

# Poverty is the problem – not parents: so tell me, child protection worker, how can you help?

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## Article

**Cite this article:** Bennett K, Booth A, Gair S, Kibet R, and Thorpe R (2020). Poverty is the problem – not parents: so tell me, child protection worker, how can you help? *Children Australia* 45: 207–214. <https://doi.org/10.1017/cha.2020.39>

Received: 30 November 2019  
Revised: 12 May 2020  
Accepted: 13 July 2020  
First published online: 14 August 2020

### Keywords:

Parenting in poverty; child protection; parents with children in care

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## Abstract

Families who attract the attention of child protection services most often have ongoing lived experiences of poverty, gender-based domestic and family violence, problematic substance use and, sometimes, formally diagnosed mental health conditions. Without broader contextual knowledge and understanding, particularly regarding ongoing poverty, decision-making by child protection workers often leads to the removal of children, while the family's material poverty and experiences of violence remain unaddressed. Case studies are a common tool to succinctly capture complex contexts. In this article, we make explicit, through case examples and analysis, how poverty is almost always the backdrop to the presence of worrying risk factors before and during child protection intervention. Further, we expose the existential poverty that parents live with after they lose their children into care and which invariably exacerbates material poverty. In the final section, we consider the multi-faceted organisational poverty that blights the work environment of child protection workers, and we suggest strategies for improved practice with families living in poverty.

## Introduction

It is common for families experiencing material poverty to become trapped in damaging cycles of inadequate financial resources, debt, powerlessness, shame, desperation, depression and, for stress relief, easily accessible substance use. Then an accident or crisis occurs, like homelessness, family violence or children acting out, and child protection services are alerted (Child Family Community Australia [CFCA], 2017).

Case studies are commonly used as a way to highlight the context and humanity of a situation respectfully and to provide opportunities for reflection and a contribution to ethical professional practice (Short et al., 2017). The case studies in this article are drawn from the lived experiences of families supported by the Family Inclusion Network (FIN) Townsville. They have been compiled with collaboration and consent where appropriate, and names and some details have been changed as a way of preserving anonymity. FIN Townsville is a self-funded, parent led support and advocacy grass roots registered charity. Parent advocates and interested professionals volunteer their time as *Resourceful Friends* (Thorpe & Ramsden, 2014) to support families when child protection intervenes in their lives, using a trauma informed, community social work model of practice (Atkinson, 2002; Herman, 1992/1997; Holman, 1983).

Child protection intervention occurs when a notification is made concerning a child who has been, is being or likely to be physically, sexually and/or emotionally abused or neglected. Neglect draws the attention of Child Protection when a child's basic needs are not met to the extent that it affects their health and development. Several factors can be thought to affect parents' inability to meet their children's needs including domestic violence, problematic alcohol and substance use, mental ill health, disability and poverty. However, definitions can be subject to individual child protection workers' interpretations, giving rise to inconsistent outcomes. Members of FIN Townsville have noted that risk averse practices by child protection workers have contributed to a culture whereby parents who have difficulty with meeting children's needs are considered neglectful, without due consideration being given to causal factors, like poverty. However, as Einboden (2019) argues, 'Young families consistently struggle with the lack of affordable child care, social isolation, precarious employment, and housing instability. Most child neglect and abuse isn't just a matter of poor parenting; it's a matter of having poor parents' (n.p.).

In this article, we narrate first how poverty is a significant causal factor in bringing a family to the attention of child protection authorities. We proceed to explore how poverty and other indices of social deprivation, like housing stress, invariably worsen following child protection intervention, with little attention given by agencies to remediate the situation in preparation for reunification (Fernandez et al., 2019), and further deterioration when children move into long-term care (Broadhurst & Mason, 2019). We then explore how the organisational experience of child protection workers impairs their ability to recognise and respond actively to poverty, thereby reducing the likelihood of reunification. Finally, we identify some

implications for improved practice which could facilitate far fewer children entering and staying in care for reasons largely due to poverty.

### How poverty brings child protection into the family

As is common, when socio-economic challenges prevail, the burden of child rearing is borne by mothers who are left to fend for their children (Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee, 2004, Chapter 10). The majority of parents naturally go out of their way to make ends meet even to the detriment of their own well-being (Russell et al., 2008). In the following case study, Alina, a sole parent, uses a variety of means to provide for her children but eventually hits rock bottom. Stress resulting from poverty, isolation and fatigue experienced by parents are risk factors for child abuse and neglect, and there is a strong link between the socio-economic status of a family and risk of children being neglected (CFCA, 2017).

When seeking support, FIN Townsville has noted that parents and grandparents experience shame and stigma due to derogatory remarks and labels from neighbours, kin and human service workers and, therefore, go to extreme lengths to access alternative forms of support (Bonnet & Venkatesh, 2016). Like Alina, many parents refrain from seeking help from child protection or other agencies for fear they risk having their children removed (McArthur et al., 2010).

