

ARTICLE

# Navigating the Australian Welfare System for Those Relying on Emergency and Community Food Assistance

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More than one in ten Australians live in poverty, with many relying on government provided support and emergency payments. These payments are insufficient to cover basic costs of living, and as a result, many people are forced to engage with emergency and community food assistance. The aim of this article is to explore the experiences of those who, despite being in receipt of an Australian welfare payment and engaged with the welfare system, rely on charitable food assistance for some or all of their weekly food supply. Interviews were conducted with seventy-eight people and were thematically analysed. The main findings of this study are the significant challenges faced by people who are on very low incomes when navigating the government-provided welfare and non-government charity systems and the insufficiency of the welfare system in providing income to meet basic costs of living.

**Keywords:** Welfare payments, social policy, low-income, food aid, charity

## Introduction

Estimates suggest that 13 per cent of Australians live below the poverty line (Davidson *et al.*, 2020). Between 1999 and 2017, the proportion of people in poverty fluctuated between 11.5 per cent and 14.5 per cent (Davidson *et al.*, 2020) as global events, rising living costs, stagnant wage growth, and unemployment and underemployment impacted Australians. To support those experiencing financial hardship, the Australian welfare system has a range of support and emergency payments. However, these payments are often insufficient for recipients to cover their basic costs of living. As a result, many people seek external support to make up the financial shortfall, leading to an increasing number of people accessing emergency and community food assistance. This article explores the experiences of those who, despite being in receipt of an Australian welfare payment and engaged with the welfare system, rely on food aid for some or all of their weekly food supply, highlighting the insufficiency of government support. The main research question for this work is: How do people navigate and experience the welfare system and emergency and community food assistance?

## Background

The Australian welfare system aims to support people who cannot fully support themselves through the provision of income support payments (AIHW, 2021). The system is premised on liberal principles, encouraging recipients into the workforce and off government support

(Herscovitch and Stanton, 2008; Stambe and Marston, 2022); as such, payments are modest with strict requirements (Carney, 2007). While there are a range of payments for different life experiences, all provided through Centrelink – the government welfare agency – the main payments are: support for employment seeking, the JobSeeker payment (previously Newstart Allowance); support for students while they are engaged in education; aged and disability support pension; and a number of family support payments and tax benefits. These payments are set at different rates, with different conditions and requirements attached. In 2021, 26 per cent of Australians aged over sixteen years received some form of government income support (AIHW, 2021).

Poverty is a significant concern for people engaged in the welfare system. This can be partly explained by the rate of welfare support payments for those seeking employment, which, for single people without children, are generally below the poverty line (Davidson *et al.*, 2020). Previous research has documented the inadequacies of the system (Saunders, 2018), including links between welfare support and poverty (Hinton, 2018; Fitts and Soldatic, 2020), and the need to increase these payments has been an ongoing concern for many advocacy groups (Mendes, 2015). Research conducted with employment seeking payment recipients found that only one in five agreed that the support provided was ‘enough to live on’, while just under two-thirds indicated that it should be increased (Morris and Wilson, 2014). Research has highlighted the financial inadequacies of welfare support, with many people reporting that they need to seek additional assistance or forego basic living expenses (McKenzie and McKay, 2017; McKenzie *et al.*, 2019). However, despite the extensive job search requirements for unemployed people and the application of sanctions if they do not meet these obligations (Peterie *et al.*, 2019), Australia continues to have a sizeable unemployed and underemployed population. Designed to provide short-term assistance while the recipient is seeking employment, one in three people in receipt of JobSeeker are now long-term unemployed, with many suggesting that if the payment were increased, more people would be encouraged to exit the workforce and become dependent on a generous welfare payment (Mendes, 2021). However, the simplicity of this argument disregards the challenges, such as the stigma attached to receiving welfare, for those engaged in the welfare system.

