



Commission of Inquiry  
into Poverty

**Poverty among  
Aboriginal Families  
in Adelaide**

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1975

*Research Report by  
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Adelaide*

The Commission of Inquiry into Poverty was established in 1973 to investigate the causes of poverty in Australia and to recommend ways of reducing it. The Commission has published a number of reports, including this one, which is a study of poverty among Aboriginal families in Adelaide.

The Commission has been assisted by the publication of this report by the Government of South Australia. The authors thank the Government of South Australia for its assistance in the study.

The report was prepared by the authors in their capacity as members of the Commission. However, they have been fully responsible for its content and are not to be held responsible for any errors or omissions.

It was published by the Fay Gale and Joan Binnion of the University of Adelaide, by reprinting the study on behalf of the Commission.

*Professor Donald F. Henderson  
Chairman, Commission of Inquiry into Poverty*

Printed by D. W. Green Printers, Melbourne

Australian Government  
Publishing Service  
Canberra 1975

#### FOREWORD

An important feature of the work of the Australian Government's Commission of Inquiry into Poverty has been the organisation, mostly on a commissioned basis, of a wide range of research studies. The Commission and the Government believe that it is important that the results of this research be available to the public in order to stimulate discussion and action to reduce poverty.

Consequently, the Commission has arranged for the publication of the reports it has received on these research studies. This volume deals with poverty among Aboriginal families in Adelaide, based on a study undertaken during 1973.

The material and recommendations in these reports do not necessarily reflect the views of the Commission. However, they have been fully considered and taken into account in assisting the Commission to formulate recommendations to the Australian Government.

We are grateful to Dr Fay Gale and Joan Binnion of the University of Adelaide for undertaking the study on behalf of the Commission.

*Professor Ronald F. Henderson*  
Chairman, Commission of Inquiry into Poverty

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This study was commissioned by the Commission of Inquiry into Poverty under the Chairmanship of Professor Ronald F. Henderson. It owes much to his guidance and to that of his assistants Hayden Raysmith and Bruce Burraston.

Max Foale drafted the map and Sandra Evans typed the manuscript. Milton Gale and Denis Binnion assisted with the collection of data. We are grateful for the assistance given by various Aborigines in Adelaide who assisted with the interviewing. In particular we wish to thank Josie Agius, Ellen Duguet, Jessie Ridge, Margaret Smits, Betty Watson, Cyril Coaby, Lewis Lovegrove and Ned Milera. Various groups and departments also gave considerable help to the project, in particular the Aboriginal Education Foundation, the Aboriginal section of the South Australian Department of Public Health, the Lutheran Social Welfare Centre, the Prisoners Aid Association and the Port Adelaide Methodist Mission.

Fay Gale  
Joan Binnion

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# Introduction

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The Aboriginal life style has so often been called a 'culture of poverty' that it is quite proper for the Commission of Inquiry into Poverty to have commissioned a series of studies of Aboriginal poverty. But poverty is not an absolute state. It varies from household to household, place to place and from day to day. Rural poverty may be quite different from that experienced in the city and no two cities will necessarily present the same patterns. The study described in the following pages deals only with Aboriginal families in the city of Adelaide.

When Oscar Lewis first called his study of Puerto Rican households 'The Culture of Poverty' he probably did not realise how rapidly this phrase would be adopted in countries as far away as Australia.<sup>1</sup> Not only have some students of Aboriginal subcultures explained their experiences

in terms of Lewis' conceptual framework but Aboriginals also have taken up the catch cry.

When we explained this present study as one of poverty, Aboriginals identified positively with phrases such as the following. 'We have always known poverty.' 'We are born in poverty, live in poverty and die in poverty.' 'Aborigines and poverty mean the same thing.'

We set out to study their widespread acceptance of their situation as one of poverty. We have tried to determine to what extent Aboriginals are poor. What does poverty mean to the Aboriginal household? To what extent is it a real condition or a misconstruing of their situation? How are the various services helping or hindering Aboriginals from alleviating their actual or perceived condition of poverty?

1. Oscar Lewis, 'The Culture of Poverty', *Scientific American* 215, 4 (1966), pp. 19-25; and *La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty*, San Juan and New York (Random House, New York, 1966).

# 1 Methodology

This study of poverty examines the economic situations of Aboriginals living in family households in the city of Adelaide in 1973. It does not consider Aboriginals living in institutions or in white households.

An earlier study described a population of 1,917 Aboriginals in Adelaide.<sup>1</sup> Virtually one-quarter of this number was living either in institutions (children's homes, hostels, reform schools, gaols, hospitals or medical centres) or could be found fostered or adopted in white families.<sup>2</sup> None of these situations is included in this present study of poverty. The sample used in this survey was drawn only from Aboriginal households which represent approximately three-quarters of the total Aboriginal population of Adelaide.