**Alina** is a feisty, independent minded woman living alone with 4 children following a nasty experience of domestic violence. Alina manages to hold a loving family together from one crisis to another. The family live in poverty, relying on benefits and mostly managing to get by. That is, until Alina sinks into depression when the daily struggle overwhelms her. She keeps the children adequately fed with a good evening meal, but when she's depressed Alina neglects the house which soon becomes dirty and smelly. At these times, child protection intervenes and moves the kids into foster care until the house gets cleaned – on one occasion, with help from the local *Family Inclusion Network [FIN]* – and all of the accumulated clutter is removed. Child Protection call Alina a *pauper* and offer neither practical help nor money for a skip, despite paying far more to the foster carers than the cost of a skip and modest help, and far more than Alina has to regularly manage on for a week.

The cycle then starts again. Things begin well, but every little household glitch throws a spanner in the works: the washing machine packs up and needs replacing; the new school year means uniforms and books have to be bought out of layby; there's no fuel in the car, which needs 2 new tyres anyway, and one of the kids needs to go to the GP and that's further away than a sick child can walk. *FIN* helps out with transport, mostly from the *FIN resourceful friends'* own pockets, and Alina skips her medication to keep food on the table.

Eventually, Alina needs to use a pay-day loan company to get by, but she first needs to borrow money from a *Facebook* friend to pay off the last loan and get statements from Centrelink and her bank, all before getting a new loan from which she immediately repays her friend. But then the new loan doesn't cover all the pressing expenses nor Alina's medication, so she does a bit of sex work while the older kids are at school and the younger ones are watched by a kind neighbour. This helps a lot to clear debts and Alina rewards herself by getting a new small tattoo, which cheers her up . . . until she learns that the house owner wants them out as he's putting the house on the market. Just when everything was beginning to pick up.

Finding another house and moving is a big expense and Alina feels her only option is pay-day loan sharks. Alina knows loan sharks charge a fortune in interest, but she feels it's demeaning and unpredictable to front up to welfare agencies, and there's always the risk they might notify child protection authorities. Instead, with the pay-day loan people, Alina knows she will get what she needs with few questions asked, and she retains her self-esteem and independence.

Alina moves with the help of a friend with a ute, and his partner helps her with cleaning so she can get most of the bond money back from the old house. The kids need to change schools again – the third change in 2 years. At the new school the older boy is expected to have his own laptop and another trip to the loan sharks won't cover that as well as keep food on the table. Alina's son feels shamed by other kids at school when their poverty is exposed. He begins to play up and bully other kids. His behaviour escalates and soon Child Protection are called again. And again.

Alina is terrified they will take her son and possibly the younger kids as well, so depression overtakes her, the house becomes neglected, and a self-fulfilling prophecy is set in train.

In Australia, poverty is largely seen as an individual issue and not a structural and systemic failure. Consequently, vulnerable parents are shamed for living in poverty and seeking help for it (Russell et al., 2008). This experience is heightened for new refugee arrivals in Australia, who dream of a land of milk and honey, but discover life at the bottom in their new country is harsh and unforgiving (SBS News, 2017).

Pre-arrival trauma, language barriers, social isolation, unemployment and culture shock are recurring themes in the lives of resettled refugees. Gendered inequalities and cultural expectations force many refugee women almost single handedly to bear the brunt of child raising and bear shame when things go wrong. In the next case study, Bijoux is already disadvantaged on many other levels with language barriers being the biggest bar she has to jump over. The pre-arrival stress of being constantly on the run and living in a refugee camp can have debilitating effects on parents, making them vulnerable to mental ill health. In a new country and with limited supports, Bijoux is confronted by the unfamiliar laws of the land and finds herself engaging with child protection services.

**Bijoux** is 40 years old. She arrived in Australia 6 months ago, heavily pregnant, and accompanied by her husband, Toure, and eight children. All in the family had suffered pain and trauma in the hands of rebels followed by 10 years in a refugee camp. On arrival, Bijoux and her husband were supported by a settlement agency to open bank accounts, register at Centrelink, rent a house, and enrol the children at school. Due to the family size, they had no option but to take a one year lease on an overpriced 5 bedroom house.

Bijoux learned she would receive the family tax benefits from Centrelink. Toure, would receive a much lesser amount in his own account, and the eldest two children would receive their own allowance independently. Culturally, Toure had always provided and managed the family finances so, unsurprisingly, he felt intimidated by this new arrangement.

Bijoux is illiterate and innumerate, and only speaks her native language. Toure speaks French, has limited spoken English and enrolled for AMEP (Adult Migrant English Program) classes at TAFE.

Due to her more limited skills, Bijoux required extra supports and was frustrated by language barriers outside her home. Toure then became the custodian of their debit cards and managed their finances. All was well until Toure made acquaintance with some men in the community and went on drinking sprees, some days leaving the family without food or household supplies. When confronted, Toure became very aggressive. Bijoux suffered in silence as she found it too difficult to 'expose' her husband's aggression.

