

Who cares? Life on welfare in Australia

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The National Coalition government have instructed Work and Income New Zealand to increase benefit sanctions and the ACT party welfare policy is that those on Jobseeker Support would be placed on Electronic Income Management after a short period of cash welfare (ACT, 2022), a form of compulsory money management, which makes this book useful for those in Aotearoa New Zealand at the present time. Eve Vincent, an anthropologist, carried out qualitative research exploring two approaches tried by the Australian government to control beneficiaries, the use of compulsory money management through Basic Cards and the ParentsNext programme.

The use of compulsory money management was trialled in three locations in Australia, the east Kimberley region, the Northern Territory and Ceduna, an isolated community in South Australia. The locations where the Basics Card was introduced impacted Indigenous populations disproportionately, with 73% of Basic Card users being Indigenous. The use of the Basic Card began in 2016 (ending in 2022) as a trial in east Kimberley and Ceduna but the trial has been continued in the Northern Territory. While there are variations in its use, the usual approach is that 80% of a person's income will be on the Basics Card and cannot be used at gambling or alcohol outlets, while the other 20% of their income is deposited into their bank account.

The other form of conditional welfare the book explores is ParentsNext, first introduced in 2016 and then rolled out nationally in 2018. It is a pre-employment programme for

people with pre-school children, with the aim of getting parents into the workforce as quickly as possible. In 2021, 83,000 parents were enrolled in ParentsNext, with 95% women and 68% single parents. The delivery of ParentsNext is contracted out to a range of for-profit providers. Each participant in ParentsNext is required to participate in an activity approved by their provider (such as study or parenting activity) with failure to engage in their activity resulting in sanctions.

Two chapters outlined a history of welfare in Australia which follows a similar trajectory to Aotearoa New Zealand with a focus on work as a way out of poverty and, more recently, the use of surveillance and sanctioning to control the daily lives of beneficiaries. As the electronic income maintenance focused mainly on the Indigenous population, their engagement in paid work and the economy was outlined in the history chapters.

A chapter is dedicated to the experiences of people in Ceduna with the Basic Card, outlining their daily experiences and frustrations with having their income controlled. For some participants, use of the Basics Card was shaming and a reminder of past experiences of state overreach into their lives. Practical issues were outlined such as the Basics Card not working in places people wanted to buy basic items but could not because the Basic Card was set to decline at any store where alcohol was sold. Others shared stories of their strategies to get around the restrictions and finding ways to purchase alcohol despite having to use a Basic Card. After five years of the trial the evaluation of the efficacy of use of the Basic Card was inconclusive and consequently it

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is no longer used—with the exception of the Northern Territory.

Another section of the book focused on ParentsNext, describing the research participants' experience of structural violence through their participation in the programme. As with the Basics Card, Indigenous populations were overrepresented in the scheme. Overall, it appeared people found ParentsNext inconvenient and stressful with any indication of non-compliance being sanctioned via a loss of income.

Themes of shame across both the use of the Basics Card and ParentsNext was explored in depth described by the author as a “surprising complexity of shame” (p. 109). For example, in relation to the Basics Card in Ceduna, it was noted that some Indigenous participants experienced no shame as everyone around them was also using the card therefore its use engendered a sense of belonging. On the other hand, some

participants experienced having to use the card as stigmatising. Vincent also challenged the stigmatising discourse that people ‘do nothing’ while on a benefit; the participants in her study were engaged in caregiving roles as parents for other family members and were active community members.

The in-depth exploration of conditional welfare outlined in the book was thought provoking and the impact of surveillance and state control was written about thoroughly using the research data. For those interested in poverty and welfare, this is a useful source. I did, however, find the structure of some sections of the book disjointed as at times it jumped between the content of interviews, the research process, the policy settings and the background to the policies. I would, however, recommend this book to those interested in understanding the daily lived experience of beneficiaries.

ACT (2022). *Electronic Income Management*. <https://www.act.org.nz/eim>

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