

Improving the Job Network for People in Housing Crisis

*The Experiences of Clients of
Two Melbourne Agencies*

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November 1998

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Contents	Page
Executive Summary	ii
1. Introduction	1
2. Method	3
3. Results	4
Sample	4
Service utilisation	5
Respondent profile	6
Education and work history	7
Summary of profile	9
Experiences with Centrelink	9
Experiences with the Job Network	14
Outcome of job referrals	16
Overall satisfaction with Job Network agencies	17
4. Discussion	20
Assessment of needs	21
Employment assistance provided to job seekers	27
Access to complaints and review procedures	29
Linkages between homeless persons services and employment programs	29
Incentives for employers to engage disadvantaged job seekers	30
5. Conclusion	30
Key issues	30
Policy implications	31

Appendix 1: Information for Participants
Appendix 2: Client Data Collection (survey form)

References

Executive Summary

Background

This project was developed to monitor the impact of changes to employment assistance services and specifically the introduction of the Job Network on job seekers in Melbourne who were experiencing homelessness or were in housing crisis.

The study involved a survey of clients at two Melbourne based agencies, Hanover Welfare Services and Melbourne Citymission, who provide a range of accommodation and support programs for people experiencing homelessness or at imminent risk of homelessness. The Job Network commenced in May 1998. In order to allow for a settling down period, the survey was introduced at the end of June and ran for three months across 13 services in Western, Southern and inner metropolitan Melbourne.

The sampling frame was designed to ensure that the survey sample was representative of the range of households experiencing homelessness or in housing crisis. Eligibility was based on two criteria: the client was in the labour market (either unemployed and/or seeking work) and was either homeless or in housing crisis. A total of 227 survey forms were completed across the participating services over the three-month period. The sample represented 43% of clients eligible for inclusion in the study.

The majority of respondents were male (60%) and single (88%) with a mean age of 25 years. Nearly half (48%) were aged under 21 years, 16% between 21 and 25 years and 25% between 26 and 35 years old.

Over half (52%) of respondents had left school aged 15 years or younger. An additional 18% had left at age 16 years, 14% at age 17 years and 12% at age 18 years. Nearly half of the sample had not obtained a qualification of any type (that is, year 11 or higher).

Over half (55%) had been unemployed for over one year, 27% for 6-12 months and 9% for 3-6 months. Twenty per cent had never worked up until the date of the survey. Significant age variance was evident with under 21 year olds over represented among those with no work experience. Over half (54%) of under 18 year olds and 27% of 18-20 year olds had never worked. The 46 respondents who had never worked had left school on average four years earlier. Just over one-quarter of respondents stated that they had participated in a training program in the previous year.

Study Findings

Experience with Centrelink

The majority of respondents (58%) had been assessed by Centrelink (Job Seeker Classification Instrument) for eligibility for Job Network assistance. A substantial 44% were unable to report their eligibility for Job Network services following the assessment. They ticked the 'don't know' response. A further 44% reported that they were eligible for Job Search Assistance (Flex 2), whilst only 7% were assessed as eligible for Intensive Assistance (Flex 3).

Nearly one-third of those not assessed by Centrelink had been unemployed for at least two years and one-quarter had been unemployed for over one year. Those not assessed were significantly older by an average of four years compared to those who had been.

Respondents were asked whether they had breached Centrelink regulations or guidelines for any reason. One-quarter of all respondents had had their income support cut or reduced because of breaches. It is evident from the reasons provided that in most cases the lack of a stable home resulted in many clients being unable to meet their obligations to Centrelink. Extreme transience leads to poor communication between Centrelink and its clients.

Experience with the Job Network

A total of 97 respondents (43%) reported that they had been referred to or accessed one of the Job Network agencies. The majority of the sample had not therefore received services from a Job Network provider.

The name of the Job Network agency was reported by 70% of those referred, enabling categorisation into the three groups - not-for-profit community, private commercial and the government agency. Just over one-third of respondents (38%) had accessed a private commercial agency, 32% the government agency and 29% a not-for-profit agency. Respondents had made use of a total of 24 different agencies representing a reasonable coverage of Job Network providers.

Respondents were asked to describe the assistance received from their Job Network provider. The most frequently reported assistance was help to develop the client's resumé (55%) followed by referral to job(s) (45%). Other types of assistance included development of interview skills, looking for jobs, help with language difficulties and in returning to school. Help to get into training courses was provided to 12% of respondents.

Two-thirds identified additional unmet needs. The majority of these were not directly related to employment services and included stable housing (21%), financial assistance for transport and clothes (19%) and personal issues (lack of confidence, self-esteem, health, 19%). However, they were perceived by respondents as important to their ability to obtain work. The remaining unmet needs could be considered to be core business of the Job Network and included assistance with interviews, applications, referral to jobs, training, language and practical work experience. It is evident that these job seekers had a level of needs which exceeded that offered thus far by Job Network providers.

Outcome of Job Referrals

Of the 41 respondents referred to prospective employers, over half (56%) had been referred to one or two employers, 18% to three employers, 6% to four employers and 20% to five or six employers. In only three instances was a job forthcoming for this group, two of which were casual work. Whilst the sampling frame restricted this research to those who were not employed at the time of interview, client data from SAAP suggests that this reflects the pattern of outcomes for all homeless job seekers.

Overall Satisfaction with Job Network Providers

Over one-third (39%) of those respondents who had used the services of Job Network providers expressed dissatisfaction with the assistance provided, whilst an additional 30% were neither satisfied or dissatisfied. Compared to satisfaction rates in other health and community service sectors, this response indicates a significant level of dissatisfaction with Job Network providers to date. Substantial variance in the level of satisfaction was reported across the three categories of providers with the highest level of satisfaction reported with the not-for-profit community agencies.

Respondents were asked to describe their experiences with Job Network agencies from a list of six positive and six negative descriptors provided on the survey form.

Overall, respondents found the Job Network confusing (41%), followed by helpful (29%) and complicated (25%) with negative opinions more frequently expressed.

Substantial variance was also evident across the three provider categories. The top three ranked descriptors for those using private commercial agencies were confusing (46%), impersonal (35%) and disinterested (31%). In comparison, for those using not-for-profit agencies, the first three were helpful (30%), fair (30%) and accessible (25%). Whilst the equivalent rankings for the government agency were helpful (41%), confusing (32%) and complicated (30%).

Policy Implications

People who are homeless or in housing crisis are significantly disadvantaged when trying to obtain work. They are characterised by early school leaving, a lack of educational qualifications and effective exclusion from any meaningful training or employment.

Recent research by Hanover and others has indicated the high level of disadvantage faced by young people in housing crisis, including low self-esteem, poor health, substance use and family conflict. Their experience of homelessness is invariably associated with an array of additional barriers to re-engagement with employment assistance. The study points to ineffective engagement between Centrelink, the Job Network and these job seekers.

Almost half of those 100,000 people who experience homelessness in Australia each year are in the labour market, most of whom are unemployed and actively seeking work. Historically, they have received poor access to employment assistance and, as a consequence, their ability to get out of situations of homelessness has been severely hindered.

The research findings revealed that these particularly disadvantaged job seekers are effectively being denied employment assistance. Their experiences with the Job Network were characterised by a high level of confusion, frustration, despondency and poor results.

Several of the factors that had previously made programs under the Working Nation scheme problematic, continue to be evident under the Job Network scheme. The research highlights factors needing to be addressed prior to the next tender round for the Job Network if these job seekers are to receive more appropriate assistance:

- The classification instrument, used to assess job seekers' barriers to employment and to allocate resources to them, needs to be changed. The instrument's weightings and response categories require amendment to ensure that the characteristics of job seekers experiencing homelessness are fully recognised and that they become eligible for intensive assistance.
- Accurate classification for intensive assistance requires full disclosure and assessment of all the circumstances of disadvantaged job seekers. Job seekers in housing crisis are often reluctant to disclose personal issues in a bureaucratic environment without having first developed a trusting relationship.

- Community organisations funded under the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) are already mandated to help persons experiencing homelessness engage employment services. Given this, SAAP service providers who know the circumstances of the homeless job seeker well, ought to be authorised to make preliminary assessments of the factors considered under the Job Seeker Classification Instrument and to be facilitated in making recommendations to Centrelink staff and in requesting timely decision making.
- A broader range of specialist Job Network providers that are able to integrate employment assistance with other forms of housing and welfare assistance to particularly disadvantaged job seekers, is needed to enable employment services to be delivered within a pre-existing helping relationship. Hanover's experience of working with those who face multiple barriers to employment demonstrates that continuity of the helping relationship is vital to ensure, not only the engagement of employment assistance, but also the successful completion of training, work experience and job placement.

