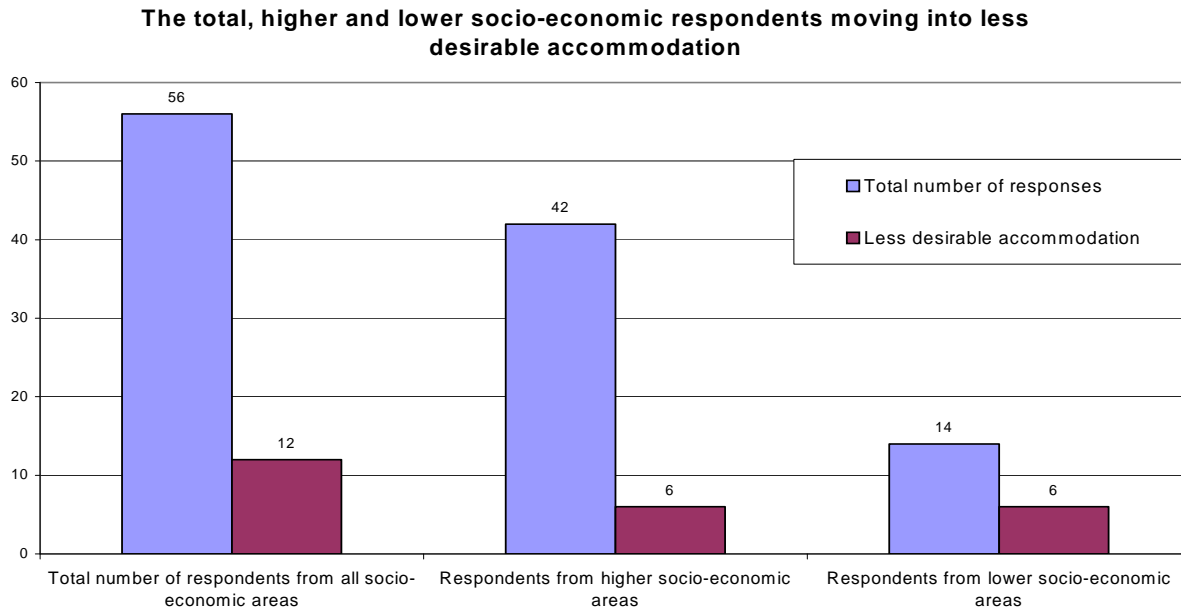
Figure 1:



Some findings on Government *unexpected* or *unanticipated* consequences of breaching

There exists a body of literature that identifies ‘the unanticipated consequences of purposive social action’. See (Merton, 1936; Burgess et al. 2000; Sleep, 2001), and such outcomes may be viewed by Government as collateral damage. Whilst Government Departments speculate on probable policy outcomes, that speculation is often not identified in official policy. For example DEWRSB’s (2000) Job Network Net Impact study acknowledged “that 20% to 31% of individuals who were engaged in various programs went ‘off-benefit’” for unknown reasons (p. 2). Similarly Moses and Sharples (2000) reported a “very conservative...**27% of people who are breached do not reclaim [benefits] within 6 weeks**”, speculating that “for some the system just becomes too hard and that they turn to relatives, the welfare sector or crime for support” (p. 17, bolding in original). Simply increasing the number of hoops through which a recipient must jump results in disincentive, so that some people leave the system even when fully eligible to receive payment (Goodin, 2001).

A ‘collateral’ consequence of being breached, noted in the literature, is that accommodation standards of welfare recipients can be reduced (ACOSS, 2001b; Pearce et al. 2002). In *this survey*, **twelve people out of 56 (almost 22%) reported needing to move into less desirable accommodation**. Three reported moving “on the streets” and another to a “men’s homeless shelter”. One location where the survey was conducted is a lower socio-economic area relative to the other two. **Almost half of the respondents** from the lower socio-economic area needed to move into less desirable accommodation. This consequence of breaching should have been foreseeable by the Government, as pointed out by the National Welfare Rights Network (2002, p.6). Figure 2, below, differentiates affected recipient’s socio-economic locations.

