



Building Safe and Sustainable Communities: Families are Central

*Speech to the Australian Institute of Family Studies
19 August 2014*

I'm delighted to be here today to speak to the Australian Institute of Family Studies on the topic of "Building Safe and Sustainable Communities: Families are central". As the title of this address indicates, I believe we cannot have safe and sustainable communities if we don't have strong and functioning families.

I want to start by telling you about some families that are not strong or functioning. These families are real so I have removed any identifying details and names have also been changed.

TINA is 28 and a single mum with 2 children. Tina's own mother was a teenage parent, a heavy drinker and had a number of abusive relationships. Tina started getting into trouble after starting high school. Tina would run away from home for a couple of weeks at a time and barely attended school. Tina spent time in foster care from age 13 and stayed with different friends and family over the next few years. Tina moved in with her first boyfriend, John, when Tina was 16 and they had their first child when Tina was 22. Tina smoked and used drugs during the pregnancy. Tina and John's relationship was mutually abusive and on one occasion Tina stabbed John. Tina continued to see John and became pregnant again. Family services have threatened to remove her children.

KYLIE AND JAKE have 5 children aged between 18 and 1. The first was born when Kylie was 19 and the second followed shortly after. Kylie herself was in foster care from the age of 5 and all Kylie's siblings were removed from their parents. Jake is a drug user. Kylie met Jake in a youth training scheme, moved in with him and got pregnant. Family services monitored the family for a year after the baby was born. All Kylie and Jake's children have subsequently been subject to child protection plans and are at risk of being taken into care. The family have been in debt and behind in rent. Some of the children have been in trouble with the law and exhibited anti-social behaviour in the neighbourhood.

About NyunggaBlack

NyunggaBlack provides strategic business advice drawing on broad networks and expertise to help clients solve problems and grow their businesses in specific sectors. Our consulting services focus on Native Title, Employment and Mining and Energy and also on how clients can ensure Reconciliation Action Plans deliver real outcomes as well as business growth.

NyunggaBlack also works in partnership with key clients to deliver managed service business opportunities for commercial and economic opportunities in Aboriginal communities and for Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander people.

KIRSTY has four children; the first born when she was 18. Kirsty's partner Steve is the father of the 3 youngest children. Steve also has 3 older children from a previous relationship who sometimes live with Kirsty and have caused problems for the family. Steve had a lengthy prison sentence for burglary and has spent time in prison off and on throughout their relationship.

The children have been subject to child protection plans for neglect and emotional harm. Family services have been particularly concerned about poor school attendance and the state of the home and have been on the verge of putting the children into care twice.

Kirsty also served time in prison during which the children were cared for by their grandmother. Kirsty's own mother was a single mother who already had 10 grandchildren by aged 51.

JENNY was in foster care from the age of 3 along with her siblings. Jenny's father was an alcoholic.

Jenny had her first child at aged 17 and went on to have several more with the same father. Jenny's last 3 children are to 3 different fathers. A number of Jenny's children have spent time in care. Jenny is now a 42 year old single mum and already has 4 grandchildren.

Jenny's children have caused chaos at home and at school, and in the local area. Jenny is a heavy drinker and has regularly gone off drinking, leaving the children at home.

Some of Jenny's children have become aggressive, intimidating neighbours and not going to school. Jenny's four primary school children attend school only occasionally. Jenny's 2 eldest sons have been involved with crime.

Jenny's home is in a bad state – the back garden is strewn with rubbish, there are no beds for the children.

If we want to create safe and sustainable communities we need strong and functioning families. And that means we need all parents to be meeting their responsibilities.

What we are seeing here are examples of chronic and inter-generational family breakdown enabled by welfare dependence. These families are unable to function properly in normal society. They all have access to plenty of services and programs designed to help them. But the problems have persisted.

There are several common threads to these stories and the many others like them:

- The problems are inter-generational. The families are repeating the behaviours and patterns they grew up with
- The parents all have large numbers of children, more than the average in the general population. The parents have poor to non-existent parenting skills. Then on top of that they have large families which would place extra stress even on the most competent parents.

- Many of the parents are having children as teenagers - while they are still children themselves. This pattern is often repeated over generations.
- The make-up of the family units are constantly shifting. There are complex and chaotic networks of half siblings and step-siblings, absent biological fathers; new boyfriends, children in and out of foster care, grandparents raising children.
- School attendance is irregular or non-existent.
- The people in these families struggle to form effective and positive relationships, with each other, with their partners and with others in the community.
- There are higher instances of abuse, institutional care, violence, child behavioural difficulties, mental health problems, drugs and alcohol abuse and anti-social behaviour.

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These families are not Indigenous. They are not even Australian. They are British families. The case studies come from a report by Louise Casey CB, a senior British government official. Her report "[Listening to Troubled Families](#)" was published in 2012.