The Federal Government is currently undertaking a Review of the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program. This should be an ideal opportunity to increase the Program's priority at both the strategic and service delivery levels to develop linkages with employment assistance programs. A critical pathway to escaping homelessness and to maintaining stable housing is to obtain a secure job. SAAP to date has placed insufficient emphasis on strategies for getting homeless people into training and work.

The vast majority of these young job seekers are in the first third of their working lives. If we do not ensure that our nation has suitable arrangements to deliver effective employment assistance to them, we will condemn them to a life of social exclusion and poverty.

1. Introduction

In May 1998, the Commonwealth Government introduced a substantial restructure of employment assistance services through the replacement of the Commonwealth Employment Service and introduction of the Job Network. These changes were the outcome of Coalition policy which emanated from its election platform in 1996 that criticised the then Labor Federal Government's Working Nation policy as

'neither solving the problems of unemployment nor providing effective help to many people' (Liberal and National Parties 1996)

Coalition arguments focused on the ineffectiveness of the CES and the plethora of assistance programs in the community, and argued that job seekers were in effect recycled through training programs without achieving real employment outcomes.

The rationalisation of employment assistance was based on the principle of the competitive market which would increase job seeker choice, building on earlier developments by the Labor Government's Working Nation strategy. The Coalition also retained the focus on case management as a means for assessing job seeker needs and of matching those needs with appropriate levels of assistance. In addition, the Coalition committed to a tightening of eligibility requirements and harsher penalties for breaches of guidelines by job seekers.

The restructure of employment assistance programs with the introduction of Centrelink and the Job Network in 1998 has been accompanied by many additional changes to the extent and type of assistance available to the various categories of people in the community who are looking for work.

One of the important changes from a job seeker perspective is that under Labor's Job Compact, intensive assistance was provided to anyone unemployed for at least 18 months. Greater emphasis was placed on assisting the long-term unemployed. In consequence, reduced levels of assistance were available to the short-term unemployed - a proportion of whom ultimately became part of the long-term unemployed. In contrast, the Federal Government has aimed to provide improved assistance to the short-term unemployed through its redesign of employment services, including access to a greater range of job search facilities.

The Job Network specifies three core categories of assistance available to job seekers based on an assessment of their labour market disadvantage. This assessment is conducted by Centrelink staff using the Job Seeker Classification Instrument (JSCI). The three categories of assistance are:

1. Job Matching (Flex 1) - basic labour exchange services accessible to all job seekers
2. Job Search Assistance (Flex 2) - short-term assistance and training to develop job search skills, targeted at those unemployed for over 6 months
3. Intensive Assistance (Flex 3) - ongoing support targeted at those facing significant disadvantage in the labour market with emphasis on the long-term unemployed

A range of private commercial and not-for-profit community agencies as well as the corporatised government agency (Employment National) were contracted through a national tender to deliver the range of Job Network services. A second round of tenders is planned for 1999.

Community agencies, including Hanover and Melbourne Citymission, who had operated successful employment programs targeting those with particular needs or backgrounds who require specialist assistance, were concerned that a significant proportion of people requiring more intensive assistance involving case management were likely to miss out. Even though the performance driven payments structure was developed to encourage substantive outcomes for job seekers, there has been concern that those taken on to receive Intensive Assistance (that is, as Flex 3 clients) may not receive a level of assistance which meets their needs.

This project was therefore developed to monitor the impact of the restructure on people in Melbourne who are experiencing homelessness or are in housing crisis. There is a substantial link between housing crisis and unemployment. Nationally, over 100,000 individuals were provided with assistance as clients of homeless persons services (Supported Accommodation Assistance Program) in 1996-7. In Victoria, the equivalent figure was 28,900 individual adults. Table 1 provides the labour force profile of SAAP clients by selected age category for both Victoria and Australia for 1996-7.

Table 1: Labour force status before support by selected age category of client, Victoria and Australia, 1996-7 (%)

Labour force status	Victoria					Australia				
	15-19	20-24	25-44	45-54	All ages	15-19	20-24	25-44	45-54	All ages
Employed full time	3.2	3.3	3.5	4.0	3.4	2.8	3.1	3.8	3.7	3.3
Employed part time	2.3	2.5	4.0	3.2	3.1	2.4	2.2	3.2	2.4	2.6
Employed on a casual basis	3.9	3.2	2.6	2.6	3.0	3.7	2.9	2.6	2.1	2.8
Unemployed	45.3	42.9	27.0	25.5	34.3	52.0	46.8	32.2	25.5	38.3
Not in labour force	45.3	48.1	62.8	64.8	56.2	39.1	45.0	58.3	66.3	52.9

Source: SAAP NDCA Client Collection (AIHW 1997a and 1997b).

The data shows that 38% of those experiencing homelessness nationally were unemployed but in the labour market, whilst an additional 5% were employed either part time or on a casual basis. The equivalent figures for Victoria were 34% unemployed and 6% part time or casual. Significant variance between age categories is evident from the data with over half of 15 to 19 year olds unemployed nationally.

Using a conservative assumption that only those unemployed and not in any work would be accessing employment services, it is estimated that at least 38,000 nationally and 9,900 Victorians who are homeless or at imminent risk would require employment services over a 12 month period. These estimates are likely to be conservative on two counts:

- those in housing crisis or homeless who receive one-off short-term assistance from homeless persons services have not been included
- those who are turned away from services due to lack of resources or do not access services at all

A crude estimate would be that about 10% of the unemployed are either homeless or at imminent risk sufficient to warrant them approaching community based services for housing assistance.

Hanover believes therefore that it is critically important that both Centrelink and the Job Network are accessible and sensitive to the range of needs of those in housing crisis. The objective of this study has been to assess the impact of the recent changes to employment assistance services on this group.

Specifically, the study aimed to:

1. assess the extent to which people experiencing homelessness are being included or excluded from employment and training opportunities
2. identify whether particular client groups are at greater risk of missing out on opportunities
3. document any other unmet needs for assistance or dissatisfaction with employment services reported by clients

2. Method

The study involved a survey of clients at two Melbourne based agencies, Hanover Welfare Services and Melbourne Citymission, who provide a range of accommodation and support programs for people experiencing homelessness or at imminent risk. The Job Network was introduced by the Federal Government in May 1998. In order to allow for a settling down period, the survey was introduced at the end of June and ran for 3 months across 13 services in Western, Southern and inner metropolitan Melbourne.

Eligibility for inclusion in the survey was based on the following criteria:

1. client was unemployed and/or seeking work, that is, in the labour market, **and**
2. at SAAP services: all clients (crisis accommodation, crisis support, transitional support)
at Housing services: client receives financial assistance or is accommodated
at JPET services: all clients

The sampling frame was designed to ensure that the survey sample was representative of the range of households experiencing homelessness or in housing crisis in Melbourne. The inclusion of 13 services from the 2 agencies meant that 4 categories of service and program were covered in the data collection, including:

- crisis accommodation/youth refuge (4)
- transitional support (4)
- shop-front crisis assistance (4)
- employment assistance for youth (1)

A mixed strategy for completion of surveys was adopted in recognition of the diversity of service types and client situations. Most of the questions in the survey were pre-coded and the number of questions were restricted to ensure that it took no longer than 10 minutes to complete. Workers were asked to assess client eligibility and then to ask eligible clients to participate by explaining the reasons for the study and providing an information sheet (Appendix 1). Verbal consent was sought prior to client participation. No identifying information was collected on the survey that would breach confidentiality. Clients were assured that the study was voluntary and that participation would not affect future assistance provided by the agencies.

A flexible approach to completing the survey was adopted by services to minimise intrusion for clients - the majority of whom were in crisis or were anxious about their circumstances. Whilst in many cases workers completed the survey by interview at an appropriate time and location, others allowed clients to complete the survey on their own. In addition, about 15% of surveys were completed by a Hanover staff person specifically utilised as an interviewer, so as not to intrude on support worker time.

A working group of staff was convened to inform the development of the methodology and procedure. A pilot at three services was conducted to test the survey form. Minor changes were made to the wording of some questions and to the lay-out of the form. The final version of the survey form is shown in Appendix 2.

3. Results

Sample

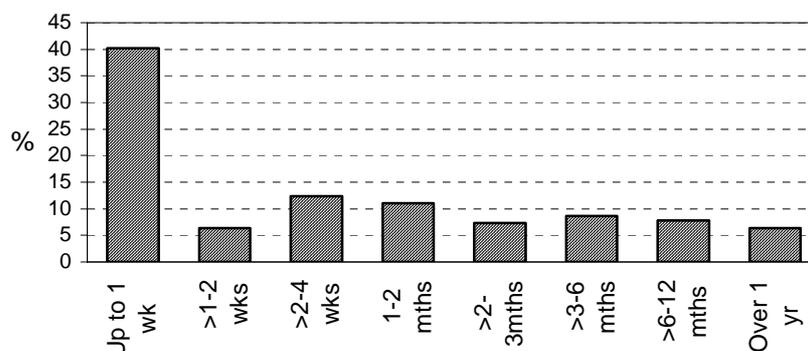
A total of 234 survey forms were completed across the participating services over a 3 month period from July to September 1998. Seven forms were excluded from the analysis as these respondents were not in the labour market or seeking work. This resulted in a final sample of 227 valid forms for analysis.