Those dependent on income support face many challenges when managing their limited finances. Budgets are prioritised for essential expenses including housing and utilities, while food becomes a discretionary purchase that is either limited or foregone (McKenzie and McKay, 2017; McKenzie *et al.*, 2019). A recent report from the Australian Council of Social Services (ACOSS) echoes this, finding that among welfare recipients, health and wellbeing activities, and heating and cooling are foregone because of a lack of finances, with many respondents skipping meals in order to save money (ACOSS, 2019). This is supported by further research finding that 80 per cent of households who are food insecure are also in receipt of some form of government assistance (Temple *et al.*, 2019). Other work highlights the role of poverty and income on chronic food insecurity (Keating, 2013). The low rates of welfare support, and the increasing number of people who are long-term dependent on government assistance, means that the welfare and charity sectors will continue to play an important role in supporting people who are inadequately supported by the welfare system. This work seeks to explore challenges faced by people living in poverty in Australia and extends previous scholarship by seeking to understand the experiences of people who rely on the welfare sector and emergency and community food assistance.

## Theoretical framework

This article draws on the work of Bourdieu, specifically his conceptualisation of capital. According to Bourdieu and Richardson (1986), types of capital include economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital. Individuals are said to have unequal access to these types of capital, which can impact their situation and the resources they have access to (Bourdieu and Richardson, 1986). The greater

capital one has, the better one's chances of changing their social status, and having success in spheres such as the labour market (Woodward, 2013). However, accruing capital is both challenging and time consuming, with broader societal factors impacting the resources one can accrue and/or has access to. Specific to this article are the concepts of economic and social capital, which can be used to explore the resources that people have access to and/or use which necessitate their engagement with the welfare system. According to Häuberer (2011), these forms of capital can be used to convert one form of capital to another where 'specific goods and services can be gained directly with economic capital, others only with the capital of social relations or of social commitment (social capital)' (p. 35). While financial needs lead to engagement in the welfare system, the inadequacy of the financial value of payment, alongside the known difficulties when navigating the system, mean that some are forced to draw on their social network also to make up the short fall in resources, information, and support.

## Method

This research used qualitative methods to explore the experiences of people who are food insecure living in Victoria, Australia, between June 2018 and January 2019. The method for this research project has been published previously (McKay *et al.*, 2020) and is summarised below. The Deakin University Human Research Ethics Committee granted ethical approval for this research (2018-053).

### *Sample and recruitment*

Participants were recruited through providers of emergency and community food assistance across Victoria, Australia. Thirty-five providers of emergency and community assistance were sent an electronic copy of the plain language statement and flyer describing the study and providing potential participants with the contact details of the research team. Individuals who were interested in participating in the research were directed to contact the research team to arrange an interview. Participants who were interested and contacted the research team were provided with a copy of the plain language statement (PLS) and consent form. Informed written and verbal consent was obtained prior to interviews being conducted. There was no existing relationship between the researchers and the participants prior to the interviews being conducted. Participants were not provided any additional information about the nature of the interview beyond what was included in the advertising information and PLS. Participants were given a \$20 gift card as a token reimbursement for their time. The provision of some form of reimbursement or compensation for the time an individual gives for an interview is consistent with the literature surrounding hard to reach populations and qualitative research in general (Liamputtong, 2007). While there are some who might consider this as coercion (Head, 2009), the research team value participant's time and their contribution and made the decision to provide this reimbursement.

### *Data collection*

Semi-structured interviews were conducted via telephone or in-person at a suitable location. Trained research assistants familiar with the emergency and community food aid settings conducted the interviews. An interview guide consisting of approximately thirty open- and closed-ended questions based on broad areas of investigation including access to and use of emergency and community food assistance, welfare, employment, demographic characteristics, and household food security status was used. The interviews ranged from thirteen to 133 minutes and were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim by a professional transcription service.

