

breach travesty exposed

In recent weeks the publication of research undertaken by the National Welfare Rights Network and ACOSS has exposed the national travesty of unjustifiably harsh breaches being doled out in record numbers to people on unemployment payments throughout Australia.

300,000 breaches imposed on 200,000 people constitutes a **250% increase** in the rate of breaching over the last three years and provides \$170m in savings to the Government.

Even more alarming is the severity of the breach penalties. The most common penalty is equivalent to a fine of \$760. This is almost double the average fine for drink driving (medium to high levels of alcohol) and higher than the average “break and enter” fine imposed by Magistrates in New South Wales (\$706). Both these offences are criminal charges. How can missing an appointment at Centrelink or making an error with declaring earnings be treated as more severe?

The level and severity of breaching is having a very adverse impact on the individuals who are penalised – many of whom are already amongst the most vulnerable recipients, being homeless or having a psychiatric condition. It is also having a significant impact on community welfare agencies, 22 of which recently signed a joint statement calling on the Government to overhaul its unjustifiably harsh penalty regime.

Because of the significance of this breaching issue, especially in the context of its possible extension to sole parents and people on disability payments under the guise of “welfare reform”, this edition of “rights review” contains a number of articles which further explore and expose the travesty of Social Security breaches in Australia today. ▲