Australian Social Policy Conference presentation

Poverty amongst privilege: Social exclusion of children in Boroondara

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Acknowledgement
In working towards an Australia free of poverty, the Brotherhood of St Laurence recognises the Indigenous custodians of this country.

Introduction
The municipality of Boroondara takes in some of Melbourne’s most affluent suburbs. So you might wonder why a charity like the BSL is researching child social exclusion in this location. Well firstly, we were commissioned by local organisations, Foundation Boroondara, the Hawthorn Rotary Club and Camcare, who were concerned by anecdotal evidence and personal experiences that indicated there was an alarming degree of child social exclusion in the area. So they commissioned the BSL to gain a more accurate and deeper understanding of the state of child social exclusion in the area. Specifically, to ascertain how the needs of children are being met, not being met and what is required to meet these needs.

The findings indicate that there is indeed a considerable amount of social exclusion in Boroondara. The findings have greater significance than just for the municipality of Boroondara though. They reveal how social exclusion manifests amongst a generally affluent area. Although there is much overlap in the nature of social exclusion between a generally disadvantaged and generally advantaged neighbourhood, there are characteristics of social exclusion particular to generally affluent areas. In order to address social exclusion in generally affluent areas public policy needs to recognise that there is indeed social exclusion in advantaged areas, which is camouflaged by the general affluence of the area, and also needs to recognise the particular nature of this social exclusion.

Methodology
This piece of research consists of two separate stages. The first stage scoped published data on child poverty in Boroondara, it was completed in 2005 and it heavily drew on the 2001 ABS census. Hence stage one is more concerned with income poverty rather than social exclusion.

Then the aim of stage 2 was to explore the people behind the figures to gain a more complete picture of the particular nature of social exclusion.

The data was collected in three ways:
Firstly, 25 community, government and welfare agencies that provide services to more than 500 families in the region were surveyed. The survey mostly inquired about the services offered by the organisation, how they perceive the nature of child social exclusion, its causes and potential remedies.
Secondly, in order to elaborate on the survey results 9 in depth interviews were conducted with staff of the agencies who work with children in the region. The agencies that took part in the survey and interview worked in areas including: disability, migrants, material aid, counselling, maternal and child health, child education and care, children at risk of harm and income support.
Lastly, a focus group was conducted with 9 mothers who live in the area. All the mothers were on a low income and use the services of local welfare agencies. Some of the mothers suffered from multiple disadvantages, such as being the victim of domestic violence or from a CALD background.

**Findings**

**Extent of poverty in Boroondara**

On average Boroondara is an affluent region. However, Boroondara covers a population of about 150 thousand people, and because many of these people are very wealthy, this increases the average wealth and income of the area. Hence, this average level of wealth can mask that not only does child social exclusion exist in Boroondara, but there are quite a sizable number of children living in poverty, in order of 12% of children according to the Henderson poverty line. (Over 4500 children). This figure was arrived at using the 2001 census, which provided the number of families under the poverty line, and this was then multiplied by the Australian average number of children in a household. This is a conservative estimate because it only includes children under the age of 15.

Averaging across a population can be misleading for numerous indicators of well-being. For example, Tony Vinson’s research, which emphasises placed-based disadvantage, uses life expectancy as an indicator of community well-being. But if a large proportion of the population live over the age of 90 it lifts the average of the whole region, concealing the considerable number of people who die aged younger than 70. The same failing is applicable if one were to average out the educational attainment of an area.

Admittedly, 12% of children living in poverty is much lower than the regions in Melbourne where disadvantage is concentrated, in such regions child poverty can be above 25%. However, as was shown by Kleinman, at least in the UK, the sum of the number of people living in poverty in all regions where disadvantage is not concentrated actually outweighs the sum of people living in poverty in regions where disadvantage is concentrated. (Kleinman 1999)

**Demand for and state of services**

The survey found that 17 of 24 agencies could not meet the demand for their services. Agencies had various means to cope with excess demand. They reported regularly referring clients to other agencies, where often the referred to agency was also struggling to meet demand. Hence, some agencies are juggling clients between themselves in an attempt to help their clients. Furthermore, some agencies try to offer limited services, for example volunteers are used to assist clients. Lastly, but commonly, agencies are forced to turn away clients and close waiting lists.

The most common issue around child social exclusion that agencies felt was not handled well in Boroondara was housing. This is despite that agencies rated this as an important contributor to child social exclusion, yet only three of the surveyed agencies were actually able to offer any kind of housing support. Housing services are very expensive to offer and agencies simply did not have available resources. The next two most important issues that agencies said were not handled well in Boroondara were family services and violence management.