### **Data analysis**

Data were analysed thematically following the process described by Miles *et al.* (2014). Analysis for this article was guided by the constant comparative method, where data collection and analysis are conducted simultaneously. After reading and rereading the transcripts, patterns and themes were identified within the data. The research team met regularly during data collection and analysis to discuss the pertinent themes and the properties and details of the themes. Deep reading and immersion in the data allowed for the creation of codes and categories representing participants' experiences when seeking to provide food for their families. The data were organised using NVivo software, where themes were named, evolved, and refined through constant analysis. Data are presented as verbatim quotes; no attempts have been made to change or correct grammar or language used by participants. Gender, age, and welfare payment type are used in this article to provide context to the quotes presented in the results.

### **Results**

Interviews were conducted with seventy-eight individuals who were accessing emergency and community food assistance. Detailed reporting of participant demographics and overarching results of the general experiences can be found elsewhere (McKay *et al.*, 2020). In summary, most participants were female ( $n=57$ , 73.1 per cent), with an average age of fifty-two years (SD 15.9) and had been accessing food aid for four years on average. Around two thirds of participants reported low or very low food security ( $n=54$ , 67.5 per cent). Most participants were in receipt of government welfare ( $n=75$ , 96.2 per cent); twenty-two were in receipt of the disability support pension (\$926.20 per single per fortnight), twenty-three were in receipt of the employment seeking benefit (or equivalent) (\$559.00 per single per fortnight), seventeen were receiving an aged care pension (\$926.20 per single per fortnight), twelve were receiving a parenting payment (\$776.10 per fortnight), and one was receiving a carers pension (\$780.70 per fortnight). While there are other supplementary payments including rental assistance and energy supplements, these payments are below the poverty line for most recipients. Some payment types either required or allowed recipients to be employed for up to fifteen hours each week, with income having the potential to impact payment amount: however, almost two-thirds ( $n=45$ , 61.5 per cent) of participants were unemployed at the time of the interview.

Analysis resulted in two key themes highlighted by participants in discussion of their experiences with the welfare system and emergency and community food assistance. The first was the challenges they experienced with navigating the welfare system, and the second was the impact of low welfare payments on their financial position which necessitated their use of emergency and community food assistance and other forms of support.

### **Challenges in navigating the welfare system**

Participants had serious challenges when trying to navigate the welfare system, including the various processes and policies they needed to understand and adhere to, and the multitude of systems that interact and need to be understood when accessing welfare benefits. Participants described the time-consuming nature of engaging with the welfare system for those living in poverty, the lack of plain language information available, the challenges with communicating with welfare services staff (through Centrelink) and the other requirements they needed to meet.

Overall, all activities related to accessing welfare and the welfare system were time consuming. Changing details, asking questions, and accessing assistance, were all described as activities that can take hours, therefore limiting the amount of time participants could spend elsewhere. What should be simple communication with Centrelink about changes to eligibility and/or payment requirements or other details often involved long waiting times, either in person or on the phone.

It is very hard to get help from Centrelink. It is almost impossible to get in touch with Centrelink if you use the phone, we have to wait at least two hours. Because I tried to get in touch with Centrelink in the last several months, for several reasons, and every time we called Centrelink we had to wait until two hours at least and most of the time they don't even help you out properly. They just try to do the minimum effort and try to get rid of you and move onto the next customer (female, aged seventy-plus, disability pension).

Given the long waiting times, many participants said that they often planned their day around attending an appointment with a welfare agency, or even making a phone call, to ensure they allowed enough time to engage with the system and/or staff.

I try not to ring them because you can't get through and when you do get through they give you to the wrong person then you get cut off anyway. You go into Centrelink and you think, 'Oh god, here we go.' You got to make sure you've allocated yourself at least half the day just to be in Centrelink. Not that it always happens but majority of the time you've got to spend your day in Centrelink because if you've missed a piece of paper or a bit of information you've got to come back and do it all over again (female, fifty-seven years, unemployment allowance).