One morning the family received a call from the children's school asking Bijoux to attend for a meeting. Through an interpreter, the teachers expressed their concerns about her children's well-being. They were unkempt, constantly hungry, slept in class and were often last to be collected from school. Bijoux explained that with the pregnancy and three pre-school age kids she was getting very tired. When she got home, she broke down and expressed her frustration to Toure who became agitated and slapped her, telling her this was her responsibility.

The fights became more common and Bijoux's eldest son moved out. She was horrified. Without his help, how would she be able to care for the children or pay the rent?

Two weeks later Child Protection Officers visited her home. As fate would have it, soiled nappies, food, and toys littered her floor and her home was in chaos. The officers, through an interpreter, explained that they had received a complaint from school that the children were neglected and two of them had reported to their teacher that their dad beats them and their mother too. Bijoux denied knowledge of this, but admitted that Toure had become increasingly aggressive. The officers immediately took the 6 younger children away. Bijoux did not understand what was going on, especially when the police put a protection order on Toure, stating he was not to go to their home. She informed the police that Toure had her debit card and he was made to give it back to her, even though she did not know how to use it and had no one to help her. Her only option was to go back to the settlement agency for support. Torn between protecting her children and her cultural obligation to protect her family image, she wondered what would the community think if she had reported her husband? What of being a negligent mother? For the first time Bijoux regretted coming to Australia; life was not this hard in the refugee camp.

Soon after her children were removed, Bijoux was placed on *NewStart* payment (now called *JobSeeker*) while she still had to pay rent for an empty 5 bedroom house. The real estate agent sent two notices of breach which she was unable to read. After a month, another letter came and Bijoux took all three to her case manager who explained she had been given an eviction notice. Now on a very low income, where could she live with a new baby due very soon?

Meanwhile, Child Protection made an application to court for 2 year custody orders on the children, who had been placed with three different foster carers. All this was too much for Bijoux. She stopped eating, could not sleep, and became very depressed. The final straw was when her GP assessed she was at risk of pre-eclampsia and had to be admitted to hospital. Bijoux started having suicidal ideation . . .

Although Bijoux was aware of her husband's abusiveness, her hands were 'tied' as she depended on his skills to carry on the cultural role of a provider. An unplanned pregnancy, isolation, a limited income and no social supports, Bijoux is exposed to poverty that is not only material but also social, impacting heavily on her parenting abilities.

In Bijoux's case, poverty and other stressors, including domestic violence, led to the removal of her children and the subsequent reactive decline in her mental health (Kaur & Atkin, 2018). The removal of her children led to reduced income, greater poverty and homelessness, jeopardising the possibility of her children's return. In the absence of material and social poverty, this situation could have been averted.

Yet it would appear that in 2019 removal of children into care is still actioned by workers who do not appear to be aware of the depths and despair of poverty for families and, instead of taking action to remediate poverty, focus on perceived deficits in parents – deficits which might well decrease if relief from poverty was forthcoming (Saar-Heiman & Krumer-Nevo, 2019).

### How poverty worsens following child protection intervention

The general public knows that raising children adds to financial living costs. Most people could be forgiven for thinking a parent or parents would be better off if their children did not live with them. This may be the case for parents with full-time employment. However, in FIN Townsville's experience, most parents who come into contact with child protection find that their financial situation worsens when their children are removed from their care. This is particularly so for those dependent on Centrelink payments for income, as they lose their Centrelink parenting payment and

are, instead, placed on Centrelink's *NewStart* payment, which is a payment for jobseekers with stricter conditions and less money (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2019). This reduction in income increases the likelihood of ongoing poverty for these parents. And for working parents maintaining employment becomes difficult, because of the many daytime commitments following child protection intervention.

Many low-income parents rely on government housing to enable them to have a low cost roof over their heads. However, the size of the social housing offered depends on the number of people who will be living there (Queensland Government, 2019). Thus, if a family's number of occupants is reduced to one when children are removed, then the result may be the sole parent losing their right to have government housing which, in turn, is given to a family seen by the government as being more in need (Australian Government Department of Social Services, 2019). Crucially, this outcome undermines one of the requirements child protection agencies place on parents for them to have their children returned to their care – having an adequately sized family home.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents represent a higher percentage of parents whose children are in care and these children are now 10.2 times more likely to be removed from their families than non-Indigenous children (SNAICC, 2019). The following example provides an all too common picture of life spiraling into poverty, powerlessness and insecure housing after Child Protection intervention (Stokes & Schmidt, 2011).

**Marlee** has just given birth to a healthy baby girl, Kirra, and has returned to her home in a small town. This is a time of happiness, albeit clouded by current and past events in Marlee's immediate family.

Marlee's partner, Yarran, is currently in prison for non-lethal strangulation, because he tried to choke Marlee. This incident of domestic violence was the last straw after many years of physical and emotional abuse.

Marlee says she still loves Yarran, although she knows she needs to distance herself from him if she has any chance of keeping her children. Currently, their two older boys are in foster care.