This decision to limit the study to those living in Aboriginal households was taken quite deliberately. This was to be a study of primary poverty; a study of families who are poor because they do not receive sufficient income to enable them to maintain a reasonable standard of living. It was not commissioned as a study of secondary poverty. Virtually all Aboriginals living in white households or in institutions have their immediate economic needs taken care of. Although they may suffer considerable cultural deprivation they do not usually lack food, clothing or shelter.

Their present position in an institution or white home may have been caused by earlier years of poverty. Many of the children in children's homes, or those who have been adopted or fostered by white adults, were originally taken from their families because of the conditions of poverty in which they were found. They may exhibit many of the symptoms resulting from earlier years of poverty. But a study of such people requires very different methods from those necessary for a study of primary poverty. Aboriginals living in institutions or white households

1. Fay Gale, *Urban Aborigines* (Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1972).
2. Gale, *Urban Aborigines*, p. 96.
3. Jane Dixon, Evaluation of a program for homeless men (report to the Australian Government's Commission of Inquiry into Poverty, Adelaide, 1974).

have thus been excluded from this survey of Aboriginal incomes.

They have not been excluded because they are unimportant. The fact that one-quarter of the Aboriginal population is largely isolated from Aboriginal family living is a serious reflection of the larger community's failure to assist Aboriginal adaptation to urban living. Such people, separated from their relatives and their cultural backgrounds, have enormous problems of identity. But this large group of social isolates exists to some extent because their families were too poor, economically and socially, to give them sufficient support during their early years. Because at least some of the causes of present Aboriginal difficulties lie in past patterns of family poverty it seems necessary that these initial studies of poverty should be made on the family and its economic circumstances.

Other studies were commissioned to examine the situations of particular groups of people not living in families. One such study of alcoholics and homeless men in Adelaide included many of the Aboriginal men omitted from this study of families.\*

For various reasons then, the following chapters describe the poverty of Aboriginals living in Aboriginal family households. The study was further narrowed by its definition of an Aboriginal family household. It was decided that in a population which has few aged persons, none of whom live alone, the major groups suffering poverty due to insufficient income would be households with dependent children. The term family household was therefore limited to apply only to those Aboriginal households which contained at least one child. For the purpose of this study, the term household was taken to mean at least one Aboriginal adult, either mother, father or guardian, and at least one child. The household could thus contain as few as two Aboriginals although in actual fact it was usually much larger. Such a definition excludes married couples without children and single Aboriginals living together without children. It also excludes aged people without children or grandchildren living with them. However because it is rare for Aboriginals to live in such small units the definition in fact

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then moved through each collector's district looking for Aboriginals. (The technique is described in more detail in the companion study by Brown, Hirschfeld and Smith, *Aboriginals and Islanders in Brisbane*). This method allowed for density variation, but it required large quantities of manpower to complete the interviews in the given time. It therefore introduced the inevitable bias which results from using many different interviewers. The Adelaide study had an apparently less satisfactory sampling frame, but it maintained consistency in interviewing in that the chief interviewer went to every household on every occasion.

When our sample had been drawn, a questionnaire was designed to obtain both household and personal details. Two pilot studies were run to test the questionnaire and to try different interviewing techniques. Previous experience had shown that the only effective entry into an Aboriginal household is with another Aboriginal well known to that household. The Aboriginal Education Foundation temporarily employed an Aboriginal to act as an introducer and the Aboriginal section of the Department of Health offered the assistance of their Aboriginal field workers. In addition to these people, some other Aboriginals were employed on occasions to introduce the interviewer to those families not known to the other Aboriginal introducers.

The chief interviewer was a female and the majority of introducers were also female. But male interviewers and male Aboriginal introducers were also used. The females made the initial inquiry during the day time. The majority of the Aboriginal household adults to be interviewed were female because many of the Aboriginal women have white spouses or companions. Where there were Aboriginal male income earners, who could not be interviewed during the day, then an evening visit was arranged. In this case a white male accompanied the female interviewer in addition to one or two Aboriginal introducers. In such cases the males and females tended to move into separate rooms for their respective discussions.

An attempt was made to interview everyone above the school leaving age of 15 years, but this was not always possible. Some people did not wish to be interviewed even although the household head had agreed. But these refusals tended to be from very shy or young people or from inebriated adults. In such cases the female household head usually knew all the necessary information to fill out the individual's schedules as she tended to control the incomes of such members of her household whether they were male or female, young or old.

The early months of 1973 were spent in locating Aboriginal families and arranging for Aboriginal assistance. Various Aboriginal clubs were addressed to ensure the co-operation of the community and to make the aims of the study as widely known as possible before interviewing was commenced. All the 70 interviews were carried out during the months of May, June and July 1973.

