

Full of hope: Poverty, social work and social services in the world we live in

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ABSTRACT

Child poverty is a central consideration for social work in Aotearoa, affecting families and social service delivery and social work in many fields of practice. Working with individuals, whānau and communities to enable them to pursue their dreams and aspirations is central to social work. Although thwarted from time to time by neoliberal contractual requirements, the resilience of practitioners means that they can be full of hope about their work and the possibilities it holds as they work in resistance to those requirements. It is practice that means working for change at both an individual and systemic level.

Keywords: Child poverty, hope, aspirations, social services, social work practice

Introduction

“People say it’s the disease and the hunger that’s killing us, but I say it’s the being poor” (Henry O’Toole [main character], in Huff, 2020).

While O’Toole is referring to poverty generally, his remark is equally apposite in relation to child and whānau / family poverty, a major focus for this article. (While I am focusing on child whānau / family poverty, I will use the term *child poverty* as an easier shorthand throughout this article). We begin with a brief discussion about child poverty in general and its incidence and prevalence in Aotearoa New Zealand; child and whānau / poverty is an appropriate place to focus because it is so central to many of the issues faced by social service users. From there, we proceed to a wider conversation about what this means in the context of social services and social work and the possibilities for creative and constructive work in the current environment.

Child poverty

There is a vast national and international literature on poverty, especially, but certainly

not exclusively, child and whānau poverty. That literature traverses, among other things, discussions and debates about both how best to measure poverty and what a definition should include and be based on. It is not necessary or appropriate to review those debates here. However, there is one significant core that runs extensively through the debates, namely that poverty encompasses a lack of resources (especially, but not exclusively, financial resources) to enable an individual and / or whānau to participate in and enjoy a standard of living regarded as acceptable in contemporary society. (Cheyne et al., 2008; Lister, 2004; Smeeding, 2009; and Townsend, 1993 discuss this much more extensively than is either possible or necessary here).

Reflections on social work practice and a range of work in the social work literature make it very clear that poverty is a central component underlying so much of the lives of users and the daily engagements and relationships for practitioners (Bradshaw, 2001; Daly & Kelly, 2015; Dowling, 1999; Krumer-Nevo, 2020; Parrott, 2014; Sheedy, 2013). Perhaps even more critically for practice and practitioners, the ANZASW

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Code of Ethics clearly identifies identifying “solutions to poverty” as a core part of the history of social work’s development, going on to note, under the heading “Our Professional Values and Ethical Principles”, that “we have a particular interest in the needs and empowerment of people who are marginalised, vulnerable, oppressed or *living in poverty* [emphasis added]” (Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers, 2019).

What do we know about poverty, more specifically, child poverty, in the Aotearoa New Zealand context? Probably the most substantial and influential work around poverty measurement in this country has been undertaken by Perry in his annual reports from the Ministry of Social Development. (See Perry, 2024 for the latest iteration.) His work draws extensively on a material hardship approach to poverty. That is, poverty is demonstrated by the lack of a range of possessions, resources and/or absence of amenities and opportunities regarded by New Zealanders as necessary to enable participation in contemporary New Zealand society. For example, children who have six or more of these items set out in Table 1 would be considered to be living in material hardship; this definition is one of the

Table 1. Material Hardship Items

Households and children
Income adequacy for basics
Used Foodbank/other community help
Borrowed for basics from family/friends
Can pay unexpected \$500 essential bill
Delayed replace/repair appliances
Car
Holiday away each year
Dampness or mould
Can afford to keep home warm

measures used by government in its annual report on child poverty.

Who are these children and families in Aotearoa New Zealand? The characteristics of the group living in poverty are reflected in Table 2. It is worth noting in this table that column 1 refers to the percentage of children in that group living in material hardship while column 3 refers to the percentage of children living in poverty. For example, 7% of children in two-parent households live below the poverty line, while of the group of children living in poverty, 37% live in a two-parent household.

Child-specific items in the 2018-19 Household Economic Survey and later surveys

Item No.	Item
Have/do, don't have/do for each of your children (Respondents are asked whether any lacks are because of cost or for some other reason.)	Economising : not all, a little, a lot – to keep down costs to help in paying for (other) basic items (not just to be thrifty or to save for a trip or other non-essential)
Two pairs of shoes in a good condition that are suitable for daily activities	Postponed a child's visit to the doctor
Two sets of warm winter clothes	Postponed a child's visit to the dentist
Waterproof coat	Did not pick up a child's prescription
All the uniform required by their schools	Been unable to pay for a child to go on a school trip or other school event
A separate bed	Had to limit children's involvement in sport
Fresh fruit and vegetables daily	Had your children go without music, dance, kapa haka, art, swimming or other special interest lessons
A meal with meat, fish or chicken (or vegetarian equivalent) each day	Had your children continue wearing shoes or clothes that were worn out or the wrong size

Source: Adapted from Perry (2024).