Marlee has considered moving back to Darwin as she has no family locally. Her Darwin family consists of her mother who suffers from schizophrenia, and her grandmother who is very caring, but is now old and frail. Such a move could help her separate from Yarran, but her two sons are located here in town, and she is allowed supervised visits once a week for one hour. Due to having baby Kirra, Marlee has not seen her two boys for three weeks, and she is eager to see them and introduce them to their baby sister. She knows they will ask her about their father Yarran. Additionally, Marlee does not want to leave the support she can access from Yarran's mother who is well known in the local Aboriginal community.

Marlee survives week to week on Centrelink payments. She is missing the larger income she had from Yarran's employment, although she knows she will need to get used to reduced financial circumstances if she is to separate successfully from Yarran. Then there will be pressure to conform with *ParentsNext* obligations once Kirra reaches six months of age.

Child Protection require Marlee to attend counselling and parenting programmes and each bus trip for these and for contact visits adds to her weekly costs. With a new baby, Marlee has decided it is easier to simply buy groceries from the convenience store around the corner from her home. Her mother-in-law advised her to leave her bank debit card and PIN with the shopkeeper, as this will enable her to buy food rather than be tempted to spend money on alcohol. However, the result of this arrangement is Marlee now pays more for groceries, and this worsens her already reduced finances. Additionally, Yarran's sister often turns up and needs to be fed and wants money for unpaid fines for driving her kids to school without a licence, otherwise she'll be sent to prison. Marlee cannot refuse to help family, as her mother-in-law could make life very difficult for her in the

community, including family payback. For this reason, Marlee wouldn't mind going on the Welfare Card so that she can buy more groceries than she needs at the supermarket, sell some at half price to struggling white neighbours, like Judith, and then have a bit more cash in her pocket for bus fares and for her sister-in-law.

There is no question of Marlee's love for her children, but Child Protection is concerned about her ability to protect her children from witnessing the violence from Yarran. Having already removed Marlee and Yarran's two boys, they had been planning to remove baby Kirra immediately after birth. However, the conviction and jail term of Yarran meant they could allow Marlee to keep baby Kirra. At least for now! But Marlee knows Child Protection will be back if Yarran comes into her life again on his release.

After hearing bad news about her white Australian female neighbour, Judith, Marlee is feeling surrounded by issues of poverty, domestic violence and Child Protection intervention.

**Judith** also has a violent partner, who now has a domestic violence order stopping him from legally visiting Judith and their toddler son. Like Marlee, Judith is in government housing and trying to survive on Centrelink payments.

One Sunday afternoon, a tap washer failed in Judith's bathroom, resulting in water pouring uncontrollably over the hand basin. Judith knew to turn off the mains but she needed water for cooking and bathing that night. It was getting late, so Judith turned to her partner, as she knew he would help. He comes immediately, fixes the tap washer, and helps Judith clean up the mess. Unfortunately, one of the other neighbours called the police, as they know there is a domestic violence order in place. The police attend and arrest Judith's partner. The police notify Child Protection that Judith had invited her violent partner into the home.

Child Protection reacts by removing Judith's toddler son on a 3 day Temporary Assessment Order. They indicate they will be applying for a 28 day Court Assessment Order, with a strong indication they will apply for a 2 year Custody Order.

If Child Protection is successful with an application for a custody order, then Judith faces losing her family house and being relocated to a shared accommodation with other women. But a suitably sized home for a family is what Judith will require for her to have her toddler son returned to her care.

Judith's Centrelink payments have been reduced, as she only needs to take care of herself, which now plunges her further into poverty. Judith manages to obtain some casual work, but her unpredictable hours, typical of the gig economy, often clash with Child Protection meetings and court hearings.

Both Marlee and Judith are experiencing shame and powerlessness and both fear Child Protection, despite the new departmental policy of keeping families *Safe and Together* (Department of Child Safety, Youth, and Women, 2018, p. 14).

Marlee and Judith's examples of losing the care of their children, and experiences of poverty, appear to result from having abusive partners. Families with complex problems such as domestic violence are no longer a marginal group in service delivery, but rather they have become one of the primary client groups of modern child protection services (Bromfield et al., 2010). It seems reasonable to postulate that disadvantage and domestic violence caused a spiral into long-term poverty and powerlessness that triggered Child Protection intervention, along with the seemingly inevitable consequences of a reduced housing standard, less income from Centrelink and the increased likelihood of losing your children to long-term care by the state (Fernandez et al., 2019).

While Judith's example of life after Child Protection intervention is based on the outlook of a white Australian woman having her children removed from her care, Marlee's example is similar for an Aboriginal woman. However, Marlee's increasing poverty after child protection intervention can be considered more complicated due to cultural and family obligations and requirements.

## How material and emotional poverty become entrenched when children are in long-term care

We have found almost no research on the ongoing lives of parents who have lost their children into long-term care, apart from a 2019 study by Broadhurst and Mason which found 'cumulative and enduring collateral consequences of child removal' (p. 26) which led to 'profound longer term consequences' (p. 33). In particular, that study focussed on the effects of grief, relationship and role loss, stigma and social isolation. It also identified the 'exclusionary potential of welfare restrictions' (Broadhurst & Mason, 2019, p. 32) which can render women 'homeless and destitute' (p. 33), but did not focus in detail on the enduring and deepening impact of poverty.