Sixty per cent of respondents were clients of Hanover services, whilst 40% were accessed through Melbourne Citymission. Based on Hanover client data, 42% of all clients are in the labour market. Over the 3 month period, July-September, Hanover assisted a total of 729 clients across all services. Thus it may be estimated that 306 clients were eligible for inclusion in the study survey. The sample obtained represents 44% of those eligible for participation. Over the period, Melbourne Citymission assisted 515 clients across the sites included in the study. Forty-two per cent were eligible for inclusion, out of which the sample of 91 comprised 42%. Overall, the sample represented 43% of those clients meeting the eligibility criteria.

Service utilisation

Median duration of assistance (either support or accommodation) was 3 weeks for the sample, with the profile significantly skewed to short-term assistance reflecting the predominance of crisis accommodation and shop-front services in the sampling frame (Figure 1). Forty per cent of respondents had been clients for less than one week, whilst 14% could be considered to be long-term clients (over 6 months).

Figure 1: Duration of assistance by support agency



Over one-third (35%) were being accommodated by services, 45% were being provided with support (SAAP), 41% one-off or crisis assistance and 15% were receiving employment assistance (JPET). Table 2 summarises service utilisation of the survey sample. As expected significant variance is apparent in duration of assistance by categories of assistance, with clients of the JPET program showing substantially longer duration compared to the other categories.

Table 2: Service utilisation by survey respondents

Category of assistance	N	%	Median duration (weeks)	Mean duration (weeks)	SD
Accommodated by service	80	35.2	8.0	19.7	38.6
SAAP support	103	45.4	4.3	12.4	19.8
One-off/crisis assistance	93	41.0	0.1	6.6	16.0
Employment assistance	33	14.5	33.9	37.2	24.6
All respondents *	219	100.0	3.0	13.8	28.0

* Clients may receive multiple types of assistance; missing data excluded.

The categories of assistance provided to respondents reflected their reported reasons for seeking help, with over half seeking housing assistance, 20% financial assistance and 14% employment assistance.

Staff feedback suggested that the sampling strategy tended to focus on newer clients entering services. In addition, staff may assess that some longer term clients are not job ready due to a range of complex issues still to be resolved. The eligibility criteria excluded those not assessed as being in the labour market, which would produce a sample characterised by a shorter support period profile. The sample data in Table 2 indicates that the SAAP client group had been supported for shorter periods, but that this was in effect 'compensated' by the longer support received by the JPET group. In summary, comparison of duration of assistance for the sample with that of SAAP clients in Victoria indicates that the study sample may be considered to be representative of clients using homeless persons services.

Respondent profile

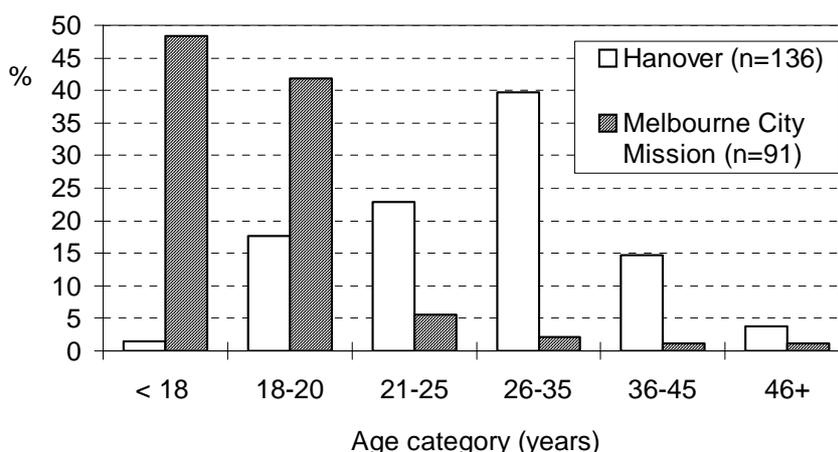
The majority of the 227 respondents were male (60%) and single (88%) with a mean age of 25 years. Nearly half (48%) were aged under 21 years with significant variance in age profile between Hanover and Melbourne Citymission respondent groups. The average age of respondents was lower than that of clients of the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program in Victoria (mean of 29 years). Female respondents were significantly younger than males by an average of 5 years (Table 3).

Table 3: Selected characteristics of survey respondents

	Survey Respondents, %
<i>Gender:</i>	
Female	40.5
Male	59.5
<i>Family Type:</i>	
Single	87.7
Couple (no children)	2.6
Person with child(ren)	6.2
Couple with child(ren)	3.5
<i>Age:</i>	
Female	21.4 yrs (SD 7.0)
Male	26.8 yrs (SD 9.2)
All	24.6 yrs (SD 8.8)
<i>Age Category:</i>	
<18 years	20.3
18-20 years	27.3
21-25 years	15.9
26-35 years	24.7
36-45 years	9.3
46+ years	2.6
Total Clients	227

The Hanover sample was closer to the SAAP age profile whilst the Melbourne Citymission sample reflected a weighting to services with a youth focus, that is JPET and SAAP refuges. Figure 2 (page 7) clearly shows the variance between agency respondents and indicates a greater spread of respondent age within Hanover, reflecting the inclusion of suburban, non-age specific services in the sampling frame.

Figure 2: Age profile by support agency



In summary, taken together the samples from the range of services across the two agencies provided a sample of clients that may be considered as representative of the broader population of people experiencing homelessness or housing crisis and who were unemployed and in the labour market.

Education and work history

Age left school

Over half (52%) of respondents had left school aged 15 years or younger. An additional 18% had left at age 16 years, 14% at age 17 years and 12% at age 18 years.

Qualifications

Nearly half of the sample had not obtained a qualification of any type (that is, Year 11 or higher). Another third had completed Year 11 or 12, whilst 16% had completed a trade, diploma or tertiary qualification. The remaining 7% reported completion of other vocational courses or training.

Work history

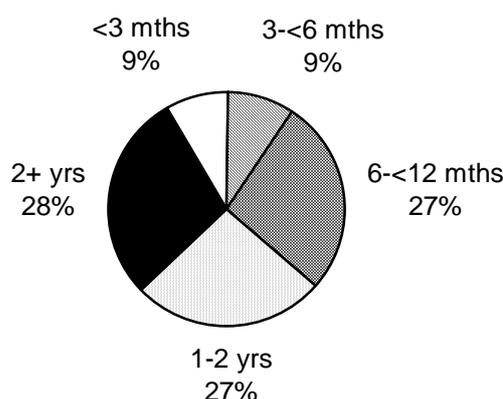
Respondents were asked to describe their previous work history. Nearly one-third (31%) described their history as regular full-time, 16% as regular part-time and 30% as casual. Twenty per cent had never worked up to the date of the survey. Significant age variance was evident with, as expected, under 21 year olds over represented among those never having worked. Over half (54%) of under 18 year olds and 27% of 18-20 year olds had never worked.

Examining the group who had never worked (n=46), on average, they had left school 4 years earlier. In other words, 4 years had passed since leaving school without any experience of a work environment.

Current employment status

Over half (55%) had been unemployed for over one year, 27% for 6-12 months and 9% for 3-6 months (Figure 3). The period of unemployment reflected respondent age with a significant positive association for both genders. Four per cent were reported to be in casual or part-time work.

Figure 3: Period of unemployment



Over 92% of respondents were in receipt of Newstart or Youth Allowance (for < 21 year olds). A small number were on other Government payments (2% Sole Parent, 2% Disability Support and 1% Sickness Allowance), whilst 2% either reported no income source or were registered/awaiting benefits.

Participation in training in previous year

Just over one-quarter stated that they had participated in a training program in the previous year. Melbourne Citymission clients were more likely to have taken part in training due to the inclusion of a JPET program in the sampling frame, of whom 41% had undertaken training. If JPET clients are excluded, then 20% of respondents had participated in training of some kind in the previous 12 months.

Half the training courses came under the Skillshare or JPET program, with 18% stating TAFE courses and one-third unspecified courses. Courses included bar/hospitality, gardening/landscaping, computing, personal care, community health and general pre-employment training.

The low level of participation in vocational training for this group of people in the first third of their working lives serves to show the extent of their marginalisation from employment. The 12 month period includes the final phase of the prior employment assistance environment. Anecdotal feedback suggests that the low level of participation may be an outcome of the wind down phase of many programs under the previous arrangements.