It was found that informal discussion was the most effective means of obtaining information. Thus time spent with each household varied from one to three hours. A formal questionnaire was not used in the interview. Recording schedules were designed and all data were similarly recorded for each person. Instead of a formal questionnaire the required questions were memorised. They were then asked in varying orders to allow a normal flow of conversation. A pen and paper were produced during the interview to record essential numerical details only. Most of the interview was recorded on the schedules immediately afterwards in consultation with the Aboriginal introducer who had been present at the interview. The interview was handled in this way because much personal information was required and to obtain this accurately it was necessary to put the respondents completely at ease.

Earlier surveys by welfare agencies and data recorded at some agencies suggested a very high number of one-parent families. From personal knowledge of the Aboriginal community it was felt that these records were not entirely reliable. Some Aboriginal women listed as deserted wives or single mothers were known to have male companions in permanent residence. Because the women were afraid of losing social service benefits they did not reveal the presence of their companions if they felt at all unsure of the confidentiality of the interview situation. It was important that the full household be detailed and its total income recorded. Poverty statistics calculated on the basis of officially declared household income could be quite inaccurate. It was essential that 'illegal' male contributors to the household income be included. The deletion of a formal questionnaire and the consistent use of one interviewer made this possible.

The questions were framed so that they were completely open-ended as Aboriginals, particularly, tend to agree with any suggestion made by the interviewer. For example the question, 'Do you think that "x" is a good thing?', would inevitably receive an affirmative response. But later in the interview the answer to, 'Do you think that "x" is a bad thing?' would also be affirmative. This was tested purposely in pilot studies and found to be the case. So that the choice of res-

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ponse could be left completely to the Aboriginal, methods of eliciting information such as the following were used: 'What do you think about . . . ?'; 'How do you feel about . . . ?'.

After entering the house a variety of techniques was used, according to the circumstances prevailing. The interviewer spent as much time as necessary feeling for ways to reassure the householder and help him relax. Usually the presence of the Aboriginal introducer put the householder at ease, and the preliminary inquiries about the family both relaxed the atmosphere and gave the interviewer some starting points for conversation. Many of the formal questions could be woven into the general conversation at appropriate occasions and in some cases the interview was over with the Aboriginal protesting that the interviewer had not got the information she had come for.

Most Aboriginals were extremely pleased to talk, to have a new face to look at and a new ear

to listen to their worries and problems. Many said that the interview seemed more like a 'chat' than an interview. By using this kind of technique, the Aboriginal did not feel so acutely that his or her privacy was being invaded yet again, and the interviewer was able to obtain the maximum amount of reasonably accurate information. Reassurances were necessary in some cases, particularly when a householder was ashamed of her own appearance or the condition of her house or some aspects of her private life.

The questions about finance, expenditure and health were generally left until late in the interview, when the householder was feeling adequate and competent in the interview situation.

In view of the personal nature of the questionnaire it was gratifying that so many Aboriginals co-operated so freely. They clearly hoped that such an inquiry might lead to an improvement in their life styles.



# 9 Employment

More people in the survey were dependent on government pensions (or 'hand-outs' as they are usually termed) than were in receipt of wages. Of the 157 adult Aboriginals in the 70 households only 48 were actually employed. There were, in addition, 37 adult whites in the seventy households and 23 of these were working, making a total of 71 workers out of an adult population of 194 in the 70 households.

As is shown in Table 9.1, 69 adult Aboriginals and seven whites were receiving pensions of some kind. Some 15 per cent, 30 out of 194, were living on unemployment benefits and 20 per cent, 38 out of 194 people, were in receipt of social service pensions as deserted wives, widows, unmarried mothers or aged people. Two were in gaol at the time of the interviews. Altogether the government was directly supporting 78 people, 40 per cent of the adults in these 70 households.

The 194 adults were grouped into 142 income units. Of these, five units contained only white people, the other 137 units had at least one Aboriginal member. Of the 142 units, 76 of the income unit heads lived entirely on government benefits or pensions and 66 depended on wages. Unemployment is therefore an important factor in the relatively low poverty level of the Aboriginal community.

It is worth looking at the nature of the distribution of those employed in relation to the unemployed. In this case 'unemployed' refers to all of those receiving pensions. Tables 9.2 - 9.6 relate employment and unemployment to various de-

mographic factors. The distribution in relation to marital status is interesting. As Table 9.2 shows, none of the income unit heads living in *de facto* relationships were dependent on pensions. All the males who were not officially married to their partners were in full-time employment. In Table 9.2 and subsequent tables dealing with employment, the term income unit head refers to the adult male, if the unit is a partnership, but to a male or female if the unit contains only one adult.

**Table 9.2 Numbers in each marital status group in relation to employment of income unit head**

Marital status	Employed	Unemployed	Total
Married	29	9	38
<i>De facto</i>	14	0	14
Separated or divorced	6	13	19
Widowed	0	15	15
Unmarried	17	37	54
Not known	0	2	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>76</b>	<b>142</b>

This pattern gives some support to the claim of several Aboriginal women that a man is likely to be an earner if he only lives with a woman and is not married to her. Chi-square tests do not, however, show the pattern to be statistically significant. But the women believe that they have more sexual power to force a man to work if they can threaten to leave him if he does not work. This threat, they say, is easier to use if the couple is not married.