Related research with mothers who reluctantly gave up their babies for adoption indicates that many suffer life-long chronic sorrow which affects their mental health (Robinson, 2000) and similar research with parents – male and female – who lose their children through divorce and separation reports comparable findings (Burke et al., 2009). But neither of these related studies explore the material consequences of mental ill-health in such circumstances of loss.

In FIN Townsville, we have walked beside parents whose children are in long-term care, being *Faithful Companions* (Jones, 2009), supporting them through their grief and the strain of having experienced the hugely debilitating child protection process. We found that *Trauma and Recovery* (Herman, 1992, 1997) and *Trauma Trails* (Atkinson, 2002) provide us with guidance on working in trauma-informed ways with both Australian Aboriginal parents and non-Indigenous parents. Providing a safe place and safe relationships was foundational, followed by support through deep listening when people told their stories and moved through layers of loss. Our FIN support groups provide a space where parents can share their stories and connect with others, gaining a sense of connectedness and belonging, existential meaning and eventually, possibly, hope.

We find loss, grief and chronic sorrow are central to the experience of parents with children in long-term care. We have also identified some serious reactive mental health effects, similar to those for relinquishing mothers in adoption (Rickarby, 2014). What we had not anticipated so clearly were the serious effects on physical health, for example, heart attacks and strokes, cancer, chronic back pain which, without exception, FIN Townsville parents with children in long-term care were experiencing (Judge, 2019; Orsi & Thorpe, 2015). The most frequently occurring factor we have observed in these people's lives is chronic poverty, often overtly evidenced by insecure housing, as identified by Stokes and Schmidt (2011). While child protection workers appear to think that parents move on in their lives after losing their children long term, we have observed that this takes a very long time, if ever; deepening poverty is an all too common experience, as identified also by Broadhurst and Mason (2019). This is exemplified in Stacey's story when, before child protection intervention, she and her family enjoyed a comfortable life with an average working income.

**Stacey** first met *resourceful friends* from FIN some years ago outside the Children's Court where Child Protection were applying for a two-year custody order on her nine year old son, Joe.

Stacey was devastated as she was convinced she had done nothing wrong. Joe had been taken into care on an assessment of risk of harm (no actual harm) related to Stacey's boyfriend at the time. In the past he had served time for armed robbery. Stacey had ended this relationship

when Child Protection became involved, but Joe was refusing to return home to her care as he had been placed with the family who had provided day care for him as a pre-schooler and then after school care. Joe complained that his mother worked long hours and had boyfriends who took her attention away from him, so he preferred the foster carers and was refusing to even see his mum. The carers for their part were doing nothing to facilitate Joe's return to his mum and Stacey suspected they wanted to adopt Joe.

Stacey was a single mum who had a solid track record of being a hard worker in the hospitality industry in order to provide a good home for her child. She had been allocated a standard 3 bedroom housing commission house following a serious DV incident with Joe's father some years earlier. All was well until child protection intervened.

Once a two year order had been made on Joe, Stacey became socially isolated as she felt judged and ostracised in public. Her health declined markedly. She ate little, slept little, felt anxious and depressed much of the time and, to comfort herself, started buying items at street markets, allowing no one to know how much clutter she was hoarding under her house. At work Stacey became less reliable and was being bullied by a new supervisor. She came home from work to her empty house in tears every day. Stacey believed the Department made inadequate efforts to support reunification between her and her son.

For comfort, Stacey took up with a new man who soon moved in. They were both working, so poverty was not an issue at the time and his presence in the house ensured Stacey was not required to move from the house into a one bedroom flat. But then triple disaster struck. Firstly, the court made a long-term Guardianship Order on Joe, leaving Stacey with no hope of reunification before he reached 18. Then, following escalating bullying at work, Stacey – only in her mid-forties – had a heart attack and was forced onto benefits. Shortly after, her boyfriend was made redundant and they both were claiming *NewStart* as single people, since they were uncertain the relationship would last. Indeed, unemployment did not suit Stacey's new friend well and he took to gambling which sent the household spiralling into poverty. This sparked rows, and when these became violent Stacey banned the man from her bedroom, but balked at kicking him out of the house as then she would be alone again and forced to move out. They lived parallel lives in the house, arguing often about money, struggling to pay the rent and electricity bills, and often eating cheap takeaways or bread and jam. Stacey put on weight and her health deteriorated further with a bad back delaying her return to work. The Job Network Agency hassled her to do work for the dole which, physically, was beyond her and she constantly had to negotiate an exemption. Stacey then felt totally overwhelmed when her car needed expensive repairs and, at the same time, Housing gave her a deadline to remove all the hoarded clutter under her house.

Through all this, the child protection worker reported that Joe remained adamant he wanted no contact with his mum. Stacey's depression deepened and, as the months turned into years, she became stuck in chronic sorrow, chronic ill health, and chronic poverty. Her heart was broken, and she felt utterly without hope.