Casey is the Director General of the British government's Troubled Families Programme which aims to turn around troubled families through intensive case management of the family as a whole across multiple areas of dysfunction.

In her report, Casey concludes that the traditional approach of services reaching individuals at or after the crisis point or after and trying to fix single issues in these families is likely to fail. Instead they look at the family as a whole.

The Troubled Families Programme began with 120,000 "troubled families". In 2013 the government announced its intention to add another 400,000 families.

Family is at the core of strong, safe and sustainable communities. If we can get families on track then the community will follow.

At the end of her Report Casey observes:

"...what can be established, and perhaps the starkest message to take from these interviews, is the extent to which the problems of these families are linked and reinforcing. They accumulate across the life course, passed on from parents to their children across generations of the same family. ...

And at the most fundamental level is an absence of basic family functioning which must be restored (or created for the first time) if these families are to really change."

Family is at the centre of society and community. If families don't function as they should, then society breaks down.

Some people will tell you that it is the problems in society that cause the problems in the family. I don't agree. Sure, once you have a broken society the problems in society and in families reinforce each other. But family is at the core of strong, safe and sustainable communities. If we can get families on track then the community will follow.

For some time now it has been unfashionable in progressive circles to talk about the importance of the family and "family values". At the other end of the spectrum, the conservative view can get too caught up in the moral dimension – whether parents are single, or divorced or gay.

Both of these approaches are unhelpful.

To me it doesn't matter if the family unit is structured like the Cleavers or the Waltons or the Brady Bunch or the Huxtables or the families from Modern Family or the Addams family. A good family is one where the parents do their job. All of those TV shows depict good families.

If we want to create safe and sustainable communities we need strong and functioning families. And that means we need all parents to be meeting their responsibilities. So let's explore for a moment the responsibilities of a parent.

Parents must ensure their children are fed.

Parent must ensure their children have good hygiene – that they brush their teeth and bathe. They need to take their children to a doctor or hospital when they are sick.

Parents need to ensure their children have clothing and shelter and go to bed at night.

Parents need to send their kids to school every day.

Parents also need to keep their kids safe – this means knowing where they are and who they are with and ensuring they are safe at home.

And parents need to seek help if they are struggling to do any of these things for whatever reason. There is plenty of help available.

These are the basic, minimum responsibilities of parenting. It doesn't matter how much parents love their children nor how much affection they show them. If parents don't perform these minimum responsibilities then they are neglecting and abusing their children.

Parents also need to take responsibility for themselves and their family unit. This means having a job. If they are unemployed then it means doing what is necessary and seek whatever help they need to get into the workforce.

Finally parents need to teach their children values. Different parents will have different values in some respects. That's fine. But they should raise their children to hold a set of values. If parents want to pass on their culture or religion or language to their children then that is their responsibility too.

What I have just said is common sense. But there is a reluctance for people to say this in public. We have become hostage to the bleeding-heart mentality that demanding parents perform their basic responsibilities is blaming and shaming the unfortunate; we should instead feel sorry for them.

Well, who *I* feel sorry for are the children.

We have seen too often what happens when we acquiesce while parents fail to meet their responsibilities, when we give parents too many chances or we fail to intervene.

Here are just a few examples from our own communities.

Kiesha Weippeart was a 6 year old Aboriginal girl from Western Sydney, reported missing in 2010 and later found to have been killed by her mother, Kristi Abrahams. Kiesha's stepfather is also in jail in connection with Kiesha's murder.

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The judge described Kiesha as "an inevitable product of entrenched intergenerational failures".

Kristi Abrahams had a terrible childhood. Kristi's father (Kiesha's grandfather) was violent, an alcohol abuser and had served prison time. Kristi's mother (Kiesha's grandmother) died when Kristi was 10 and Kristi was placed in an Aboriginal group home, rather than a non-Aboriginal foster family. Kiesha's father, Chris Weippeart, had been a drug user. He died in 2012.

In her 6 years of life Keisha was in and out of foster care and had been subjected to years of physical abuse by her mother.

Another Aboriginal child, 2 year old Dean Shillingworth, was murdered by his mother. His body found in a suitcase in a duck pond in Sydney's south-west in 2007. Dean was also known to family services and had been at times in the care of his paternal grandmother.

Dean's mother, Rachel Pfitzner (who is not Aboriginal), had 3 children with 3 different fathers and had recently moved into a nearby public housing estate. Rachel had a lengthy criminal record for offences including assault and shoplifting. At the time of Dean's murder the boy's father, Paul Shillingworth, was in prison. Family members of Rachel Pfitzner have said that she was terrified for her safety if Paul was released.

In 2007 a 7 year old girl – known by the alias "Ebony" – died in her home after her parents starved her to death. The family had been known to DoCS for many years and the case reflects abject failure by multiple agencies. There had been at least 17 separate reports lodged with DoCS going as far back as 1993.