A large proportion of the single young men

**Table 9.1 Employment in relation to race and sex**

Race	Working	Unemployment benefits	Home duties	Invalid pension	Deserted, widowed, old age pensions	Unmarried with children	Gaol	Total
Aboriginal male	31	15		4				51
Aboriginal female	17	10	39	3	25	12	1	106
<b>Total</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>157</b>
White male	23	5		1	1		1	31
White female			6					6
<b>Total</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>		<b>1</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>Grand total</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>194</b>

and women did not work. The majority received unemployment benefits, but some girls had pensions as unmarried mothers. Many of the older women are very critical of the increasing numbers of young people who do not work: 'It is just too easy for them'. One woman said to the interviewer who was met by several teenagers, 'Can't anyone make this lazy lot work?'. Another said, 'There's plenty of employment, but no takers for the jobs. Money comes too easy'.

Table 9.3 shows a clear relationship between marriage, legal or otherwise, and employment. 'Married' includes both legal and common law unions. 'Single' refers to all income unit heads who have no partner. Married income unit heads are much more inclined to work than are single income unit heads. Single people, with or without dependent children, clearly have less incentive to work than do married males. Only 26 per cent of the single Aboriginal income units were found to be working at the time of the survey. More than half of these had no dependent children and therefore, apart from the few older and invalid people, were able to go out to work. There were five white income units within the Aboriginal households. These whites had no partners. The Aboriginals called them 'hangers-on' and it is not therefore surprising that four of the five were unemployed.

**Table 9.3 Race and marital status of income unit heads in relation to employment**

	Employed	Unemployed	Total
<i>Married</i>			
Aboriginal	15	5	20
Mixed	28	4	32
<i>Single</i>			
Aboriginal	22	63	85
White	1	4	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>76</b>	<b>142</b>

Chi-square tests applied to Table 9.3, grouping married and single in relation to employed and unemployed, show a high significance level ( $P < .001$ ). It therefore makes a considerable difference to the employment situation whether Aboriginals are married or not. The declining opportunity for Aboriginal males to marry may therefore be a significant factor in their rising unemployment.

Many Aboriginal women have said that white husbands are more reliable workers than Aboriginal men and give this as a reason for choosing white spouses. But Table 9.3 does not show any statistical relationship between ethnic factors and employment. The relationship is clearly between marriage and employment. Maybe the white spouses work because they are married not because they are white; the women are perhaps

influenced by the number of single unemployed Aboriginal males. But Table 9.3 suggests that these Aboriginal men are more likely to be unemployed because they are single than because they are Aboriginal. All the Aboriginal men married to white women were employed and the white women concerned all said that the Aboriginal men were 'good workers'.

The observations made by Aboriginal women may be correct, but the wrong reasons are given to account for these situations. Thus white husbands are better workers than single Aboriginal men, but not because they are white. A similar situation occurs when we look at kinship groupings. Some groups are said to be better workers than others. But there does not appear to be a significant variation in the work pattern from one kinship group to the next, as shown in Table 9.4.

**Table 9.4 Employment and region of origin**

Origin	Employed	Unemployed	Total
Point McLeay	19	25	44
Point Pearce	8	15	23
West Coast	9	10	19
Central	9	6	15
Northern Territory	3	4	7
Upper North	4	4	8
Mixed	3	3	6
Upper Murray	1	2	3
South East	4	3	7
Interstate	5	5	10
White	1	4	5
Unknown		3	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>76</b>	<b>142</b>

Because numbers in each group are small, except for the Point McLeay people, a close comparison is not valid. But in general terms the differences are not large enough to have much meaning. Examples cited by Aboriginals of some groups earning more than others can be shown to be due to a difference in education levels, not to any particular attribute held by one kinship group as against another.

Two other demographic factors do appear to have some influence upon whether individuals work or not. Age and numbers of dependent children will be considered. Table 9.5 shows that a higher proportion of those under 21 years of

**Table 9.5 Age and employment of income unit heads**

Age in years	Employed		Unemployed		Total
	Number	%	Number	%	
<21	10	40	15	60	25
21-34	34	58	25	42	59
35-49	20	56	16	44	36
50+	2	10	18	90	20
Unknown			2		2
<b>Total</b>	<b>66</b>		<b>76</b>		<b>142</b>

## Employment

age and over 50 years of age are unemployed than people between 21 and 49 years of age.

It can be seen that 60 per cent of those under 21 years of age were unemployed, the majority living on unemployment benefits. Such young people said that benefits were 'quite enough' and it was not necessary to work. They had fewer financial commitments than their elders and saw little reason to take on boring jobs.