Derek provides another example, this time a man who was earning well above the average wage before child protection intervention, but who progressively slipped down 'the ladder of life' into poverty as he became embroiled more deeply in the child protection system and was unable to haul himself out. The consequences for his mental and physical health were serious as he fell further into poverty and, even when one of his daughters decided to return to live with him after several years in long-term care, his poverty became a major stumbling block in their renewed relationship.

**Derek's** 3 young daughters were already in long-term care when he found support with FIN. Derek was struggling to understand, let alone accept, what had happened. Two years ago his wife had left him and the girls for another man. Derek had managed to hold down his job and care for the kids well enough for a while without any Child Support from his ex-wife and paying very high child care and after school care fees on account of his good income. That is, until one day when his 10 year old refused to go home from school and disclosed that Dad's brother, who

was living with them, had touched her inappropriately. Consequently, Derek lost his girls, initially into short-term care but then, when he lost his job and plunged into deep depression, child protection authorities applied for a long-term order, having found the children's mother living with a suspected drug dealer. She was deemed unwilling and unable to care for the children.

When his girls were removed, Derek found the demands of maintaining contact challenging as this could only be arranged during standard office hours and Derek's employer was unwilling to give him leave for one afternoon a week. Even meeting with the child protection officer had been difficult to arrange as she was unable (or unwilling) to work after hours. Attending case planning meetings and court were problematic and, eventually, Derek's employer let him go.

Derek had a past history of mild depression which, surprisingly, he had managed quite well after his wife left. However, the combination of losing his girls and then his job, and finding himself on *NewStart* which barely covered his mortgage payments let alone electricity bills, phone, rates, car registration, insurance, and only then food, was too much and he had a depressive breakdown, spending 2 weeks in the local psychiatric facility when he became suicidal.

Thanks to the support of a very good trauma counsellor, Derek gradually became well enough to think about finding employment. However, having been a crane driver at a Port Authority, which automatically had paid for the annual renewal of all the Trade Certificates Derek had needed, he now was faced with having to pay to renew them himself – an impossible task while on *NewStart* and with massive accumulated debts, including a *Robodebt* related to child care fees from many years earlier which arrived out of the blue. Even a Job Network agency was unable to help sufficiently. Thus began what Derek experienced as a fall down the ladder of life, when he was forced to search for other, less well paid, employment. His car was not deemed good enough for Uber driving and Derek resorted to searching for cans and bottles to obtain the recycling refunds. The shame Derek felt was enormous and humiliating. This fueled a return of his depression which made job searching a task for which he had little energy. The longer he was unemployed the harder it was to find employment. This vicious circle was, he discovered from meeting other parents in FIN, an all too common experience when you lose your children long term. The only day Derek lived for was seeing his daughters weekly in a park, but it was hard to be just a fun dad after being a full on dad.

Eventually, as a teenager, one of his daughters self-placed back home with Derek, but he was now in impoverished circumstances and, despite preferring to be living with him, she was ashamed of him and his home after the relative comfort of the foster home. This exacerbated Derek's grief and shame and gave a sour edge to his joy with having her home. As he took to saying: "It's not over when it's over".

As has become apparent throughout this article, remaining in paid work is highly problematic when child protection is involved in your family life. Falling back onto *Newstart* is pivotal in plunging most families into poverty and debt, and even with an improvement in the level of payment under *NewStart* (as with the *JobSeeker* payment) it is highly unlikely that this would prevent entrapment in poverty when child protection processes take so long. By the time children are placed into long-term care, the debts have piled up while shame, grief, depression and numerous practical barriers prevent an early or easy transition back into a pre-child protection lifestyle and a more adequate family economy. Marginalisation and social exclusion become complete, and parents sink to the level of the *precarariat* – precarious proletariat (Standing, 2012). It is a massive, often unattainable, uphill struggle to regain a life out of poverty.

This reality for many parents with children in long-term care has also been uncovered by the ongoing long-term work of other FINs in several Australian states, confirming a need for future research in order for the debilitating plight of parents to become exposed as an important social justice issue. Given that many

children exiting care gravitate back to their first families, arguably it is incumbent on society to minimise the harmful impact on families as a result of child protection intervention, in order to ensure that families are better positioned to support their young people into adult life and to be a buffer against the well-known adverse pitfalls for those leaving care (Cashmore & Paxman, 1996). At present, however, the case study evidence presented in this article suggests that child protection processes can cause enduring, significant material and psychological harm to many parents – arguably, beyond the principle of ‘least possible harm’.

### Poverty awareness in child protection agencies

Through the case examples presented so far, we have revealed that poverty can often draw child protection authorities into monitoring a family, sometimes to the point of removing their children into care. After children have entered care, the demands and extended processes of child protection investigation, assessment and decision-making push families deeper into poverty and, when for some children long-term orders are made, then the descent into deep poverty becomes entrenched for many of their bereft families. Indeed, even families who were managing fairly well before child protection intervention quickly spiral into poverty following intervention which, when compounded by loss, shame and trauma, can become a long-term reality from which escape is a formidable challenge (Broadhurst & Mason, 2019).