Table 2. Selected Key Characteristics of Children and Whānau Living in Poverty in Aotearoa New Zealand

	Rate (%)	Numbers	Composition (%)
ALL 0-17s	12	144,000	100
Household type			
Two-parent with any dep children	7	53,000	37
Sole-parent with any dep children	32	60,000	42
Other family HHs with any dep children	18	28,000	20
Main source of HH income			
Main source market	8	78,000	54
Main source government	39	66,000	46
HH work intensity			
2+ earner HH – 1+ FT	6	36,000	25
Sole-earner HH – FT	14	37,000	26
Part-time only	24	14,000	10
No earner (workless)	42	53,000	37
Self-employed	3	4,000	2
Ethnicity			
Māori	22	62,000	33
Pacific	29	45,000	23
Asian	4	8,000	4
European	9	70,000	37
Other	14	6,000	3

Source: Adapted from Perry (2024), Table 7.

As indicated in the earlier discussion, this description is based around a material hardship approach to, and measurement of, child poverty, one of the key components of the approach used by government in its annual report on child poverty indicators.

Recent work suggests that the number of children living in poverty are worsening. For example, the Ministry of Health (2024) report on the country's health shows that the numbers going without food has increased since the previous report with one in four children living in households where food ran out often, or sometimes, in the previous year. Concurrently, foodbanks are reporting greater pressure on their resources, requests for assistance coming from diverse groups,

including those who had never previously sought assistance. Indeed, the pressure on one prominent foodbank in South Auckland has been such that it has decided to stop providing parcels.

Furthermore, Stats NZ (2024) has recently reported work on persistent poverty, one of the measures to be developed under the Child Poverty Reduction Act 2018. Its initial estimates are that one in 10 children live in persistent poverty, defined as being in a household below 60% of the median before housing cost income level in the current year and in 2 of the previous 3 years. While these are an estimate only at this stage, this would mean that approximately 120,000 children live in persistent poverty. As a third piece of

the recent picture, the “Growing Up in New Zealand” project has identified one in five of its sample experiencing material hardship at some stage in their first 12 years and one in 10 in their 12th year (Growing Up in New Zealand, 2024).

All of this occurs, of course, in an environment which is replete with significant (unnecessary and excessive) pressures, stresses and strains in a range of areas affecting social work practice, provision of social services and, even more significantly, the lives and opportunities for those individuals, whānau and communities with which social workers work. Recent media has been redolent with a range of stories, reports and articles around a host of issues of significance for both poverty and social services. These stories and reports have canvassed such critical issues as:

- attacks on Te Tiriti and on programmes linked to and embedded within te ao Māori;
- homelessness, increases in the numbers of the homeless and difficulties in accessing emergency housing
- increasing numbers of children in poverty and material hardship;
- cuts in contracts for social services across different settings;
- difficulties in accessing mental health services;
- a range of cuts and reductions in services for people with a disability and their whānau;
- boot camps for some youth justice offenders;
- cuts in the school lunch programme; growing use of foodbanks; and increased unemployment and tightened eligibility for benefit assistance and greater difficulty in accessing that assistance.

This list is by no means exhaustive but it is very substantial, in both its breadth and depth, and, as I have indicated, in its implications both for services and for those who work within and those who use those

services. The recent Pakukore conference was subtitled “Poverty, by Design”, reflecting an emphasis that the changes, consequences and directions indicated in the list above are not unfortunate by-products, but rather are the result of deliberate decisions about priorities and choices. While these priorities and choices (and the resultant outcomes) may seem some distance away from the daily demands of social work practice, clearly they are not because of the ways in which they impact on the lives, choices and opportunities (at multiple levels) faced on a daily basis by whānau, communities, social work staff and social service agencies.

Towards a hopeful future

While this started as a regular, standard article, the process of writing it and various interactions during that time led me in a slightly different direction. It is a direction which has led me to focus further on social work and social services and, second, to reflect more closely on the relations between social work practice and the role of the state. I have been lucky enough to have had a series of experiences in recent weeks which have provided both the opportunity for conversation and reflection and engagement with a quite diverse range of activities—the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers Conference; another mahi tahi gathering with the Peter McKenzie project; Hiko mo te Tiriti; the Pakukore : Poverty, by Design Conference—which have provided multiple stimuli, encouragement and challenges. Throughout these (and other related) experiences, I am left with hope, excitement and deep optimism about the prospects which lie ahead for social work practice and for the social services in which we are immersed.

The data on child poverty and the directions reflected in the list set out above make for grim reading and significant distress—both for those directly affected and for those who work with them. While tussling with the issues above (and many other significant ones) and acknowledging the difficult

climate in which we currently practise, I have been introduced to the work of Hilary Cottam (2018), whose book, *Radical Help: How We Can Remake the Relationships Between Us and Revolutionise the Welfare State*, explores many of the issues facing social and related services and challenges many of the assumptions made about delivery and provision of services. In her work, she sets out different examples or case studies around working with users (I dislike this word but don't have a ready alternative) in five areas: family life; youth work; unemployment and employment; and health and ageing.