Only 10 per cent (two out of 20) of the income unit heads of 50 years of age and over were employed. People in these age groups had older children who were working or receiving pensions, and so they had less incentive to find jobs than did adults with several dependent children. The majority of these older people gave ill-health as a reason for not working. There is more incentive for people in the age groups of 21 to 49 years to seek employment. The relationship between age and employment is statistically significant. Chi-square tests applied to Table 9.5 give a value of  $P = <.01 >.001$ . For purposes of calculation the two unknown were omitted.

The other factor influencing whether people work or depend upon pensions is the number of dependent children for which each unit head is responsible. This factor is, of course, related to age. Table 9.6 shows that the more dependent children an adult has the more likely he or she is to find work.

Clearly a much higher percentage (67 per cent) of adults with no dependent children did not find it necessary to work. Chi-square tests show a significant relationship between employment and numbers of dependent children ( $P = <.02 >.01$ ).

With this general pattern of employment and unemployment in mind the actual positions of the

**Table 9.6 Dependent children to each income unit head in relation to employment**

Number of dependent children	Employed		Unemployed		Total
	Number	%	Number	%	
0	20	33	40	67	60
1-2	18	51	17	49	35
3-4	16	52	15	48	31
5-6	8	67	4	33	12
7-8	3	100			3
9-10	1	100			1
Total	66		76		142

workers and those on pensions will be considered in relation to the poverty scale in Table 9.7. Table 9.7 shows that there are two groups of people on or below the poverty line. These are intact large families, in which the father is either working, or on unemployment benefits, and single-parent families depending on pensions.

Four of the nine intact family units, 44 per cent, living on pensions, and 13 of the twenty-nine single-parent units, 45 per cent, living on pensions, were found to be below the poverty line. But 11 out of 36, or 31 per cent, of the employed with known incomes living in family units were below the poverty line. A comparison of the employed with the unemployed in Table 9.7 shows that those who work are definitely better off. If the poor and marginal incomes are compared with the low and higher incomes of employed versus unemployed, then chi-square tests applied to Table 9.7 show a significant level of  $P = <.001$ .

But employment brings greatest benefit to those without children and to the families where both parents are working. All the single adults who were working were in the medium income groups and the majority were above 200 per cent on the

**Table 9.7 Employment and the poverty scale before rent for each income unit head**

	Poverty level					Total
	Very poor-poor	Marginal	Low income	140-199.9	200+	
<i>Employed</i>						
Family, 1 parent working	11	8	6	8	3	38
Family, 2 parents working				4	1	5
Single, with children		1		2	1	4
Single, no children				2	17	19
Total	11	9	6	16	22	66
<i>Unemployed</i>						
Family, no worker	4	2	2		1	9
Single, with children	13	12	2	2		29
Single, no children	3	23	1	11		38
Total	20	37	5	13	1	76
Grand total	31	46	11	29	22	142

poverty scale. Similarly none of the units in which both parents worked were found in the lower income groups.

On the other hand large families are not necessarily benefited if only the father obtains a job. Table 9.7 shows that more than half of the families with only one parent working were on or below the poverty line. Their level of poverty would be more evident if this table had been able to take into account the concessions available to pensioners but not to workers. Pension concessions and allowances increase with each additional dependent child, but a man's wages do not. Thus a man with a large family may actually be better off on unemployment benefits than in a poorly paid job.

It was therefore quite good advice given by one Aboriginal woman to another with a large family when she said, 'Get your old man to quit working and go on unemployment. You'll all be better off'. Since this statement was found to be true for several of the large intact working families visited, serious questions must be asked about our present social system as applied to large families in which the household head is employed.

One example will illustrate this statement. A married Aboriginal couple with five children, whose ages ranged from two to 11 years, elected to take unemployment benefits in preference to a job. After several inquiries the father was offered a position with a State government department. This job involved him in being away from his family and working in the country for long periods. After two weeks he found that his wages, after deductions, amounted to only \$63.00 a week. However he discovered that unemployment benefits and allowances came to \$68.00 a week besides allowing him to remain at home

with his family. Under similar circumstances who would work?

Looked at from the point of view of the household and not just the income unit, it becomes clear that the financially secure households are those where two people are working, five out of seven being above the marginal levels. Similarly, households where at least one is working and one is receiving a pension are better off than those just on pensions or with only one income earner. Table 9.8, which shows the numbers of incomes in each household, illustrates this situation. It shows that 15 out of 22 households receiving both wages and pensions are above the marginal levels of poverty. By contrast all households receiving only pensions are poor or marginally poor.

When household heads were asked their opinions about employment opportunities for Aboriginals in Adelaide, 64 responded with definite statements. Forty-six, 72 per cent, said that there were plenty of jobs and many opportunities if only Aboriginals wanted to take them. However, many of those answering in this manner were not themselves working. One said, 'Oh there's plenty of jobs around but it don't pay us to take them.'

