

128,000 people breached in 1998

In 1998 Centrelink imposed over 128,000 breaches on people receiving Newstart Allowance (NSA) or Youth Allowance (YA). The information on breaches, obtained by the Welfare Rights Centre under Freedom of Information (FOI) laws, showed that Centrelink imposed 67,074 activity test breaches and 61,674 administrative breaches in 1998.

The imposition of a breach causes great hardship for people already living below the poverty line. Breaches result in rate reductions of up to 24% for 26 weeks or the cancellation of NSA or YA for eight weeks in the case of a third activity test breach in two years. In 1998, 1340 people had their payments cancelled for eight weeks. People in the age group 18 to 24 were much more likely to have a breach imposed than people in other age groups.

strain on charities

Breaches cause great financial hardship on the individuals on which they are imposed. Without adequate income support (or in some cases none at all) the victims of this harsh regime find it difficult to pay rent, buy food and purchase the necessities of life. Often they turn to charities for financial assistance. This further stretches the limited resources of charities which are already under great strain from the increasing tide of people who call on their services for assistance.

What is particularly disturbing about breaches is that, in the experience of the Centre's caseworkers, many of the people who have breaches imposed are from the most disadvantaged groups in our society. For example, breach rates for Indigenous Australians are nearly twice as high as what they are for non-Indigenous Australians. Other groups who are often breached are the young and homeless; people with intellectual disabilities; illiterate people and people from a non-English speaking background. Breaches can also result in people having to pay fines of extraordinary amounts (see case study this page).

scant regard for human rights treaties

The imposition of such harsh breaches constitutes an attack on basic human rights, as they deny people their means of support and the severity of the penalty far outweighs any alleged breach. To deny people income support payments for 8 weeks can deny them shelter, housing and food.

The cancellation of 1034 people's Allowances for eight weeks at a time shows that the Australian Government has introduced a regime of Social Security penalties which has scant regard for Article 22 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (of which Australia is a signatory) which states:

"Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to Social Security ..."

If how a society looks after its disadvantaged is a measure of its value and worth, then we are failing to measure up. ▲