However, it is also apparent that young people with poor educational achievement, who experience housing crisis and homelessness, are often alienated from engagement and participation in structured mainstream education and training institutions. Their prior experiences will contribute to lower levels of participation in standard vocational training programs currently offered.

Summary of profile

The above profile may be considered to be representative of people in housing crisis who are in the labour market. They are generally in the first third of their working lives. They are, however, characterised by poor educational and work skills achievement. In effect, they have been marginalised from the jobs market as they do not have the skills or experience to compete for the few jobs that are available.

The housing history and profile of personal needs of the study group would typically be the same as that of younger clients of services assisting the homeless generally. Hanover's young clients (under 25 years), for example, have the following characteristics:

- average age of 15 years when left parental home
- 20% left home at 13 years or under
- one-third experienced violence, abuse or neglect in the family home
- moved house 6 times in prior 12 months
- 70% in emergency accommodation, hostels or hotels, staying with friends/relatives or sleeping rough (Horn 1998b)

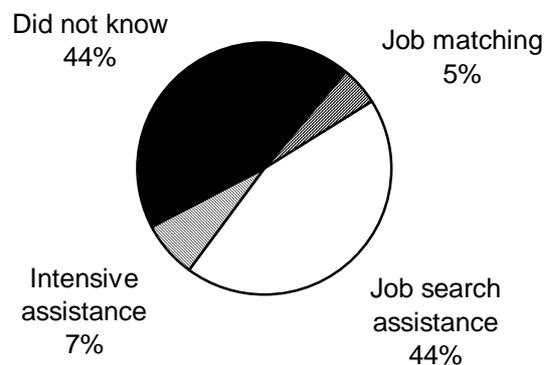
With this pattern of experience it is not surprising that the study group have such a low level of educational achievement or participation in vocational training.

Experiences with Centrelink

The majority of respondents (58%) had been called in for interview and assessment by Centrelink for eligibility for Job Network assistance. The survey of clients requested the results of the interview: a substantial 44% were unable to answer in terms of their eligibility for Job Network services, that is, they ticked the 'don't know' response. An equal percentage reported that they were eligible for Job Search Assistance, whilst only 7% were assessed as eligible for Intensive Assistance. The remaining 5% were deemed eligible for Job Matching (Figure 4).

These responses clearly reflect a high level of confusion and uncertainty about Job Network arrangements for this client group. Yet it should be of concern that only 9 people (4% of the sample) had been assessed as being eligible for Intensive Assistance, and one-quarter for Job Search Assistance under the existing procedures. Possible explanations for this finding will be raised in the Discussion.

Figure 4: Outcome of Jobseeker Assessment Interview



Analysis of the 'don't know' group (n=57) showed substantial differences to those who did report the outcome of their interview with Centrelink. The 'don't know' group were on average 4 years younger ($p < .01$), with over half (55%) aged under 18 years). They were significantly more likely to be female (60%) and to have never worked (44%) or only had casual work (40%) compared to those who did report their interview outcome.

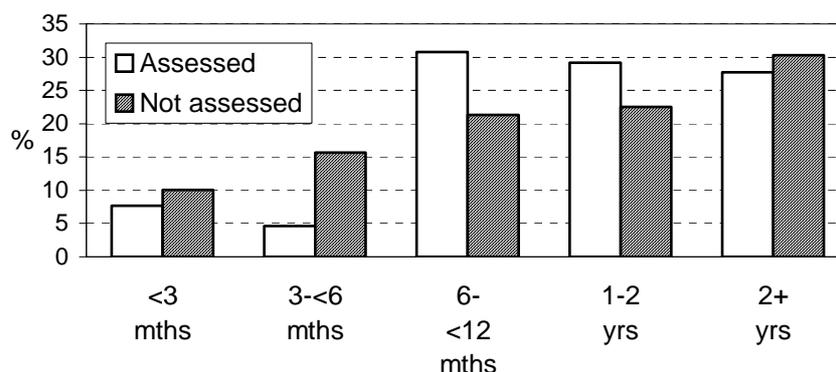
Whilst it is difficult to draw definitive conclusions about the possible explanations for the high level of 'don't know' responses, it was clear from the qualitative comments reported by many of those surveyed that there is:

- a high level of confusion about Centrelink and the Job Network
- a lack of communication and transparency relating to explanation of assessment procedures and outcomes
- the personal needs relating to both the causes and experiences of housing crisis impact on client participation and commitment to the new Centrelink procedures

Analysis also examined the difference between those reporting that they had been interviewed by Centrelink compared to those not yet notified. The former group were significantly younger, by an average of 4 years, compared to those not assessed. The average age of those assessed was 23 years compared to 27 years for those not assessed ($p < .0001$). It was also found that those called in by Centrelink were significantly more likely to be female (47%) compared to those not so far called in (32%, $p < .05$).

Respondents who had been assessed had been unemployed for shorter periods with a mean duration of 70 weeks compared to 97 weeks for those not interviewed. However it should be noted that the unemployment duration data did not have a normal distribution. Figure 5 provides the unemployment profile for the two groups. It is evident that those unemployed for between 6 months and 2 years were more likely to have been called in: 68% of the 6-12 month category and 66% of the 1-2 year category.

Figure 5: Duration of unemployment by reported Centrelink jobseeker assessment status



Just as important, however, the data indicates that nearly one-third of those not called in by Centrelink had been unemployed for at least 2 years and one-quarter had been unemployed for over 1 year. This should be of concern in that arguably those most in need of assistance had not been given sufficient priority. It should be noted that the assessment process has been in effect a 'scarce good' as a considerable time is needed to process the substantial pool of unemployed as well as those coming onto the unemployed list. Whilst the procedures for calling in unemployed people would expect to give priority to the long term unemployed, in practice, priority given to specific categories of job seekers and differences in implementation across regions appear to have resulted in the profile shown in Figure 5 above for this sample.

Respondents were asked whether they had breached Centrelink regulations or guidelines for any reason. One-quarter (n=56) of all respondents had had their income support cut or reduced because of breaches. This group did not differ in their background characteristics, education or employment history compared to those who did not report any penalties. The range of reasons reported by respondents are summarised in Table 4 below.

Table 4: Reasons for having income support cut by Centrelink

Reason	%
Repayment of debt/past overpayment	17.6
Missed appointment	15.7
Did not inform about change of address	13.7
Personal issues/lodged form too late	13.7
Did not declare work/income	11.8
Homeless/transient	9.8
Not sure why/reason not explained	7.8
Left a job	3.9
Other	5.9
Total respondents	51

It is evident from the reasons provided that in most cases the lack of a stable home resulted in many clients being unable to meet the obligations required by Centrelink. Extreme transience clearly leads to poor communication between Centrelink and its clients. Several instances were reported of individuals being unaware of letters sent by Centrelink. Not informing Centrelink about changing circumstances including change of address was a frequently cited reason for breaching. Two young people had failed to let Centrelink know of their moves from interstate and country Victoria. In one instance, a respondent reported that he had lost income due to missing an appointment, which led directly to his homelessness as he was unable to maintain his rent payments.

This level of breaching should not be surprising when one considers the housing histories of this group. Clearly the high level of transience, of temporary stays with friends, acquaintances or relatives and use of emergency accommodation facilities will prevent effective communication between Centrelink, Job Network providers and unemployed people in housing crisis.

Case Study: Susan

Susan came to Hanover in need of financial help to pay her rent. In discussing her needs, Susan disclosed that her situation was caused by her unemployment. Hanover was able to avert her eviction but she is still unemployed.

Whilst working in office administration on and off for 10 years, Susan decided to undertake an Art degree to obtain a formal qualification, gain skills and improve her longer term career options. At the age of 32, having completed her degree, she has only been able to obtain intermittent casual work. Susan now feels despondent about her choice because many employers feel she is over qualified, whilst others tell her she does not have sufficiently up-to-date administration skills. She believes her degree has not helped - rather it has meant she no longer has marketable office experience.

With the introduction of the Job Network, she thought that she may obtain practical advice to obtain meaningful employment. Centrelink informed her by phone that she had been assessed and she was given the name and contact details of Job Network agencies. She reported that she did not have a face-to-face interview with Centrelink staff.

After contacting her chosen Job Network provider, she was referred over the phone to a prospective employer. However, the job interview was unsuccessful as both Susan and employer agreed that she was unsuited to the job on offer. No further contact was made by her Job Network provider.

Susan therefore chose a second provider. Again, a single referral was arranged to a job vacancy without a face-to-face interview with this second Job Network provider. The job interview was also unsuccessful.

Susan has also been actively looking for work herself and has obtained 3 interviews. None of these have been successful. Susan still carries a significant HECS debt and is worried that when she does find work she may be forced to seek alternative lower cost housing. She has become increasingly depressed about her job prospects and well-being.