It is not uncommon for people who are long-term dependent on welfare to move from one payment to another when their circumstances change. Participants described the time-consuming process of making these changes, often related to the significant documentation and evidence required.

It took probably over a year [to switch from the unemployment to disability support payment] and it took many visits to the doctors and psychologists and yeah, it was not an easy switchover at all. So, I would say it was an absolute nightmare, in terms of actually getting the payment through (female, forty-five years, disability pension).

While frustrating, the time-consuming nature was accepted by participants, who were resigned to the fact that this is just how the process is, and that to be able to access financial support, they needed to accept the system as it is.

It's slow but what could you expect? That's Centrelink for you. You just come to accept that. There's no point getting frustrated. I've got too many other worries in the world (female, forty-five years, carers allowance).

While some participants had previously attended in-person appointments at a Centrelink office, finding the face-to-face interaction more efficient, participants reported their communication was increasingly being shifted to phone or online communication at the request of Centrelink. This shift in communication requires recipients to have regular and continued access to such means, which for those living on low incomes is not always possible.

Sometimes when we go to Centrelink, the office, and even in the Centrelink office sometimes the relevant people that looks after your problem, they tell you to call up to Centrelink. If you go down there, they say call Centrelink (female, seventy-plus, disability pension).

Many participants had been in receipt of government assistance for years and had developed strategies to deal with the delays and maintain some control over their time. For example, one participant highlighted a tactic they used to ensure that once they were in communication with

Centrelink staff, if they were somehow disconnected, that they would not have to start the process again.

Centrelink, no they're alright, I get so upset when they leave me on hold forever. One day I was on hold for nearly two hours and then they hung up on me. I got hung up on. It seemed it was my fault, as if I'd hang up after two and a half hours of being on hold. But luckily, I had told the lady, that if I did get cut off could she please call me back, so she did call me back, so that was lovely (female, thirty-four years, disability pension).

Understanding the complex system of entitlements and requirements was a constant challenge for many participants. The Centrelink system comprises the whole Australian welfare system, and as a result, it has multiple intersecting parts – but on many occasions, different divisions do not seem to talk to each other. This feature of the system was described as problematic by participants, with many lamenting the lack of information about eligibility for services and payments. Participants were further frustrated when in their communication with staff, they were not advised about other services or payments for which they may be eligible.

You go in, answer their questions, fill in the paperwork, sign it and then you're gone. They don't volunteer – or in my experience with them they've never volunteered – information that's going to benefit the customer. It's the same with if there are small little funds and things that are accessible for specific reasons, they don't tell you about them (female, fifty-seven years, unemployment allowance).

These complexities within the system place the onus on the individual to ensure that they are able to navigate the welfare system, including having the relevant knowledge about payments and services. This adds to the time-consuming and confusing nature of the process, a situation that is even more problematic for those experiencing times of hardship, such as grief.

They did not even tell me that I have got [am eligible for] grief allowance. So, after two years somebody said that on the bus stand, I was just sitting there and a lady asked, "Why are you looking so sad?" and then I said, "This is my situation." She [said] go to Centrelink and they give bereavement allowance. So, I went there and then Centrelink officers were so rude. "Two years afterwards you are coming here and asking for money. We can't go back and back date it. We can't pay you. You should have come immediately after your tragedy occurred" (female, age unknown, disability pension).

The ambiguity in eligibility for standard and emergency payments resulted in some participants not receiving payments that they should have. Given that participants were also accessing emergency and community food assistance as a result of insufficient finances, the experience for people in this situation is that every dollar of their limited budget is allocated. This lack of information, therefore, could have large financial ramifications. However, even in cases where participants knew what payments they should be applying for, this did not automatically mean they would receive these payments. Payment eligibility and requirements, and in fact the welfare system overall, are designed to deal with common needs, with individual factors often not taken into consideration. For example, one participant described a time when they were ineligible for crisis payments, despite clearly being in a time of crisis.