But how is poverty in families perceived by child protection agencies and their staff? And do they address poverty as a foundational issue to enable families to keep or be reunited with their children?

One parent, Jenny, offers the following comments and suggestions in a letter to her child protection worker:

#### My ‘now’

Oh, you are a child protection worker, you’ll understand hardship, you’ll see through the layers of modernised foyers and office rooms that we all come together in, its representation of the right way to live life – clean, maintained, ordered, organised, only what should be on display is visible – and you’ll have insight into the threat to my very existence that is the experience of having my youngest child in care of the state.

You’ll see the world I live in that isn’t this financially enriched space, not of inter-connected resources. You’ll see that if I keep my car running, pay rent and utilities, pay my phone bill for internet connection, that I don’t have funds to help my sister, and I don’t have funds to buy clothes that fit with office spaces that I need to frequent as part of my case plan requirements.

I spend my petrol going about between agencies: for food; Centrelink, legal aid, court, supervised visits; job agency and doctor appointments; parenting and therapy sessions. While I’m doing this I co-ordinate school runs and meetings, grocery shopping, checking second-hand stores, getting to the library to print things out.

There is no way to balance what is needed to be done, with my financial incomings.

I can’t get ‘back on my feet’ because I persistently swing from anxiety to depression, I must have contact with my abusive ex-partner as part of shared care arrangements for my eldest – family court ordered. I buy tobacco to have a smoke for comfort and just to be in my space. It’s expensive, but absolutely everything in my life is rationed: my time; allocating use of energy; types of social contact; choices for food and clothing; medical treatment. Dental, beauticians and hairdressers don’t make the list.

#### My ‘then’

Before I had the car, I used public transport, and traded things with people for a lift, sometimes money, tobacco, groceries, or baby-sitting their kids. That took up time and energy, and I and my youngest child had involvement in social networks that we really shouldn’t have had. I crashed and

relapsed to drinking and dope. But I could get around and give an appearance of being on time, and available at short notice. I worked hard to fit agencies timetables and didn’t try to negotiate anything. I needed to be seen as just like anyone who was living life with some amount of ease, a ‘proper poor person’. It’s what seemed to be wanted by the world around me. Of course, it wasn’t enough; the pressure to keep on keeping up without actual adequate funds is not something that can be sustained. It’s a false stability, a façade.

This façade was removed with my youngest child removed. Dad gave me his car during that time, as he had to stop driving.

#### Back to my ‘now’

I am quite clear now that my inability to maintain the façade using the resources I could muster is criminogenic; to use the networks of the disadvantaged, the informal help, the help of others also doing life in this difficult way. We are scarred and hunted, defiant in our dirty, dowdy, down-at-heelness. Our old faded bra straps, tattoos, Kmart clothes, scuffed-up shoes and cheap arse thongs/flip flops, faded hair dye, bad teeth, dodgy spelling and grammar, having smokes out on the footpath. All these fly in the face of our expressions of dignified integrity of living poor, and solidarity with others living this deficit labelled life.

So tell me, child protection worker, with your knowledge of social justice and stigma, how can you help, now that I am regaining my façade? I have a car and appear a little less fragmented. I have make-up on today, a new handbag from the women’s centre, and decent shoes I scored from Vinnies. My hair dye was purchased on special. So I’m feeling a sense of self-worth located in your eyes today. Am I deserving enough now, or do I need to look less deserving to fit your criteria for help?

Will you materialise a job that negotiates stable consistent hours with me, and food box drop-offs for the next 3 months, no questions asked? Will you arrange lawn mowing and heavy home cleaning work so that I have energy for what I need to do to achieve reunification? Will you arrange legal aid to convince child protection that my ex-partner should only have supervised visits with the kids? Will you negotiate a 5 year, no rent increase lease with my landlord? Resolve my robo-debt, and fund diploma level education?

I don’t think you will. I think, instead, in your capacity as child protection officer, you will be interested mainly in my current dose of anti-depressants and in reports from agencies I interact with.

Poverty is my problem. I’m not afraid of poverty, though I live in fluctuating levels of threat because of the many ideas about what a person who lives in poverty is like. Child protection worker, are you afraid of poverty? You would do well to be in fear more so of what is thought about poverty. If poverty were to visit you, well, you now know what you will be subject to.

This narrative provides articulation of what might be said if a parent felt they could speak freely with their child protection worker, without fear of negative consequences and pressure of stigma and shame around material and existential poverty (Gibson, 2019). Prevailing discourse around personal responsibility to independently choose to take on personal ownership of any problem means that, bereft of a structural and critical analysis, most ‘clients’ of child safety are considered undeserving of assistance and, instead, deserving of hurdles to ‘demonstrate’ utilisation of personal agency and resources (Keddell, 2017; Thomson, 2017).