Experiences with the Job Network

A total of 97 respondents (43%) reported that they had been referred to or had accessed one of the Job Network employment agencies. The majority of the sample had not therefore received services from a Job Network provider, although they were able to access the basic level of assistance available under Job Matching.

The majority of those *not* referred to a Job Network provider had not been assessed by Centrelink according to respondents. The survey requested the reason for not being referred to a Job Network provider. For those *not* assessed by Centrelink (n=73), over 70% did not know the reason, whilst 15% were unaware of the Job Network

A substantial proportion (43%) of those not referred to a Job Network provider had been assessed by Centrelink. In 80% of these cases, they did not know the outcome of their assessment. The remainder had not apparently proceeded to the next stage of choosing a Job Network provider or of making contact for assistance. In many cases this would be because they were only eligible for Job Matching. In a few cases, respondents reported health issues that prevented their participation.

The majority of under 18 year olds (83%) had not accessed an agency, however, overall there was no significant association between respondent age and referral to the Job Network.

Two variables did show significant association with referral to agencies: age when left school and past work history. The 56 clients who had left school at 14 years or under were *less* likely to have been referred to a Job Network agency: 30% had been referred compared to 48% of those who had left school at 15 or older.

Similarly, the 46 clients who had never worked were significantly *less* likely to have been referred (30%) compared to those with some work experience (47%). Those with no work experience were younger on average than those with work experience.

There were no differences in duration of unemployment or level of qualifications between those referred and those not referred to the Job Network.

The name of the Job Network agency was reported by 70% of those referred, enabling categorisation into the three groups - not-for-profit, private commercial and the Government agency. Just over one-third of respondents (38%) had accessed a private commercial agency, 32% the Government agency and 29% a not-for-profit agency. Respondents had made use of a total of 24 different agencies representing a reasonable coverage of Job Network providers.

Assistance provided to respondents was recorded for 91 people out of the 97, with the remainder not as yet having chosen, or received assistance from, their agency. An average of 1.7 types of assistance had been obtained at the time of the survey interview (Table 5). Nearly half (44%) had obtained 2 or more categories of assistance and 23% 3 or more categories of assistance.

Table 5: Assistance provided by Job Network agencies

Assistance	%
Referral to job(s)	45.1
Help with resumé	54.9
Help with other job search skills	36.3
Help to get into training courses	12.1
Other	18.7
Total respondents	91

The most frequently reported assistance was help to develop the client's resumé (55%) followed by referral to job(s) (45%). Other types of assistance included development of interview skills, looking for jobs, language related help, returning to school and initial intake.

Examining assistance provided by category of reported job seeker classification outcome indicates that those eligible for Job Search or Intensive Assistance were receiving greater levels of help as would be expected. Yet, only 28% of those assessed as eligible for Intensive Assistance (Flex 3's) had so far received help with training courses (excluding 2 cases in which clients were still being assessed by Job Network providers).

A total of 58 respondents reported that they were eligible for Job Search Assistance and were referred to Job Network providers. A fifth of these had not as yet received assistance. Looking at those who reported as having been assisted, 65% had been helped with their resumé, 48% with other job search skills, 39% with a referral to job(s) and 13% helped to get into training courses.

Table 6 shows the type of assistance received for those respondents who reported the name of their Job Network provider and who were assessed as eligible for job search assistance or intensive assistance (Flex 2 and 3). Although the respondent numbers are small, there is clearly substantial variance in the types of assistance being provided by the three categories of provider. Part of the variance is because none of the respondents receiving assistance from private providers were eligible for Intensive Assistance. However, 80% of these respondents were eligible for job search assistance (Flex 2). Yet the bulk of assistance actually provided took the form of help with their resume (73%) and referral to employers (46%) with negligible assistance provided in job search skills. This indicative data supports the qualitative picture emerging that private providers are only doing the bare minimum to assist disadvantaged job seekers.

Table 6: Assistance provided by category of Job Network agency for respondents eligible for Job Search Assistance or Intensive Assistance, %

Assistance	Not-for-profit	Private	Government
Referral to job(s)	46.2	45.5	41.2
Help with resumé	53.8	72.7	76.5
Help with other job search skills	46.2	9.1	52.9
Help to get into training courses	23.1	0.0	11.8
Other	15.4	27.3	11.8
Total respondents	13	11	17

Respondents were also asked whether there were other issues for which help was needed in order to obtain a job. Two-thirds expressed at least one additional need not provided by their Job Network. The majority of needs were not directly related to employment services, including stable housing (21%), financial assistance for transport and clothes (19%) and personal issues (lack of confidence, self-esteem, health, 19%). However, they were perceived by respondents as important to their obtaining work. The other issues expressed by this group could be considered to be core business of the Job Network and included assistance with interviews, applications, referral to jobs, training, language and practical work experience. It is evident that this sample have a level of needs which exceeded that offered thus far by their Job Network providers. Two explanations are probable for this mismatch between needs and service provision:

1. Centrelink's assessment process underestimates the extent of assistance required by disadvantaged job seekers
2. Job Network agencies are failing to provide sufficient assistance to meet client needs

Outcome of job referrals

A total of 91 respondents had accessed a Job Network provider and received specific assistance. However, just over one-third (37%) had been referred to a job opportunity.

Of the 41 respondents referred to prospective employers, over half (56%) had been referred to 1 or 2 job vacancies, 18% to 3 vacancies, 6% to 4 vacancies and 20% to 5 or 6 vacancies. In only 3 instances was a job forthcoming for this group, 2 of which were casual work. In the third case, the respondent took up the job but resigned after 3 weeks because 'it was not an appropriate position or environment for the individual'. The extent to which this reflects outcomes for all homeless job seekers cannot be determined due to the study's sampling frame, which restricted participation to those unemployed (or possibly underemployed) at the time of interview. However client data from SAAP's ongoing data collection suggests that this reflects the pattern of outcomes for all homeless job seekers.

It is therefore not surprising that many additional comments by respondents on the outcome of their experience with the Job Network conveyed a level of frustration and even despondency:

'heard nothing after interview'

'not much eventuated out of them - got a couple of interviews'

'employer told me I was not good enough for the job'

In other cases, respondents felt they were being sent to job interviews which were unsuitable in terms of their skills and experience.

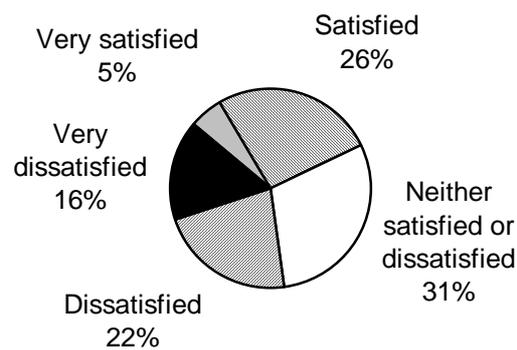
'I was sent to an interview where my skills were not sufficient, where my personality did not lend itself to this type of employment anyway'

'The agency has not bothered to meet me and discuss my employment situation and what is best for me. I get sent to interviews for jobs I know I can't sustain'

Overall satisfaction with Job Network agencies

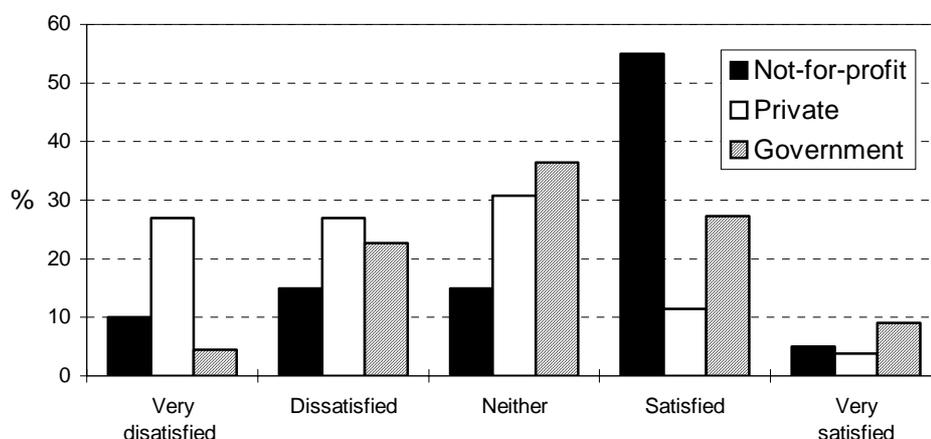
Over one-third (38%) of those respondents who had used the Job Network expressed dissatisfaction with the assistance provided, whilst an additional 30% were neither satisfied or dissatisfied (Figure 6). In the context of satisfaction measures, this response from the sample indicates a significant level of dissatisfaction with Job Network providers to date.