Only 18 people, 28 per cent, considered that there were not sufficient job opportunities. Only three of these said that they had ever encountered any discrimination amongst employers. Fourteen of the 18 who felt dissatisfied were working at the time of the interview. Their complaints were not so much that jobs were hard to get, but that the jobs available for Aboriginals were boring and quite meaningless. The majority linked the problem of the inadequate types of employment available with the low educational level of most Aboriginals.

Table 9.8 Poverty level before rent and household employment structure

	Poverty level						Total
	Very poor	Poor	Marginal	Low income	140-199.9	200+	
<i>Single income</i>							
1 employed	1	4	5	5	6		21
1 pension		6	3				9
<i>Multi incomes</i>							
2+ employed			2	1	1	3	7
2+ pensions		2	5				7
employed and pensions	1	2	4	5	6	4	22
Total	2	14	19	11	13	7	66

# 11 Conclusion and recommendations

If this study is any guide, then the Aboriginal family is disadvantaged in comparison with the average Australian family. Aboriginals who were poor or marginally poor accounted for 53 per cent of the sample population in comparison with 20.6 per cent of the whole Australian population. If those in the low income bracket are also included, then 70 per cent of the sample population is seen to be without really adequate incomes. Furthermore, earlier studies have shown that rural Aboriginals are not as well off as their city counterparts.<sup>1</sup> Reports by the mass media have suggested that South Australian Aboriginals have advantages over many of their brethren in other States. Certainly the Brisbane study supports this in showing that the sample of Brisbane Aboriginals evidenced a higher percentage below the poverty line than did the Adelaide sample. These various factors add up to a conclusion that a significant proportion of the whole Aboriginal population of Australia probably does not receive sufficient money to maintain a reasonable standard of living in comparison with the general Australian population.

The reasons for their poverty, on the surface at least, appear to lie in their low levels of education and limited skills and job training. But these are not conditions which are easily or quickly overcome. Only in recent years have Aboriginals been offered opportunities in education equal to those of the community at large. And only since the beginning of 1973 have there been special education programs available for adult Aboriginals in Adelaide. It will be many years before such changes show up in improved earning capacity. The few Aboriginals in the sample who had special or tertiary qualifications had very different incomes from those of the majority in the study. All of those with vocational skills and higher education were more than 200 per cent above the poverty line.

The problems of offering suitable education to disadvantaged adults and their underprivileged children are numerous. As Lewis in his theory of the 'culture of poverty' tried to show, poverty

brings its own social problems and blocks many preventive and therapeutic attempts to overcome its problems. Many of the social problems which Aboriginals face today result from their long history of poverty and maltreatment. The Aboriginal family in Adelaide exhibits several of the symptoms described by other students of poverty in non-Aboriginal communities. In addition, the poor Aboriginal family has attributes which are uniquely Aboriginal.

The breakdown of the Aboriginal family in Adelaide, and presumably in many other places too, reflects the severe social pressures being brought to bear upon it. Some of these pressures result from the economic situations in which a majority of the Aboriginal families find themselves. The present structure of the Aboriginal household in Adelaide illustrates this.

There were 52 married couples (legal and *de facto*) in the sample. But almost two-thirds of these were unions containing one white partner, usually a white male. Altogether there were 82 income units, either couples or one-parent families, with dependent children. Yet only 26 of these 82 families had Aboriginal male heads. The other 56 had either white male heads or Aboriginal women alone.

It is important to seek out the reasons for this displacement of the Aboriginal male. He is now often found in gaol, hostel, alcoholic centre or place for homeless men. We consider that poverty and the present welfare methods of alleviating it are partly to blame for the deterioration of the adult Aboriginal male's social status and his virtual eviction from the family.

Men who cannot earn enough to support their families have no self-respect and little appreciation from their wives or children. Indeed, partly because of their economic limitations, half of the Aboriginal men cannot even get wives. The circular path which so many men walk between gaol, legal aid, prisoners' aid and night shelters for homeless men, is but a reflection of the fact that so many Aboriginal men have no place in society. Alcoholism and gaol are all too often the only available escape routes for men who believe themselves to be of no economic or social value.

Many of the welfare services, especially those

1. Fay Gale, *Urban Aborigines* (Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1972).

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offered by the Commonwealth Department of Social Security, do not appear to take the plight of the male into consideration. Women and children are usually deemed to be the only people in need of direct financial assistance. Mothers without husbands are given pensions and various allowances. No matter how poor the family might be, these cannot be paid to a woman who has a husband living with her. Therefore a man who cannot earn an adequate wage is encouraged to leave his family for their own good. Many of the alcoholics and men in gaol, hostels and night shelters say they are there because they are not wanted in their homes. Our system of social security may have given the female independence and security, but it may also have helped in the destruction of the male.