It was clear that Ebony and her siblings were at risk and that the parents were completely dysfunctional. A [feature article](#) on the family by Anne Manne in 2010 revealed just how dysfunctional they were. It also revealed the entrenched and inter-generational problems that preceded this tragedy.

Ebony's parents married when the mother was just 18 and the father was 29. The mother had come from a violent home. The father already had a decade long addiction to Valium and had never had a job.

Ebony's mother abused alcohol and prescription drugs. The father was a problem gambler and drug addict. At the time of Ebony's death the father was taking 25 Valium tablets per day.

The relationship between the parents was characterised by abuse and violence and the mother attempted suicide several times over the years. In 2002 DoCS unsuccessfully asked the Children's Court to remove all four children from the family. Only the youngest child was removed.

By 2007 Ebony's sisters had missed 2½ years of school. Ebony was autistic and never attended school, despite special education being offered.

The family had been long term public housing tenants and lived in filth. The house they previously lived in before Ebony's death was reportedly vacated with rooms knee deep in rubbish. DoCS received an anonymous call to its helpline 3 months before Ebony's death that the house smelt of urine and faeces and that Ebony's bedroom was boarded up. But this report was classified as "information only" because the DoCs file had previous reports of dishevelment in the home.

Neighbours from the family's previous home talked about people coming and going from the house at odd hours and noise late into the night with the kids up late.

In the court case, the central theme of both parents' defence was that they weren't responsible. The mother was not responsible because she was married to a controlling, possessive man who was violent and she did what he told her to do. The father was not responsible because he was wiped out on drugs and it was his wife's job to look after Ebony and his job to care for the older children.

If neither of the parents are responsible then who is? What kind of society do we live in where both parents believe they are not responsible?

The NSW Ombudsman's report on Ebony's case outlined the utter failure of government agencies in dealing with this family for nearly 15 years.

The Ombudsman was particularly critical of the conciliatory approach to the parents failing to get the children to attend school and said they should have been prosecuted.

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These 3 cases illustrate warped attitudes to parental responsibility and the role of welfare in modern society.

None of these parents were performing their minimum responsibilities as parents. And none gave any indication that they ever could or would meet those responsibilities. Yet the children were left in their care.

What's more, government supported these families with welfare payments, public housing, free schooling and free medical and social care.

Welfare that was frequently spent on drugs, alcohol and gambling. Housing which provided the backdrop for the abuse and ultimate death of 3 young children and which at least one family maintained in utter filth. Schooling that the children regularly did not attend. Free medical and social care that was frequently not accessed.

The welfare system provided the means for these parents to neglect their children. And a failure to enforce the law meant that the parents were never held accountable. The parents were never required to send their kids to school even though that was the law. The parents were never required to look for a job, even though that is a condition of unemployment benefits.

Children have no means to take care of themselves. They come into the world wholly reliant on their parents. There are no excuses for not performing your basic responsibilities as a parent. That should be the fundamental starting point.

Too often, however, the starting point seems to be the excuses, the reasons why families can't get their act together rather than how we can work with them to ensure they do.

Poverty is commonly brought up as an excuse. This is a fallacy. Poverty does not make you helpless and it does not make you anti-social or a criminal. I grew up in poverty and as a child everyone I knew lived in poverty or not far above it. My parents raised 11 children in poverty and they fulfilled all their parenting responsibilities. And they were not unique.

There are billions of people in the world living in poverty and still doing their job as parents. When I went to India I saw children coming out of slums cleaned and dressed and heading off to school.

It's not about whether parents are poor or whether they are rich. It's about whether parents take responsibility.

Poverty did not kill Ebony, Dean or Kiesha. Their parents killed them. Government gave the parents financial and other support while they neglected their children and government agencies failed to prevent the children's deaths when they could have.

The patterns that existed in the families of Ebony, Dean and Kiesha are being repeated all over Australia today.

I recently had a conversation with a senior police official in one of the states. I won't name which state but I believe these patterns exist all over Australia.

The police and family services in this state have done extensive mapping of families in trouble. Some had 5 generations of dysfunction. All family members were known to police or family services as either victims or perpetrators or both of child abuse. There were extensive criminal histories, family violence and murder, mental health issues, drug and alcohol abuse, juvenile and adult criminal records and detention and so on.

The saddest part was that the 6th generation they were looking at – aged 0 to 5 – were already known to social services and police.

A handful of families in this state take up most of the police and social services resources.

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There are many reasons parents don't take responsibility. In the Australian and British case studies I've highlighted most of the parents didn't even understand what their responsibilities were. Their own parents had neglected them and most of the adults they've ever known were role models for irresponsibility. Some became parents while they were still children themselves.