Figure 6: Satisfaction with assistance provided by Job Network agencies



Substantial variance in the level of satisfaction by the category of Job Network agency was reported by the sample (Figure 7). Sixty per cent of respondents using not-for-profit agencies were either very satisfied (5%) or satisfied (55%). This compares with 36% for those using the Government's agency and 15% for those using the private commercial agencies. These differences were statistically significant ($p < .05$).

Figure 7: Satisfaction levels by category of Job Network agency



Respondents were asked to describe their experiences with Job Network agencies from a list of 6 positive and 6 negative descriptors provided on the survey form. The results are shown in Table 7 in rank order. Respondents circled an average of 2 descriptors, however, significant difference was apparent between the 3 categories of Job Network provider. Respondents using a private commercial agency circled a higher number of descriptors compared to those using not-for-profit agencies (by 44%) or those using the Government agency (by 23%).

Table 7: Respondent opinions on their experiences with Job Network agencies

Assistance	N	%
Confusing	37	40.7
Helpful	26	28.6
Complicated	23	25.3
Disinterested	17	18.7
Impersonal	16	17.6
Accessible	15	16.5
Fair	13	14.3
Unfriendly	10	11.0
Co-operative	8	8.8
Convenient	7	7.7
Easily understood	6	6.6
Hostile	1	1.1
Total respondents	91	196.9

From the table it can be seen that four of the first five descriptors were negative. The most frequently cited opinion was that respondents found the Job Network *confusing* (41%). Twenty-nine per cent thought that their agency was *helpful*, whilst 25% thought that the process was *complicated*. In general, negative opinions were more frequently expressed than positive ones.

Case Study: Peter

'All the jobs I have had over the past 3-4 years I have found through friends. I receive a Newstart Allowance and I want help to find work. I have had trouble finding somewhere to live over the past year and that has made it really hard for me to go out looking for work. I really needed help to find accommodation as well as a job.

I had a case manager once in 1995, organised through the CES (now Centrelink), who arranged for me to do a short horticultural course but when that finished I never heard from them again. I rang my local member of parliament looking for advice on getting work and he told me things would get better under the new system - Centrelink. They haven't. It's got a lot worse.

In December last year, I was sent a job network seeker card. It had a letter with it but it didn't seem to say much, so I rang the telephone number on the letter to see what it was all about I was told to ring somewhere else, which I did. All they did was send me another card! Now I have two cards but I still don't know what to do with them. When I go to give them my form every fortnight, I just push it under the counter or drop it in the box. No-one ever talks to me about it all. I could be anyone - they don't even ask for my ID.

I have been to five different CES/Centrelink offices over the years, but no-one from any of them have ever contacted me for an interview or helped with work in any way.'

Substantial variance was evident in respondent opinion depending on the category of agency. The top 3 ranked descriptors for those using private commercial agencies were *confusing* (46%), *impersonal* (35%) and *disinterested* (31%). In comparison, for those using not-for-profit agencies the first three were *helpful* (30%), *fair* (30%) and *accessible* (25%). Whilst the equivalent rankings for the Government agency were *helpful* (41%), *confusing* (32%) and *complicated* (30%).

4. Discussion

The study has found that those people in housing crisis who are in the labour market are characterised by early school leaving, a consequent lack of educational qualifications and hence effective exclusion from any meaningful employment. Eighty-two per cent of the study sample had been unemployed for over 6 months, whilst 20% had no work experience at all. Only 28% had undertaken a training course within the previous 12 months.

The study sample can be considered as representative of young people experiencing homelessness who access services funded under the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program. Many of this population have become alienated or excluded from education and training institutions. They are also often suspicious and defensive when dealing with government departments or authority in general.

Recent research by Hanover and others has indicated the level of disadvantage and personal issues faced by young people in housing crisis, including low self-esteem, poor health, substance use and family conflict (Horn 1998b). Their experience of homelessness is invariably linked with an array of additional barriers to re-engagement with employment assistance. In many instances, homelessness and premature school leaving are both outcomes of the same underlying issues.

A recent Brotherhood of St. Laurence development project examined the school to work transition experiences of young people (MacDonald, forthcoming). The level of disadvantage faced by early school leavers required the development of an ongoing individual case management approach to first engage the young person, to fully assess their needs and then to advocate effective matching to education, training and employment services. The successful outcomes from this project support the past experiences of Hanover and Melbourne Citymission in working with disadvantaged job seekers, particularly young adults.

Our combined experience of working with those experiencing homelessness has shown that these underlying issues often take some months to be fully disclosed to support workers. Successful casework relies on effective engagement that provides a trusting relationship as a basis for addressing issues and developing achievable goals.

The survey sought to assess client experiences with both Centrelink and the Job Network. Their responses point to a high level of confusion about employment services:

- 44% of those called in for interview by Centrelink did not know the outcome of their assessment
- 41% of those using Job Network agencies described their experience as 'confusing'
- 30% of those referred to a Job Network provider could not name the agency

The group not knowing the outcome of their job seeker assessment were on average 4 years younger, more likely to be female and reported a lower level of work experience. The findings suggest that younger people were more likely to be confused by the changes and new procedures recently introduced.

The high level of 'don't knows' may be in part due to ongoing assessment procedures by Centrelink in that the job seeker interview process resulted in the need for a 'secondary classification'. However, in no cases did respondents articulate that the assessment process was still pending. This suggests that if secondary classification procedures were in progress, this was not clear for this group of Centrelink clients.

Nearly half (42%) of the sample had *not* been called in for assessment by the time of this survey. Of greater significance is the finding that nearly one-third of those not called in had been unemployed for at least 2 years. Bearing in mind the background profile of the study group, there is clearly a need for improved prioritisation to ensure that those in most need are not neglected.

Assessment of needs

Based on the background profile of the study group, one would expect that a high proportion would be assessed as eligible for Intensive Assistance (Flex 3). In fact only 7% of those assessed reported that they were eligible for Intensive Assistance. This figure is backed up by the low level and type of assistance provided to the respondents by the Job Network.

The Job Seeker Classification Instrument (JSCI) is administered by Centrelink staff and seeks to categorise job seekers by degree of labour market disadvantage. The accuracy of this assessment is totally dependent on full disclosure of all relevant issues by the job seeker. Whilst an examination of the reliability and validity of the Instrument is beyond the scope of this study, the findings must throw into doubt both key aspects of the instrument itself and the process for assessment of job seekers at the most disadvantaged end of the labour market spectrum. It seems likely that either certain groups of job seeker are under reporting relevant personal issues, including their housing crisis to Centrelink. This is not a new situation. Under Working Nation, non-disclosure of personal barriers or disabilities to the CES was a common occurrence.

The study has found a significant level of breaching with over one-quarter having their income cut or reduced by Centrelink. The reasons for this relate predominantly to their housing crisis that prevents effective communications and engagement between job seeker and Centrelink.

Many of this group have become alienated from Government departments and structured environments. This is especially true for young people. It is therefore questionable whether an agency responsible for punitive procedures and decisions will be able to obtain full disclosure on issues of a sensitive and personal nature, which may be integrally linked with the individual's sense of failure. It is more than likely that personal issues which will affect the individual's chances of obtaining work are being under reported.

A second cause of under assessment of homeless job seekers for intensive assistance is that the JSCI gives insufficient weight to the relevant issues. Whilst it is acknowledged that the JSCI is not intended to be a comprehensive assessment of an individual's needs, the Department developed the Instrument with the expressed objective 'to ensure that job seekers who are most disadvantage in the labour market are identified for Intensive Assistance' (DEETYA 1998). In order to achieve this effectively, the Instrument needs to have proven validity and reliability.

A total of 18 factors are used to classify job seekers, with points ratings assigned to each category of response for every factor. The selection of factors, response categories and points ratings were finalised by DEETYA following a comprehensive development process. The majority of the factors were developed from analysis of the 1997 JSCI survey. However, 7 factors were unable to be tested by statistical screening methods and evolved out of stakeholder consultations. Four of these factors are particularly relevant to the situation faced by those in housing crisis:

- transport (own transport, adequate public transport, inadequate transport)
- contactability (own telephone in residence, no telephone)
- stability of residence (stable residence, homeless or living in insecure, temporary or emergency accommodation)
- personal factors - secondary classification (4 categories from 'nil' to 'high')

Whilst it is evident that each will contribute to labour market disadvantage, it is uncertain whether adequate weighting is attached to the response categories so as to accurately reflect the level of actual disadvantage faced by the job seeker. The final classification of job seekers (and hence their eligibility for Intensive Assistance) is dependent in part on these categories and their weightings.