I had a crisis situation. I had an explosion just after the accident and he was both angry and violent – he used to yell at me and that. Anyhow, because I [was not able to] stay at my house, and he took all my money and took my car and all that, but [I contacted] Centrelink for a crisis payment said I wasn't eligible. And it was really stressful, because I didn't quite

understand – yeah they said I didn't meet the criteria, because I still had a home, I was okay but they didn't take into consideration my car was gone, all my money was gone, my phone etc. And I found that really, it was going on for a whole week they spoke to me. I was crisis because I couldn't afford to buy food, get a voucher, or even get down there, couldn't ring anyone (female, forty-six years, unemployment allowance).

The lack of clear communication had significant ramifications for many participants. Communication issues could result in welfare payments being suspended because of time delays when reporting income or activities, or as in the case below because of a short-term illness.

They've cut my payments to nothing at times. And it hasn't happened recently, but years ago when I was on the Dole, it used to happen all the time. If I missed an appointment or like once I missed a *Work for the Dole* thing because I was really sick and I had a medical appointment and I gave Centrelink my medical certificate saying that I was sick and I couldn't *Work for the Dole* and they still cut my payment to nothing. I was sick, so not only was I sick but I had no money as well. And because they cut my payment to nothing then my electricity was actually being paid out of my Centrelink Newstart, but because it didn't get paid because nothing went into my account, they cut off my power as well. So, I was living in the dark with no food. And the thing is, I gave them my medical certificate (female, forty-five years, disability pension).

The financial situation of these participants necessitated their engagement with the welfare system, and as such they needed to remain in communication with Centrelink staff. Participants who were in receipt of an unemployment allowance were required to undertake a number of activities to receive their payment. Payment requirements included activity seeking employment and demonstrating application for numerous jobs in a set period.

If I didn't have the voluntary work, I'd have to go looking for three jobs a week or four jobs a fortnight or something. And they don't take a lot into account what your age is (male, sixty-three years, unemployment allowance).

Of concern for these participants was the fear that if they did not meet one of these deadlines or requirements, their payments would be stopped. This potential for cessation of payments caused significant stress and anxiety for participants due to their already limited income. This uncertainty with payment receipt could then place their housing security at risk.

Centrelink is not guaranteed, you have to jump all these hoops now to get that payment. If I don't have that Centrelink payment and my job, my house is at risk, my shelter is at risk, and I'm not too close to family and what not, I don't have someone that I could go to and feel okay to say, "Hey, you got a grand to help me save my place?" (female, forty-one years, unemployment allowance).

Participants highlighted many issues in navigating the complex and bureaucratic welfare system. While issues of communication and knowledge could impact the payments, the time-consuming nature of the process and the constant cycling through the process were the main challenges.

### **Managing and accessing resources**

The second main concern for participants was the very low financial value of welfare payments, and the significant impact of this financial insecurity on their lives. Despite all the administrative

and time-consuming activities they engage in when accessing Centrelink and welfare support, they were still forced to rely on emergency and community food assistance and other external supports to survive.

Welfare payment amounts depend on payment types, with some payment types, such as the aged pension, hundreds of dollars more than others, including those classified as job seeking payments. Participants were aware of this discrepancy in payment amount and were conscious of the time when they could move from one payment type to another.

The pension is a bit more money but it's still not a great deal, but it gives you enough then to manage because we've all learnt to manage with less so once you have that little bit more of a buffer, it makes life a bit easier. I talk to my friends who are on the pension, and they certainly are living a bit more comfortability or in a less stressful financial situation (female, sixty-four years, widows' pension [same value as unemployment allowance]).

Those who were not yet eligible for the aged pension were looking forward to becoming eligible for this payment once they had met the age requirements. These participants, who were often in receipt of an unemployment allowance or equivalent, were optimistic that the extra money would be beneficial given they had already been making ends meet on less.