**The particular nature of child social exclusion in Boroondara**

Because Boroondara is largely an affluent area it does not have some of the supportive infrastructure of other areas where poverty is concentrated. Outreach programs were specifically emphasised by agency staff. Disadvantage in Boroondara is not so apparent as other areas and tends to be hidden away. Furthermore, parents may feel reluctant to ask for help because there is a strong sense of shame attached to being poor when one is surrounded by so much affluence. Shame
is an aspect of poverty even in areas with concentrated poverty, and it is heightened in areas of scattered poverty. To quote one agency staff member, ‘being poor in a wealthy area can be devastating’.

Prejudice and intolerance of difference was a major contributor to child social exclusion in Boroondara. For example, a couple of agencies reported that some mothers clearly attempt to prevent their own children interacting with other children who have come from a ‘problematic’ background. Also, interacting with other parents at pre-schools can be quite daunting for some mothers from disadvantaged backgrounds, as they feel they do not fit in. This then can affect their willingness to take their child to pre-school.

A couple of the mothers from the focus group said that they were unable to enrol their children in pre-school at all, due to a lack of places; there was a one to two year waiting list. They said that the pre-schools that they approached in the area have a ‘sibling policy’ which means that children whose siblings have attended the pre-school receive preferential enrolment. Hence, families that are well established in the area were favoured over the two mothers who had recently moved into public housing in the area.

Another specific way poverty amongst privilege affects child social exclusion was that children from disadvantaged families can be more susceptible to ostracism at school, often their dress and general appearance marks them out. Contributing to this ostracism many low income parents are unable to hold expensive birthday parties that are common in the area. A few mothers from the focus group also commented that recreational activities in the area, such as shopping and sporting facilities, are more expensive than in other areas of Melbourne.

Applying community solutions
Community solutions to local problems, which are so in vogue at the moment, require a strong sense of community. Nothing suggests that Boroondara’s sense of community is any weaker than other communities, to the contrary, Boroondara has much social capital that could be drawn on. Rather Boroondara suffers from a converse problem of communities with concentrated disadvantage, that as Saunders says have ‘weakened social networks that undermine their ability to provide support’ (Saunders 2005, p.114). Boroondara’s sense of community and identity is strongly tied to its affluence, with a perception of uniform well-being. Hence, combating social exclusion is not seen as a priority. This paradox is a central problem to addressing social exclusion in Boroondara; that many people and especially children are excluded in Boroondara because they do not fit into the affluent mould, yet it is precisely that there is this affluent mould which hinders developing community and government solutions to social exclusion. If community solutions are to have any impact on poverty in areas with general affluence, then it is essential to raise community awareness that there is considerable social exclusion present in the community. This was one of the main recommendations that came out of the study.

Questioning the place-based approach
The Victorian Government, along with other jurisdictions within the OECD (S.A, Britain), has adopted a place-based approach to addressing aspects of social exclusion. The Neighbourhood Renewal initiative is one of its most prominent social policy programs. The initiative provides resources for specific communities and works with communities to address particular local issues, such as crime, amenities, neighbourhood appearance, and social cohesion. Without disregarding the needs of particularly disadvantaged areas, the problem of scattered poverty in areas of higher relative wealth should also not be overlooked. Place based initiatives will not help a considerable proportion of disadvantaged people.

Scattered poverty can be more difficult to address, this is partially because as mentioned earlier, the disadvantage is more covert. Furthermore, people may need to be assisted individually, instead of having one project that benefits various people, without even having to do any individual tailoring.
Hence, to address scattered poverty people-based strategies are required. People-based strategies entail equipping individuals with the resources they need to cope and contribute to society, that is, to build their capabilities. For example, giving individuals assistance to access training and education is a people-based strategy. In Boroondara people-based strategies are especially relevant in regards to ensuring that outreach programs are established to ensure that disadvantaged individuals, such as women facing domestic violence and victims of child abuse, are given assistance.

In addition to people-based approaches structural based approaches are also required. Structural-based strategies address access to resources across the society at large, instead of focusing on a particular area or individuals. Strategies to address unemployment and low-income in general are structural-based initiatives. Structural initiatives are an important part of the solution to addressing scattered poverty, and poverty in general, because although social exclusion in Boroondara has particular characteristics distinct to areas with concentrated poverty, it remains that the primary cause of poverty is the same as most other areas, low-income.

**Conclusion**

We are not using these findings to argue that resources should be diverted from areas of concentrated poverty and put into areas with general advantage. Rather that in addressing social exclusion, all social exclusion, governments should be wary of neglecting the many socially excluded people that do not live in areas of concentrated poverty.

**Follow up details**

The full report is available on the websites of the Brotherhood of St Laurence at www.bsl.org.au
And I have a few hard copies with me.

Kleinman, M 1999, 'There goes the neighbourhood: areas policies and social exclusion', *New Economy*, vol.6, no. 4, pp.188–92.