The highest level of disadvantage for the above factors is:

- transport: 'inadequate' - 2 points
- contactability: 'no phone (or by message only)' - 1 point
- stability of residence: 'homeless or living in insecure, temporary or emergency accommodation' - 6 points
- personal factors: 'high (significant impact)' - 6 points

These factors and their weightings are designed to score their independent contributions to total labour market disadvantage, that is, the intention is to avoid double counting of an issue. However, this study suggests that an increased weighting of these factors is necessary to improve the accuracy of the JSCI.

Based on the JSCI procedure, Table 8 (page 24) provides 3 case studies, representative of the study sample, to illustrate the points scoring. Although some factors were assessed differently because of individual attributes, in each case the total points score surpassed that needed for Intensive Assistance (Flex 3: 26 points plus). In almost all cases interviewed in this study, this requirement was met. Yet, only 7% of those assessed became eligible for Intensive Assistance through the Job Network.

Table 8: Survey case studies to illustrate Job Seeker Classification Instrument scoring

Factors	Job seeker 1		Job seeker 2		Job seeker 3	
		JSCI score		JSCI score		JSCI score
Age	17 years	0	19 years	0	30 years	3
Educational Attainment	Not completed Year 10	7	Completed Year 10	6	Not completed Year 10	7
Vocational Qualifications	Nil	2	Nil	2	Vocational qual. - no longer useful	2
Duration of Unemployment	12-less than 18 months	3	12-less than 18 months	3	36 months	8
Recency of Work Experience	Unemployed	10	Casual work	4	Unemployed	10
Family Status	Lives with other (not family)	3	Lives alone	4	Lives with other (not family)	3
Geographic location and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status	N/A	0	N/A	0	N/A	0
Geographic location and Australian-born South Sea Islander status	N/A	0	N/A	0	N/A	0
Geographic location - Other Australians	Inner Melbourne	0	Inner Melbourne	0	Inner Melbourne	0
Transport	Adequate public transport	1	Adequate public transport	1	Own transport	0
Contactability	No phone	1	No Phone	1	Own phone	0
Proximity to the Labour Market	Within 90 minutes' travel	0	Within 90 minutes' travel	0	Within 90 minutes' travel	0
Country of Birth	Australia	0	Australia	0	Australia	0
Language and Literacy	Good/Good	0	Good/Good	0	Good/Good	0
Disability/Medical Condition	Not identified	0	Disability reported	2	Workability - low	4
Stability of Residence	Homeless	6	Homeless	6	Homeless	6
Disclosed Ex-Offender	Not disclosed	0	Not disclosed	0	Non -custodial disclosed	3
Personal Factors	Low	2	Medium	4	Low	2
TOTAL		35		33		48

Notes:

1. Assessment against JSCI factors is based on survey responses. For several factors, the survey did not collect relevant data - in these cases, JSCI scores were set at zero.
2. A score of 26+ points is required to be eligible for Intensive Assistance (Flex 3).

A third cause of under assessment of homeless job seekers relates to the actual procedures practised by Centrelink. The case study of Susan (page 13) exemplifies several instances reported where job seekers felt they were not being adequately assessed, for example by face-to-face interview. The actual prevalence of assessment in absentia cannot be determined from this survey. However it is of concern that disadvantaged job seekers may not be given ample opportunity to discuss their needs and barriers to employment.

The study findings therefore raise serious concerns about key aspects of the current classification process, including:

- lack of sensitivity of JSCI response categories to pick up barriers to employment that relate to homelessness and transience
- insufficient weighting given to the homeless factor 'stability of residence'
- under reporting of housing crisis, transience and homelessness
- under reporting of personal issues associated with homelessness and housing crisis
- insufficient opportunity for disadvantaged job seekers to engage with Centrelink staff

Overall, the high level of breaching, lack of transparency and understanding about the job seeker assessment procedures and outcomes, and the under assessment of needs reported in this study indicates poor engagement of job seekers who are homeless or in housing crisis by Centrelink.

The intention of the JSCI is to classify job seekers according to level of labour market disadvantage. The vast majority of people experiencing homelessness (who are in the labour market) would, and should, meet any reasonable criteria for the highest levels of assistance. The evidence from this study, as well as from feedback obtained from key stakeholders in the employment assistance sector, suggests that sensitive engagement of this group, especially those under 21 years, is not possible within the limited assessment process currently in operation.

The procedures assume a willingness and ability for young job seekers to report all their personal issues which may be barriers to employment. There are a number of reasons why a complete assessment is unlikely to eventuate, including:

- inherent reluctance to disclose sensitive issues in a bureaucratic environment
- lack of a trusting relationship with Centrelink staff
- Centrelink controls income support and 'punishment' for breaches
- job seekers with personal issues may lack insight to acknowledge relevance of barriers
- job seekers perceive that they have to do 'well' at assessment

Both Hanover and Melbourne Citymission's experience suggests that these factors are particularly relevant for young people in housing crisis. It is our belief that disadvantaged job seekers are not being fully assessed by current JSCI procedures. We consider that the likelihood of inadequate assessment is sufficient to warrant significant changes to the JSCI and the procedures for assessment conducted by Centrelink.

The JSCI should be amended to give a weighting of points for young people under 21 years of age. Currently any job seeker under 25 years receives zero points on the

age factor. This weighting would compensate for the inherent disadvantage faced by young job seekers which is not picked up by the other JSCI factors.

Nearly all those job seekers experiencing homelessness are being assisted as clients by homeless persons agencies such as Hanover and Melbourne Citymission. In most instances, as clients, case management leads to a trusting relationship between client and support worker. As a consequence, full disclosure of underlying issues occurs over time and a case plan is agreed for addressing these concerns. This assessment process includes examination of income support and employment issues.

Under Working Nation, case managers frequently discovered additional barriers not disclosed at the classification stage as both parties developed a trusting relationship. The review process for reclassifying job seekers must be accessible and simple to ensure full assessment of barriers to work. The active participation of SAAP support workers would ensure accurate assessment over time.

It would therefore be an efficient and effective use of resources if the support worker (within SAAP) could be authorised to make the preliminary assessment of the JSCI factors and make recommendations to Centrelink staff. Hanover believes a formal procedure is necessary to ensure effective engagement of the homeless job seeker and accurate assessment of barriers to achieving employment. In isolated instances to date, such support has been provided to great effect.

Hanover and Melbourne Citymission believe that significant benefits of a structured approach are possible which would maximise the co-ordinated utilisation of SAAP support worker skills with Centrelink and Job Network expertise. The benefits would include:

- full disclosure of all relevant job seeker issues to ensure accurate JSCI classification for employment assistance
- active engagement of job seekers with both Centrelink and Job Network
- improved communications between Centrelink and job seekers (through SAAP auspice)
- consequent increased efficiency for Centrelink staff
- possible reduction in secondary classification procedures
- improved employment outcomes for job seekers who have experienced homelessness

Employment assistance provided to job seekers

The study findings indicate that a substantial proportion of job seekers experiencing homelessness are not being provided with the range of assistance they feel they need to gain a job. The type of assistance provided by Job Network agencies was consistent with their reported assessment by Centrelink, that is the majority were obtaining the categories of help available under the Job Search Assistance (Flex 2) level.

The study group reported two broad categories of unmet needs:

1. employment assistance issues
2. personal, housing and financial issues

They clearly articulated the need for higher levels of employment related assistance which would come under the category of Intensive Assistance (Flex 3). Whether this group misunderstood their assessment outcome or not, they believed they were not receiving adequate help to increase their chances of obtaining work. The low levels of satisfaction and poor job outcomes are consistent with their responses to the extent of assistance being provided.

The second category of unmet needs indicates the extent to which the respondents understand the link between having stable housing, resolving personal issues (including low self esteem and health problems) and having sufficient money (for access to transport and to buy interview clothing) and being in a position to gain a job.

It seems evident, based on a reasonable assessment of the levels of disadvantage faced by homeless job seekers, that a holistic case management approach is necessary to maximise their chances of breaking out of the poverty trap. To reiterate, the long experience of agencies such as Hanover and Melbourne Citymission has led to core principles for working effectively with this client group, who may be characterised as having been alienated and excluded from the normal structured services available in our community (including schools, vocational training centres and hospital or health services). These principles include:

- non-judgmental acceptance of individual situation and experiences
- resolution of immediate crises
- development of trusting and supportive relationships
- encourage disclosure of underlying issues
- build agreement for realistic goals
- focus on long term sustainable outcomes

Although some of those surveyed would be provided with additional services from their Job Network provider, they reported a strong sense of frustration, most probably due to ineffective engagement and inadequate commitment by providers to the above principles.

The example of Peter's experience over time (page 19) indicates the difficulty for disadvantaged job seekers in gaining secure meaningful work. Whilst Peter was able to gain intermittent casual or informal work, he lacks a longer term direction in terms of vocational training and career choice. He has felt alienated from previous and current employment programs. His current homelessness imposes additional barriers to achieving longer term job outcomes. He is currently eligible for job matching. However, a higher level of targeted assistance would result in a better long term job outcome and in consequence reduced demand on both employment and housing assistance services.