When I get old enough to be on a pension, I'll probably have that little bit more money than I do now. That's why I go to the food bank because the money I don't have to pay out to buy food goes towards the next little problem with the house like the leaky roof (male, sixty-three, unemployment allowance).

However, these discussions were complicated by changes in retirement age. Over the past few decades, the age a person becomes eligible for the pension has gradually increased in recognition that, in general, people are living longer and healthier and may not need to retire as early as previous generations. However, this has put this perceived financial security further out of reach for some participants. Further entrenching this financial insecurity is the lack of real increase in the rate of the welfare payments. Participants discussed this lack of increase in the cash amount with the impact that some people had been living below the poverty line, despite being in receipt of government financial assistance, for years.

Not having a genuine increase in the Newstart allowance for – I believe it's been twenty years since there's been an absolute genuine increase. So, when you do get on Newstart, you're still living below the poverty line (male, fifty-four years, no current financial support).

While the payments have not increased over time, costs of living have. Participants described times when they had difficulty meeting the costs of their basic needs, such as food and utilities due to this widening gap between income and expenses.

You don't get much with Newstart. It's hard to survive – live with it. Yes, really hard to find – because once the rent comes out, I've probably got about \$200 left. And that's not – including food and bills (female, aged forty-eight, unemployment allowance).

Given the low levels of income support, it is unsurprising that people were struggling to cover basic expenses. Participants described times when they were more susceptible to poverty and unmet needs than others, and times when they had no safety net in their payments for unexpected costs.



Generally, it's okay but when there's unexpected expenses like I just had to get a new car battery which was \$200, and then you've got tyres and things break down, or if my daughter ends up in hospital that's when I struggle. But her ending up in hospital can be quite often. So, when we have the more unexpected expenses then yes, it's a struggle (female, thirty-one years, parenting payment).

One participant who was experiencing poor health found that the requirements made on her by Centrelink did not reflect her ability to meet them, nor were the payments sufficient for her medical treatment.

Well I was in the middle of suffering breast cancer and was told that I wasn't sick enough or eligible enough because it wasn't a terminal illness to get a sickness benefit so I was still required to look for work and given a lower rate that I would be given on the sickness benefit and had to pay for the additional medications, the treatments that I needed that weren't covered by the hospital, the travelling to-and-fro . . . I had to move back in with my parents at that time because I couldn't afford to pay rent and do everything I needed to do, so I had to move back in, at 36, with my parents, which is a bit embarrassing to be honest (female, thirty-eight years, parenting payment).

Despite the low income, participants who were in receipt of government welfare for an extended period were master budgeters. Many noted that they prioritise their money on housing at the expense of other costs, including any activity that might come with a cost and preventative health care.

I get \$760 one week and then the following week I get \$300 from the Family Tax Benefit. The week after the Family Tax Benefit I have nothing left, \$270 of that goes on rent, so I have to budget my \$760 to pay all the bills, put the petrol in the car, feed us all, pay the other week's rent and any other bills that pop up. So, it's not a lot of money to live on . . . there's no extra money (female, thirty-eight years, parenting payment).

Centrelink allows recipients the option to have their rent and utility bills paid before they receive the balance of their benefit, people who have a low income are also able to enter a payment management plan with the utility company. As a result, food was often the main discretionary item that could be reduced when money was tight. At times when other expenses needed to be paid, all participants described accessing emergency and community food assistance to mitigate the low payment amount.

Only that they should notify the government and tell them to give me more – give people more pensions that they don't have to ask for food. Because at the end of the day, it all goes around in a circle anyway, because the government – if you get more pension then you're going to spend it on food or whatever you're spending on it, and then it still goes back – the governments still get it back by your expenditure, don't they? (male, sixty-two years, disability pension).

The low welfare payments make it hard to make ends meet and cover all the participants' expenses. Ultimately, for all participants, there was just not enough money to cover their expenses.