### Discussion

Parents in FIN Townsville quickly become aware of how poverty is glossed over by child protection agency culture which at best seems to accept that ‘it is as it is’ without any noticeable efforts to remediate some of the worst effects of living in poverty in order to enable families to keep or regain their child/ren out of care. At worst, parents are blamed and shamed for being paupers and offered little help beyond being referred to family support services which are not funded to give material assistance and which employ workers who eschew getting their hands dirty doing practical work, for example,

help with trauma cleaning. FIN parents report that child protection staff seem blithely unaware of poverty when they place requirements and demands on parents which are simply beyond their means and then punish them (and their children) for not complying by, for example, reducing contact.

Parents and FIN Townsville are left wondering how this is in the best interests of children. Help with bus fares and/or the cost of snacks for children during contact visits would cost the Department very little but could make a world of difference in facilitating possible reunification of children back into their families. Instead, parents feel their actions are invariably misunderstood by workers and unfairly labelled in negative ways which are used against them in court.

In FIN Townsville's view, there needs to be greater realisation that parents can be too ashamed to make explicit the reasons for their actions (like being unable to buy snacks or make phone calls until their next benefits pay day). Additionally, child protection workers need to have advanced empathy to anticipate and understand the effects of living in poverty, to understand coping strategies and self-esteem protecting defence mechanisms which may be very different from their own and to see survival strategies rather than labelling behaviour as resistance or manipulation (Quick & Scott, 2019). As noted by Saar-Heiman and Krumer-Nevo (2019), it is workers' limited awareness of the impacts of poverty on the lives of families and the power imbalances between workers and parents which inhibits parents' participation.

So how come poverty in families is so often overlooked by child protection agencies? Broadhurst et al. (2010) argue that such agencies operate between the lines of file and report writing, leaving workers actual daily practice 'under-emphasised and under-theorised' (p. 1051) and under-articulated. Further, they suggest that teams work under pressure to standardise the experience of their workday, presenting written and spoken reports that fit organisational norms. There is good reason to conform, or risk becoming an undeserving employee.

Literature indicates that burnout, trauma and stress are common for child protection workers (Kim & Stoner, 2008) and what works to manage and heal from traumatic experiences for 'clients' would seem to be so for workers as well. Yet workplaces can be uncertain places for teamwork, with performance and administrative style supervision prevailing (McArthur & Thomson, 2012), leaving exploratory, open and critically reflective discussion to lunch time, externally sourced supervision and confidential chats after work (McFadden et al., 2015).

The term 'reflective practice' has gained credibility over time; however, it might seem that what is included in reflection requires company sanction/sanitising within a social investment (Keddell, 2017) paradigm now. This speaks to a feel of the workday as rigid and careful, perpetuating re-demonstration of individualised pathologies of child protection clients, and reports from clients that they see little evidence of changed practice, regardless of inquiries and implemented new practice frameworks.

Inevitably, such an environment could lead to psychological, emotional, social and spiritual impoverishment, constituting burnout – which should be considered a reasonable response to an unreasonable situation, yet burnout seemingly receives the same response as poverty – both 'too big to tackle and too familiar to notice' (Morris et al., 2018, p. 370, cited in McCartan et al., 2018, p. 1; Oates, 2019). Moreover, both are seen as the responsibility of the individual rather than of systems and structures.

On a more hopeful note, Cortis et al. (2019) discussed trial implementation of effective change (the Practice First framework)

in frontline child protection services. They found that change was difficult to accomplish and perhaps limited, not only by overlaying a new method upon existing systems and practices but also by the exclusion of formal feedback and input from families. Moreover, support of leadership was noted as integral to implementation of the Practice First framework. Nonetheless, a prevailing finding was that when practitioners spent more time with families face to face, including outside of the office spaces changed practice, and 'for many practitioners, the experience of working under Practice First was transformative' (Cortis et al., 2019, p. 57). Equally, Saar-Heiman and Krumer-Nevo (2019) recommended a shared dialogue between families and parents about power, concerns and hopes, but that such engagement required relationships of trust for real change to occur.

## Conclusion

In FIN Townsville, we have long known that most families who attract the attention of child protection services have ongoing lived experiences of poverty. What we have realised more clearly from preparing this article is that child protection intervention can exacerbate and prolong parents' circumstances of poverty, sometimes forever. While it may seem to workers who are less poverty aware that parents are perversely failing to meet required milestones, in fact intervention has often set in motion unravelling circumstances that become harmful and enormously difficult, if not impossible, to arrest. Without broader contextual knowledge and deep understanding of poverty, decision-making by child protection workers leads to the removal of children while the family's material poverty remains largely unaddressed. Lack of worker insight into the impoverishing manifestations of organisational pressures on their own decision-making compounds the invisibility of poverty. Becoming poverty aware and facilitating more open shared dialogue with parents on the realities of poverty impacting their lives could provide workers and families with pathways to change.

**Acknowledgements.** The authors would like to acknowledge the parents, grandparents and significant others involved with FIN Townsville who have supported the creation of this article as a means to increase the volume of their voices in efforts to influence changes in child protection policy and practice.

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