Pensions are given to mothers to care for children, but half of these children will grow up to be adult men, educated from childhood to know the uselessness of being male. It is therefore to be expected that the number of homeless men and fatherless families will actually increase under the present welfare system. The only way in which many Aboriginal men can remain in a family environment is by accepting their inferior role. They must suffer criticism and diminution of self-respect. And as the women secure more economic power they are not slow to assert their superiority. This situation cannot be encouraging for their growing sons. The recent upsurge in Aboriginal male delinquency is to be expected under such circumstances.

An Adelaide Aboriginal, Cherie Watkins, has composed a song about an Adelaide hotel which has a large Aboriginal clientele. It summarises the sense of hopelessness which many Aboriginal males now possess.

If you're passing through skid row  
You'll always fund a nunga  
who's got no place to go

Nunga is the local term which Aboriginals use to identify themselves. This song is quoted from a tape recording.

Certainly, Aboriginals in the city see a direct relationship between alcoholism and the breakdown of the Aboriginal family and the banishment of the male. But Aboriginal men can become an economic asset in the home if they live in a *de facto* rather than a legal marriage. A woman is not able to receive a pension and the allowances it offers if she has a husband living with her. But if she is not married to her partner then she can sometimes obtain a pension as well as a share of her mate's income; in many cases two incomes are necessary to maintain the family at a reasonable standard of living. It therefore seems necessary not to hunt out *de facto* hus-

bands in a more ruthless manner than at present, but on the contrary to organise a system of support for families whose male bread winner is on a very low income.

The present system of social security encourages wives in poor families to leave their husbands and it supports the conditions which prevent Aboriginal men from marrying. Although a deserted wives' pension is barely adequate, it is secure and reliable. Many Aboriginal men cannot offer such economic security.

Chapter 9 showed the highly significant relationship for Aboriginal men between marriage and employment. Either only the reliable workers have the chance to marry in the present situation, which is very much the females' market, or else only married men have the incentive to sustain continuous employment. Whatever the cause, the present situation of declining marriage opportunities for Aboriginal males does not auger well for their future employment, status or sobriety. For the sake of the Aboriginal family, and therefore of the whole Aboriginal community, some attempt must be made to help the male regain at least some of the social and economic status he enjoyed in traditional times.

For these reasons, increases in those pensions paid only to women should be studied carefully before a further diminution of the male position is encouraged. This is not to say that the mother in a one-parent family is well off. The two groups in poverty were found to be one-parent families depending only upon social security, and the families of working men in low paid jobs. The single women do need more help, but to make them more independent and better off financially may also be to increase their numbers. It will certainly make the poorly paid male even less respected or needed.

The present system of social security may therefore unintentionally be encouraging the breakdown of marriage and of the family. The survey has shown that some families are managing to live at a reasonable standard only by breaking from societal norms such as marriage. Any system of social security which encourages an under-privileged minority group to separate itself even further from the society's perceived pattern of normality is encouraging an increase in personal and group tensions.

The majority of the welfare services further support this divisive situation. Fatherless families are given priority in housing and in many welfare programs. Club activities and learning centres have been developed which concentrate on women or children. Men are largely ignored. When families combine to form multiple unit households in an attempt to beat poverty, welfare

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workers and housing authorities try to break them down into nuclear families.

Child endowments, although much smaller than pensions, follow the same principle of direct monetary payments to the mother. They further support the economically dominant position of the woman in modern Aboriginal society. In nearly all of the households visited it was the woman who assumed herself to be the household head. It was she who knew how much money came into the household and how it was spent. Even when male interviewers were employed to return in the evenings to households known to have married male heads, the economic situation was still usually better known by the woman and in many cases she assumed all financial matters to be her prerogative.

Serious consideration should be given to whether increases in child endowment are desirable, for the same reason as that put forward against blanket increases in pensions without also some form of subsidy for working fathers. But there are other reasons why many Aboriginal women do not wish to see child endowments increased. Several have said that their husbands keep asking them to have more children so that they can gain higher endowments. Women have gone to family planning clinics in secret. Other women, who do not want more children and clearly cannot manage any more, are afraid to go to the clinic in case their husbands discover the fact. Such secrecy and conflicts can scarcely be in the best interests of the family.

Some women say that they prefer white partners because they do not want as many children as Aboriginal men do. One woman said that Aboriginal men, especially the heavy drinkers, see 'a straight line between more children, more endowment, more money for drink'. Thus, even many of the women who are receiving the endowment payments see that they offer mixed blessings, and that there should be better ways of subsidising low income earners.

There is no doubt that many Aboriginal families are poor and need more money. But the whole Aboriginal society may be better off if some of these subsidies were to be paid to the working father and not solely to the mother.

The most effective work seems to be in the field of development programs which assist the resurgence of Aboriginal pride and distinctive identity. Young men who are almost aggressively Aboriginal seem to find less difficulty in obtaining wives than do those who accept their inferior status. The young activists seem to be assured of a government job and in several cases, a white wife as well. The future of the Aboriginal male may not therefore be as gloomy as it presently appears, provided the men themselves can sustain

their independence and achieve their goals of self-identity.

