

higher breach rates for indigenous australians

An important research report into the disparities in breach rates between Indigenous identified and non-Indigenous identified unemployed people has been released. The project, commissioned by the Department of Family and Community Services, was undertaken by the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) at the Australian National University. Dr. Will Sanders, author of the study, spent the last two years looking closely at Centrelink statistics and having extensive discussions and interviews throughout Australia with Centrelink staff and community welfare workers.

reasons for higher breach rates

The study confirms that national breach rates are consistently **one and a half times higher among Indigenous Australians** compared to non-Indigenous people when it comes to activity test breaches and **twice the rate for administrative breaches**. This was the case regardless of factors such as age, gender, family types and length of time on payments.

The research looked at the local/regional and state/territory statistics and found distinct patterns for breach and activity test exemptions around clusters of offices.

In discussion sessions to explain higher breach rates for Indigenous people a number of reasons were suggested, including:

- issues of literacy and mobility;
- confidence in and with government bureaucracies;
- less propensity to appeal and seek review;
- substantial reliance on family and community support;
- labour market discrimination and expectations;
- roles of compliance/review units, employment service providers, Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) and ABSTUDY administrative arrangements, as sources of breaching; and
- difficulties in accessing Disability Support Pension where it may be a more appropriate payment for some people.

It was also generally recognised that there were a number of adaptations already in place for Indigenous clients, such as Indigenous identified staff and liaison officers, the use of third party intermediaries and non standard procedures, without which the disparities in breach rates may have been even higher.

recommendations

Dr. Sanders concludes the study by making a number of suggestions for further action, including:

- greater recognition of the diversity of unemployed people and therefore recognising that different approaches may be required for different types of unemployed people. Activity test procedures may need to be more individualised;
- development of facility allowing clients to “check in” with a Centrelink officer at regular intervals and tying correspondence to prearranged and anticipated reporting cycles. These suggestions address issues such as low literacy, high mobility and poor access to postal

services;

- more of a case officer approach and less of a process approach. Particular officers would have to take on responsibility for particular clients, which may encourage both trust and a better understanding of client's circumstances;
- development of more satellite local offices, which together with more of a case officer approach should ensure more knowledge of the local labour market and other client circumstances;
- encouraging Indigenous identified staff to be decision makers. It was observed that non decision making staff were inevitably marginalised within Centrelink and not fully respected as full participants in the organisation process; and
- integration of CDEP and ABSTUDY information into the Centrelink administration system, may reduce the chances of breaches due to administrative mismatch of information between the programs.

The Welfare Rights Centre encourages research such as this critical report by Dr. Sanders and supports his suggestions for future action. Hopefully, the Department of Family and Community Services will consider the results of the study and take steps to implement its recommendations.▲