Hanover's recent research on young people experiencing homelessness showed that the majority were committed to resolving their problems and were keen to obtain access to training and work (Horn 1998b). In the previous section, a proposal was suggested that would provide a holistic response by utilising the strengths of community based agencies working with those experiencing homelessness to ensure improved engagement and outcomes with the employment assistance network.

The findings of this study, together with the experience of the two agencies, indicate that the Job Network in its current form will not achieve good outcomes for this job seeker group. The level of breaching reported suggests that this group will become more dependent on welfare services for accommodation and financial relief and more alienated from the job market at great personal cost as well as social cost to the community.

The survey group indicated significant variance in their satisfaction and opinions of the three categories of Job Network providers. Their responses indicate a higher degree of satisfactory engagement by the not-for-profit providers with disadvantaged job seekers. The level of dissatisfaction is clearly associated with a substantial range of unmet needs. Even if we allow for the possibility that a percentage were only recently taken on by their provider, the findings suggest that job seekers with high needs are at real risk of being *token* participants in the employment assistance program.

Following initial assessment by some providers, there is a possibility that this group of job seekers may be put into the 'too hard' basket, as providers put greater effort into those clients who are more likely to yield an employment outcome at least cost. Job Network providers only have a relatively small number of job vacancies. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that these will invariably be filled by those with a higher level job skills and prior work experience. It has been observed that there are no guarantees in the system to ensure that disadvantaged job seekers are not put into a 'too hard' basket. Although this research indicates significant unmet needs and dissatisfaction with private commercial providers, the exact reasons for this cannot be confirmed.

In order to improve outcomes for this group, a level of ongoing support is necessary to:

- encourage active commitment and participation of job seekers whilst receiving Job Network services
- ensure job seeker needs for employment assistance are fully met
- resolve any particular crises relating to personal concerns
- mediate or advocate on behalf of the job seeker with Centrelink to minimise breaches of regulations

A criticism of the old CES was that it made inappropriate referrals of job seekers to job vacancies. The cited case study of Susan (page 13), together with the general level of frustration and dissatisfaction with the Job Network, suggests that disadvantaged job seekers are being poorly matched to job vacancies. This may be in part due to inadequate assessment of barriers and needs by Centrelink. However, it is also evident that some disadvantaged job seekers are being inappropriately assisted by Job Network providers.

It is also our belief, based on experiences with earlier employment assistance programs, that the best possible outcomes for this group of job seekers will be achieved if access to support is available until the job seeker is established in either a job or work experience program. The continuity of a trusted adviser throughout the period of assistance is essential to ensuring ongoing participation of individuals in employment programs.

Access to complaints and review procedures

With the relatively high level of dissatisfaction from the Job Network, the study would have expected some feedback on complaints and review mechanisms. The only reaction reported by respondents was to have sought out a second Job Network provider. Anecdotal feedback suggests that job seekers in practice have little opportunity to seek redress for poor quality service or other grievances. The level of confusion and dissatisfaction recorded in this study suggests the need for improved information to be provided to job seekers that clearly conveys:

- the outcome of assessment for employment services
- the type and level of services available
- clear guidance about review and complaints procedures

Linkages between homeless persons services and employment programs

The national Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) is currently undergoing a review. As a program of last resort, SAAP funded services are mandated to link clients into mainstream social welfare programs having first assessed their needs. To date, SAAP has placed insufficient emphasis on strategies for linking clients who are seeking a job into employment and vocational training programs. A critical pathway to escaping homelessness and to maintaining stable housing is to obtain a secure job. The SAAP review provides a valuable opportunity to develop initiatives that will increase the participation of homeless people in employment assistance programs. SAAP should be encouraged to become a stronger advocate for its clients who are in the labour market.

Incentives for employers to engage disadvantaged job seekers

Jobs of any kind are a scarce resource with a substantial excess of job seekers over the number of vacancies. Even with the adoption of a structured strategy to implement the above principles, the effect of rationing labour market assistance coupled with Job Network provider payments linked to job outcomes, will result in job seekers at the most disadvantaged end of the spectrum missing out on both meaningful assistance and a job outcome.

Previous experience from Working Nation showed that participation in employment assistance programs by itself is insufficient to enable the more disadvantaged job seekers to compete on an equitable basis for the available jobs. At the current rate of jobs growth, vacancies will be taken up by those with up to date skills and work experience. Therefore a level of job subsidy is necessary to enable the most disadvantaged to gain a foothold in the labour market.

5. Conclusion

Key Issues

People who are homeless or in housing crisis are significantly disadvantaged when trying to obtain work. They may be characterised by early school leaving, a lack of educational qualifications and exclusion from any meaningful training or employment.

Recent research by Hanover and others has indicated the level of disadvantage and personal issues faced by young people in housing crisis, including low self-esteem, poor health, substance use and family conflict. Their experience of homelessness is invariably associated with an array of additional barriers to re-engagement with employment assistance and vocational training.

The survey findings point to a high level of confusion and frustration experienced by this group of job seekers under the current Job Network arrangements. The significant level of breaching reported by the study group, related to their housing crisis, indicates ineffective engagement between job seeker and Centrelink. Harsher compliance measures to 'encourage' job seekers registered with Centrelink to meet their obligations to the Job Network will be unlikely to achieve improved outcomes for disadvantaged job seekers. Rather, such measures will increase the level of breaching and alienation from the Job Network and consequently result in greater use of community based welfare services for emergency relief and material aid. Compliance measures need to be carefully considered to ensure that they do not target the disadvantaged.

Considering the background profile and experience of this group, it was disturbing to find that only 7% of those assessed by the Job Seeker Classification Instrument were eligible for Intensive Assistance. These findings therefore raise serious concerns about key aspects of the assessment and classification process, including:

- under reporting, at the point of assessment, of housing crisis, homelessness and relevant personal factors
- insufficient weighting given by the assessment instrument to homelessness and associated barriers to employment, such as contactability, transport and personal issues

Respondents also reported a significant level of unmet needs, dissatisfaction and poor outcomes from their Job Network providers. Whilst the failure of the classification process will have contributed to their responses, it is evident that many are not receiving the range and level of assistance to fully meet their needs. The relatively low level of satisfaction with private commercial providers is of specific concern.

Young disadvantaged job seekers are at particular risk of being inadequately assessed by the JSCI procedures, and therefore, of not receiving sufficient employment assistance to meet their needs.

Policy Implications

Hanover recommends that the Department should review the weightings and response categories in the JSCI to ensure that job seekers in housing crisis are eligible for Intensive Assistance.

In addition, we believe that this group face an inherent disadvantage in the labour market which is not currently considered by the JSCI. It is recommended that an allocation of weighting points be made for under 21 year olds in the 'age' factor.

Hanover and Melbourne Citymission believe that the findings of this study point to inherent limitations of the Job Network, which also were experienced under the previous Working Nation programs, in that young people with a history of homelessness and transience require a targeted approach to ensure active engagement and participation in employment assistance programs. Community based agencies, who are able to develop a trusting relationship with this group, are best placed to support them and, where appropriate, advocate on their behalf through Centrelink assessment procedures and Job Network assistance.

Significant benefits are possible through the development of an integrated approach that builds on the strengths of community based agencies working with homeless people as a means to their effective engagement with the Job Network. A structured program would increase resource efficiency at Centrelink, improve the accuracy of the classification process and lead to improved employment outcomes for this marginalised group of job seekers. Centrelink is currently inadequately resourced to effectively assess the needs of disadvantaged job seekers.

It is therefore recommended that a protocol be developed which authorises SAAP services to make preliminary assessments of the factors in the JSCI and to make recommendations to Centrelink staff on behalf of their clients.

The initial Job Network tender has concentrated employment assistance to a smaller number of large provider agencies. This study provides some evidence to suggest that disadvantaged job seekers are not gaining the quality or level of assistance intended by the Government. This is partly due to the design of the tender specifications and resultant contracts that allow effective cross-subsidisation between the three classifications of assistance available to job seekers.

We believe therefore that a broader range of specialist Job Network providers is essential to provide a focus on particularly disadvantaged job seekers. We encourage the Government to develop the second tender round in 1999 which will facilitate this outcome.

Hanover and Melbourne Citymission's long experience of working with those who face multiple barriers to employment shows that *continuity of support* is vital to ensure not only engagement with assistance programs but also successful completion of training courses and work experience. The Federal Government has committed itself to helping the most disadvantaged groups of job seekers who are in the first third of their working lives. Not to ensure an effective program will condemn many to a life of social exclusion and poverty.

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