When I applied to Centrelink I ask where places which can help people with low income. Was not enough money. And they give me this list in Geelong of all the [food aid] places. There was before actually much more, double more places. Now it's got worse and worse every year. Few places cut and don't open anymore for the community meal like before.

So, two/three years ago three places cut, not work anymore, finish (female, fifty-six years, unemployment assistance).

The lack of financial support through welfare payments meant these participants needed to look elsewhere for assistance, such as emergency and community food assistance, while hoping that a future payment change may slightly ease the financial stress they were experiencing.

## Discussion

This article has explored the impact of the formal government welfare system for people who rely on informal measures such as emergency and community food assistance for all or some of their food needs. Participants in this study were all low income, with most in receipt of some form of government payment. The low financial value of these welfare payments resulted in many participants experiencing poverty and financial insecurity, and the resulting food insecurity meant they were dependent on charity for their food needs. Their financial insecurity left participants with few options but to continue with the cycle of dependence on both welfare and charity and were forced to dedicate a significant portion of their time and energy to the necessities of living in poverty. This work has three key findings that will be discussed here. The first is that while the Australian welfare system was designed for short-term use, this is no longer the experience of many people who are engaged with it – the impact of this is that other services, including the charity sector, have had to step in to make up for gaps left by government provision. The second finding is that engagement with the welfare system requires autonomy and resilience: however, the way the system operates often results in diminished autonomy and powerlessness. Finally, there are time costs when living in poverty, with participants spending time waiting for both the state and the charity sector to fulfil their needs.

In the Australian system, welfare payments for those seeking employment are designed for short-term use, set at a very low rate so as to encourage the individual back into the workforce and into self-reliance. Yet, research suggests that a growing portion of welfare recipients are long-term unemployed or welfare dependent, leading to a perpetuating cycle of dependence (AIHW, 2021). Participants in this current study experienced helplessness, and while expressing a genuine desire to discontinue their position of dependence, the financial (and often housing and health) insecurity prevent them from gaining financial independence. This is an example, according to Bourdieu's theory of capital, of how individuals are unable to improve their situation or gain economic capital or resources (Bourdieu and Richardson, 1986). The low welfare payments, and the other, often meaningless activities that were associated with welfare dependence, meant that participants struggled to seek other income generating options, despite this being a requirement of their entitlement. This dependence on the welfare system, and the low payment amounts, means that participants were also dependent on food charity. As others have highlighted, while food charity may alleviate short-term hunger and immediate need (Bazerghi *et al.*, 2016; Lambie-Mumford, 2017), they are not designed to solve the underlying drivers of poverty and social injustice (Martin, 2021). Their expansion in Australia is likely masking state accountability and responsibility, enabling the state, as Riches (2002) states, to 'look the other way' (p. 661). The long-term implications of this are that the state will likely continue to redistribute its role in realising the right to food to the charity sector (Lambie-Mumford, 2017).

Engagement with the welfare system comes with assumed knowledge and the ability to access and interpret the resources provided, in addition to having the time to be able to apply these. Participants in this study struggled with all of these issues. They struggled with the knowledge of the system and the ability to navigate its many intricacies. They struggled with the ability to access the information resources, particularly those that were not written in easy to understand English or readily volunteered. Finally, they struggled with the time to simply meet the requirements of the system. By drawing on Bourdieu's theory of capital, specifically economic and social capital (Bourdieu, 1984), these

challenges can be considered as limiting access to a resource that impacts health (Pinxten and Lievens, 2014). This highlights the interplay between the economic, social, and cultural capital when selecting or adopting the resources that are needed for specific health-relevant lifestyles (Abel, 2008). The Australian welfare system assumes that people, like the participants in this study, have the ability and the resources to navigate the system and know precisely which payments and support they are eligible. It also assumes that they have the time to do this, discounting the other obligations or life events, such as care giving, domestic violence, poor health, or grief. Further, continued engagement in the welfare system requires participants to have the means, including the financial resources for the minimum level of engagement. These now include phone and internet access, as face-to-face assistance is increasingly discouraged. However, given that participants in this study were also relying on food charity due to their lack of finances, it is likely that they will be unable to source additional resources to maintain this engagement.