At the risk of simplifying what is a thoughtful and provoking conversation, in these case studies she describes working with users in ways which make their needs and aspirations the centre of services. That is, users determine what is needed and how it can be most effectively provided. In the discussions about these examples, she strongly challenges the neoliberal and managerial basis on which so much of social service delivery occurs, in both the public and not-for-profit sector. In an argument which is familiar on a daily basis to social workers and those working in the social services, she emphasises the ways in which programmes and services are too often determined by a narrow output framework in which the work of agencies is driven by neoliberal contractual requirements. Hers is not a criticism of social workers and practitioners—quite the contrary. Rather, it is a criticism of the economic, political and ideological forces which shape and structure the work of agencies and the lives of those we work with. Her focus is on establishing and sustaining in depth relationships with users, relationships which closely engage with their dreams and aspirations. Importantly, it is these dreams and aspirations which then form and shape the ongoing social work and the associated and requisite relationships.

Enabling and supporting people to articulate and pursue their dreams, their hopes and plans for their future lives, is surely

fundamental to social work practice and to the work that we do each and every day. It is captured in expressions such as “by Māori, for Māori”, “Pacific led and delivered”, “nothing about us without us” and is extended in Cottam's (2018) work to all of our practice. It is the organisational, ideological and contractual frameworks which make this, at best, difficult and at worst, impossible. Social work practice and social work and social service literature is clear that it is working alongside and with those dreams and aspirations that provide the daily motivation and work satisfaction and enjoyment that form the lifeblood and *raison d'être* for the daily mahi of practitioners. Too often, practitioners find their work with those dreams and aspirations thwarted, as I have noted above, by the limited goals pursued by agencies as those agencies focus on outputs and contractual obligations.

Cottam's challenge to the welfare state services focuses heavily on the failures of the welfare state, as currently enacted, to meet human needs and on the opportunities and possibilities that arise when users are supported and enabled to pursue their dreams and aspirations. However, her work fails to articulate a clear position in relation to what the role of the state might be in facilitating and supporting local responses and local initiatives. She is certainly no supporter of the neoliberal, minimalist state. There is a critical role for the state in terms of such critical considerations as promoting and underwriting equity and protecting and promoting the interests of minority groups. The state has a vital role in both preventing poverty and providing adequate income to ensure that all children have the resources and opportunities they need and are able to pursue their dreams. The state has a crucial role, too, in ensuring that there is an adequate and equitable distribution of resources throughout the country so that individuals, whānau and communities have access to the appropriate services they need, wherever they live. As Cottam (2018) observed, too often the state, through its

various institutions and agencies, acts in ways which control and manage (rather than support and enable) human need and human wellbeing.

In the light and context of the range of issues and difficulties I have outlined above, what is it that leaves me with hope about the future for social work and social services, and more importantly for those whānau and communities with which we work? While, undoubtedly, there is much to be troubled about and much currently that is very disturbing, there is also strong cause to be quite optimistic and hopeful. The recent experiences I have referred to above demonstrated three things to me very clearly.

First, on a more general level, the hikoi and the work in many other settings clearly demonstrate that there is a powerful current that is moving us forward to a much better future in which tangata whenua and tangata tiriti will create and develop an Aotearoa that works for all of us. Second, there is a substantial group of rangatahi leaders (Māori and Pākehā) who are committed to a new and better Aotearoa. This group is both active and emerging on a number of fronts and across a range of dimensions with vision, passion, energy and empathy; they will create, and then sustain, a different and better social and economic order.

Third, and more directly of relevance for social work and the social services, in those experiences of the last few weeks which I have touched on above, there are many instances, stories and experiences demonstrating the qualities and practices referred to in Cottam's work and approach summarised earlier. These include careful and sustained work with people who are homeless, work with gangs, work with rangatahi and their whānau around offending and related issues, a range of projects engaging with rangatahi as they shape their futures, work with whānau in ways that support them to continue

to care for their tamariki and mokopuna and provide them with opportunities to grow and develop, provision of foodbank services in ways that maximise the agency and autonomy of users and engage those users actively in decisions about the services. Social work practitioners often find themselves acting in ways that resist the organisational expectations and demands—the ANZASW conference provided wonderful illustrations of that resistance and of the resilience of practitioners as they worked with users in ways that provide meaningful support as users pursue their dreams, goals and aspirations. Similar themes and stories emerged at the *Pakukore: Poverty, By Design* conference.

As the social work literature and the social work code of ethics make clear, social work carries a dual mandate, namely to engage effectively with individuals, their whānau and communities *and* to work to change to social and economic environment in which those individuals, whānau and communities are located. This fundamental social justice remit is reflected in the *Ngā Tikanga Matatika Code of Ethics* values and ethical principles preamble: "Our Profession is ... dedicated to the achievement of social justice for all", going on to say "we promote socially just policies, legislation and improved social conditions" (Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers, 2019, 8 & 9). The green seeds of hope for change, of a brighter future, of resistance and resilience in the face of difficult circumstances were very strongly reflected in many of the brief examples I referred to above. It is a future full of hope, hope for the building of a better world so that all children have the opportunities and resources they need, hope for the future lives, dreams and possibilities for all those we work with, hope for the opportunities and support to pursue the high quality practice we all aspire to, hope that our collaborative and collective work with users and colleagues will build the socially just world that is embedded in social work.

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