For such reasons it is recommended that our welfare policies should aim towards the provision of adequate, subsidised or guaranteed minimum wages for working fathers in addition to the present forms of support directed only towards mothers.

An adequate minimum wage would also overcome some aspects of the present anomalous situation regarding unemployment benefits. The study has shown that a high percentage of the Aboriginal men are unemployed. Several say that they do not work because it does not pay them to work. A few of those actually in jobs know that their families would be better off if they left work and registered for unemployment benefits; they work only because they enjoy their jobs. But there are many in tedious avenues of employment who have no such incentive. If he has no wife or family to support, the job is boring and there is little economic gain to be made by working, then why should a man get up in the morning and go to work? A much more enjoyable time can be had with friends and 'a couple of bottles'.

The present system of benefits may not only encourage an increase in the numbers of unemployed, it may also be detrimental to some sectors of industry. Growers in the Murray Valley have had to throw away fruit in the last couple of seasons because they could not employ people to pick the crops. Aboriginals, who have been an important source of labour in previous years, now find it unnecessary to take such seasonal work.

Such factors described in this study do not, of course, apply only to Aboriginals. But because they are an identifiable minority they are in some ways easier to study than some other groups of poor. Thus an examination of their situation may be beneficial for other groups also.

The majority of Aboriginals show remarkable insight into their situation. Money is being spent on programs aimed at education in fields such as home management. The survey has shown that Aboriginals manage very well in view of their exceedingly low incomes. They are already using almost all of the practicable measures available to alleviate their poverty. Basically they need more money, not paid to agencies or clubs but directly to the people in need; and not paid to encourage larger families or more separations and divorces.

There is a strong opinion in vogue that all government money for Aboriginal welfare should be channelled through Aboriginal agencies. There is the belief that agencies directed by Aboriginals and those employing Aboriginal workers are inevitably better than those in which whites are

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involved. This is not necessarily the case. Some of the most effective agencies do have Aboriginal workers. But it is the calibre of these particular Aboriginals which is the key to their success. Other agencies employing Aboriginals are less effective than some white groups because the Aboriginals in these situations lack competence. Some of the best programs involve Aboriginal direction and white professionalism. There is no clear rule for granting authorities to follow. Indeed some Aboriginal leaders are more authoritarian than their white counterparts.

Many of the specialised agencies are delivering valuable services and their work should be extended. But even these are secondary to the key problem of insufficient money for the working man to take home with pride to his family. Many of the general agencies are merely providing props which would no longer be needed if all families were receiving adequate incomes.

The proliferation of agencies can do little to encourage the growth of self-respect among members of the community. On one occasion three Aboriginal field officers, from three different agencies, arrived within minutes of each other to visit the same household. The householder was below the poverty line and might have benefited more by a direct grant of the money that was spent in sending three separate officers.

The direction of grants through a central Aboriginal agency, as being mooted at present, can do little to prevent the overlap of services. There is so much disagreement between the various kinship groups and factions that whoever is in authority in the Aboriginal centre will wield considerable power and inevitably this must lead to even greater jealousy and divisiveness within the community.

Aboriginal householders interviewed during the course of this study made several practical recommendations. They pointed out, for instance, that gas and electricity accounts are sent quarterly. But all households are paid weekly or fortnightly. A family close to the poverty line

cannot organise its finances on a quarterly basis. Deductions for these basic services could be taken with the rent on a more frequent basis. Only minor adjustments would be necessary at the end of each quarter. A family without cooking facilities due to the disconnection of power would then be met with less frequently.

In fact there are many minor changes which authorities could make in an effort to alleviate the situation of those in poverty. But the basic and valid cry of many is for more money so that begging at voluntary agencies and dehumanising at government offices is no longer necessary.

It is not that inadequate money is being allocated to the Aboriginal population. This minority group of poor is probably now receiving a larger amount of money in government grants than any other poor sector. The criticism of so many Aboriginals concerns the nature of this expenditure.

Governments throughout the world are prepared to spend large sums on programs directed by the wealthier for the poor. The Commonwealth Department of Aboriginal Affairs is no exception. But the same governments are less keen to give money directly to the poor. As so many Aboriginals have said, they have to be kept poor to enable others to live comfortably by providing services for them.

There is truth in their comments. Some programs are still decided for the people and are directed more at overcoming observed problems such as housing than at raising self-respect. If all of the money being spent on Aboriginal welfare went direct to the families concerned there would be no Aboriginal poor in Australia. Many see the present bounty of the Commonwealth as an extension of the 'hand-out' or ration system of earlier years. But self-respect cannot so easily be bought. Yet we believe it must be re-established if the Aboriginal family is to survive. Welfare programs must therefore evaluate their policies clearly in the light of such factors.