Figure 2:

Discussion

The Howard Government's policy expectations for Mutual Obligation contrast markedly with the lived experiences of the 56 respondents to *this survey*, and in many aspects the policies may be considered failures. However, *the survey* findings do not complete this analysis. *This study* found that people who were breached had their lives seriously affected in other important areas, such as being dealt with unjustly and unethically, which the Howard Government does not publicly acknowledge.

Kinnear (2000) examined Mutual Obligation for The Australia Institute, and found that "the ethical foundations of the Howard Government's Mutual Obligation policies do not stand up to scrutiny". One reason was that "Australia's system of economic management [economic fundamentalism] has relied on creating joblessness to sustain economic growth" is unjust. Another reason was that proponents of Mutual Obligation willingly impose activity requirements on unemployed people, in the belief "that unemployed people have some control over their joblessness, and therefore a choice to accept or reject welfare benefits". However those proponents "are mistaken, because realistically, there is no choice" (p. V). Yet the Government is seeking to add a significant proportion of Disability Support Pensioners to the New Start employment program (Anthony, 2002).

Goodin (2001) noted the lack of choice, arguing that obliging people to sign contractual activity agreements in return for welfare benefits lacked moral force. The notion "agree or starve" (by losing benefit payment) was analogous to the highway robber's demand "your money or your life!" (p. 191). Kinnear (2000) cited Rawls' argument that Government institutional programs "must be just, and individuals must have freely accepted the benefits provided by society". Finding those two conditionalities not met, Kinnear declared that the Howard Government's Mutual Obligation policies failed ethically and morally, because the socially advantaged impose obligation as a form of repayment, upon the least financially

advantaged people, thus eroding “the ethical case for a social contract” which “may be a *manifestation* of moral decline” (pp.V-VI, italics in original; Hammer, 2002). Such arguments are cogent in light of the Government’s current legislation that attempts to place people who have disabilities under Mutual Obligation.

In an international context, Tomlinson (2001) argued that the Howard Government’s Mutual Obligation agenda is considered to breach Article 8(3)(a) of the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*: “No one shall be required to perform forced or compulsory labour”, which Australia has signed and ratified (pp. 10-11). (See also Burgess et al. 1998, p. 17; Rees, 2000, pp. 296-297). Ironically, also in an international context, the Howard Government’s actions intended to reduce mythical ‘welfare dependency’ is demonstrably unnecessary. In a seminal ten year longitudinal study conducted in The United States, the Netherlands and Germany, Goodin, Heady, Muffels, and Dirven (1999) found an “exceedingly small percentage” of people remained on welfare indefinitely, in any of those national welfare systems. Further, they found the rhetoric of “welfare dependency” referred to in those countries, and often heard in Australia, to be unfounded (pp. 136-145).

Conclusion

This small *survey* cannot be applied to outcomes for all people who have been breached. Yet the findings are consistent with the literature, including experiences reported by community welfare agencies. In the current climate of entrenched unemployment, it is evident that the Howard Government’s coercive Mutual Obligation breaching practices, whether intentionally or unintentionally designed to drive people off benefits toward community provided support, have not succeeded. Indeed, all four of the Howard Government policy areas discussed; the *expected*, the *intended*, the *unspoken* and the *unintended* have been shown to be operating out of line with the Howard Government’s stated policies.

People who were breached **did** have their lives seriously affected in one or more major areas, although the Howard Government does not publicly acknowledge these outcome effects. *This survey* found that Mutual Obligation ideology and mandatory activity test requirements did lead to people experiencing frustration, decreased self-esteem and strong feelings of being unfairly treated. A larger than expected proportion of those people also needed to move into less desirable accommodation. That latter fact reinforces a need for further research in this area, and provides evidence that Mutual Obligation ideology strikes at the most vulnerable, least advantaged group in Brisbane. *And those people were not registered as having a disability.*

The plight of the unemployed people surveyed presents a different picture of their life circumstances than the Government’s rhetoric seeks to conjure. Prime Minister Howard still boastfully proclaims the effectiveness of the “safety net”, provided to “protect” people who are “genuinely in need” and deserving of welfare support (1999, p. 4). The reality is that welfare recipients, dependent on their entitlements, can now have those payments arbitrarily suspended by Centrelink, on suspicion that they *might be likely* to not comply with Centrelink activity requirements. Perhaps this new travesty of fair treatment towards welfare recipients accords with what the Howard Government has called “tough love”.

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