Finally, poverty and welfare dependence are time consuming. Research from the US has found that people experiencing poverty are often so preoccupied with the challenges of daily living that they have less 'bandwidth' with which to make good choices (Schofield and Venkataramani, 2021). Other research has explored the experiences of waiting and queueing by people experiencing poverty, in particular in their interactions with the state (Carswell *et al.*, 2018). There is a large amount of scholarship that draws on these issues of power and time (Ozoliņa-Fitzgerald, 2016; Ibañez Tirado, 2019). For example Auyero (2011), explored the experiences of people waiting in welfare offices in Argentina, finding the implicit expectation that people who are in receipt of state welfare act in supplicant and compliant ways. While Carswell *et al.* (2018) explored the practices and meaning of waiting for the poor and lower-class in India, similarly finding that the waiting reinforces the power and control of the state. This is consistent with the work of Bourdieu (2000), who suggests that the state makes people wait as a way to demonstrate power, and as a way to delay 'without destroying hope' (p. 227), a notion that is clear in the descriptions of Centrelink processes provided by participants here. The way that many welfare agencies operate, including Centrelink, is to minimise interaction and time used in assessing applications in order to be efficient (Darcy and Gwyther, 2010). This puts Centrelink staff in the position of what Lipsky (2010) calls 'street level bureaucrats' who make often rapid decisions about entitlements and livelihoods. Bureaucrats are said to make decisions based on their own operational requirements, but also based on less formal reasons including seeking to avoid difficult or time-consuming clients, pushing ballooning wait time back on recipients of the service (O'Sullivan *et al.*, 2021). Similar work exploring the role of Centrelink workers in the welfare system has found that an important part of their job and the system as a whole is moving individuals to a lesser entitlement that further entrenches disadvantage and poverty (O'Sullivan *et al.*, 2019).

The experience of waiting has been explored in other work that has examined the experiences of people who use food charity, finding that people often wait for long periods simply to access the services, either in a physical queue, or on a waiting list for service (McKay *et al.*, 2020; Lindberg *et al.*, 2022). An important finding from this study is the trap that these participants are in, where they are waiting, queueing, and providing documents and other administrative proof, for both the state and the charity sector. Supporting the work of Lipsky (2010), for many participants in this study, these interactions with the state and the charity sector were a full-time job, or at least required them to set aside significant amounts of time due to the uncertainty about how long an appointment would take. The implications of the time and resources that are required for people to engage with the welfare system is that they may become disengaged with the system and move further to the edges of society.

## Limitations

This article has highlighted the experiences of people accessing and relying on both the welfare system and on emergency and community food assistance. While there are clear findings, there

are limitations that need to be taken into consideration. Participants were self-selecting, and only recruited from Victorian food programmes – as a result, there may be perspective from other states and services that have not been included here. We did not explore the other services explicitly that people rely on for, and as such, there may be supports in addition to those described here that are supporting these participants. While the sample was large for a qualitative study, the qualitative approach means that the analysis has been informed by the experience and knowledge of the research team. Finally, it is important to note that these interviews were conducted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and there is no doubt that the welfare and charity sectors have been impacted by the pandemic with the precarious situation of many of the participants being further compounded. Despite these limitations, this research provides some important considerations into the experiences of people who are reliant on both emergency and community food assistance and state provided welfare.

## Conclusion

Despite many participants in this study experiencing long-term need, they cycle through a bureaucratic process that was designed to provide short-term assistance. The low financial amounts provided to recipients mean many people are required to seek support outside the government-provided welfare sector in order to make ends meet. As a result, emergency and community food assistance is now inextricably linked with the welfare system in Australia, creating a system where the formal welfare system is reliant on the informal charity system to provide support for those in need.

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