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However, reasons are not excuses. I am well aware these troubled families need intervention and help to turn their lives around. But that help should not come in the form of payments and services that are abused, schooling and professional care that is treated as optional or being allowed to live on a pension without ever having a job.

The kind of help they need starts with getting the parents into work, using the model that we know works - one which focuses on the whole person and works on all the barriers to employment - like lack of education, illiteracy, addictions, health, accommodation issues, legal problems and so on - tapping into the resources and service providers who know best how to deal with each of those barriers. These families need case managed and "end-to-end" intervention and assistance. And that assistance should not be optional.

Australia has to confront the modern welfare state - where welfare has gone from being temporary or exceptional to being a long term way of life for many people. Long term welfare dependency reinforces helplessness and failure to take responsibility.

As I have said before, welfare is the worst kind of poverty. It is state-sponsored poverty. It's poverty with nothing to keep people busy. It's poverty with no motivation. It's poverty where a person's natural instincts to survive and aspire are dampened. It's poverty where people begin to think there is no other option.

Long term welfare dependency sucks the life out of people.

Many Indigenous communities are examples of what happens when welfare is accepted as a long term way of life. These communities are in poverty because of well-meaning but failed government policies centred around welfare. And the unintended results of these policies are whole communities totally reliant on government assistance, inter-generational welfare dependence and chronic long-term unemployment.

The impact of this goes far beyond people's immediate living conditions. People in these communities on average have significantly poorer health, higher suicide rates and are more likely to be victims of violence or sexual abuse. Many are illiterate and innumerate and school attendance can be low to non-existent.

But this is not just an Indigenous issue. It's a growing problem in non-Indigenous Australia too. There are examples just like those British case studies all over Australia, including its major cities.

If you speak to job placement companies and educators in these areas they will tell you about families where children think it's normal to finish school and go on welfare, where children think going to school is pointless because the government will give them an income anyway.

The welfare system provided the means for these parents to neglect their children. And a failure to enforce the law meant that the parents were never held accountable. The parents were never required to send their kids to school even though that was the law. The parents were never required to look for a job, even though that is a condition of unemployment benefits.

Any talk about welfare reform or moving people off welfare usually triggers shrieks and howls from the bleeding-heart set. There are accusations of unfairness and claims of hurting the most vulnerable.

Bill Shorten recently talked about this government's "attack on welfare" and said it "distorts the domestic destiny of hundreds of thousands of Australian families".

Now imagine we replace the word "welfare" with the word "poverty". What if we talked about a government engaged in "poverty reform" or wanting to "move people out of poverty".

Would we describe this as unfair or as hurting the most vulnerable? Would we describe the government as mounting an "attack on poverty" or as "distorting the domestic destiny of Australian families"?

I'm also tired of hearing people oppose welfare reform and at the same time say we need to treat welfare-recipients with dignity. Of course we do. Allowing people to languish on welfare and dismissing them as being unable to work is not treating them with dignity. I support getting people off welfare because I want to see people lifted out of poverty. What can be more dignifying than that?

Welfare was created to help people who've fallen on hard times to get back on their feet. Not to keep people in hard times.

If you lose your job welfare is supposed to sustain you until you get a new job. Getting a new job is the important part - yet it is so often the part that is ignored.

If you become disabled, welfare is supposed to sustain you until you can resume a functioning life which includes working. I find it bizarre that we have laws against disability discrimination on the one hand but accept people living long term on a disability pension on the other. Let's stop disability discrimination by helping people get off the disability pension and into a job.

People with disabilities can work. In fact, they make great employees. People with disabilities have lower levels of absenteeism and use less sick leave, have low employee turnover, high loyalty and retention and comparable productivity to able-bodied employees.

As a young man I worked in the equivalent of Centrelink. One of my colleagues was a quadriplegic. A man came in with an appointment and was trying to explain why he couldn't be expected to look for a job because he had a bad back. His case worker pointed over to our colleague in his wheelchair and said "See that man? He has a bad back."

There will always be exceptions in the case of disability pensions where people need ongoing and long term assistance. But we should not let the exceptions dictate the rule. Deal with the exceptions as exceptions.

Welfare was created to help people who've fallen on hard times to get back on their feet. Not to keep people in hard times.

I would like to see government agencies go one by one through every recipient of unemployment and disability payments and figure out how to get that person into a job.

Welfare reform in Australia is essential. And the best welfare reform is to get people off welfare and into work.

Most politicians know this. Some choose to ignore it because it suits them to maintain partisan opposition to whatever the government is suggesting. Some seem to be in a state of denial because the concept of getting people off welfare offends their long held ideologies about the welfare state, socialism and the origins of poverty.

This is irresponsible and cowardly.

Welfare reform also needs to be across the board – not just for Indigenous people or Indigenous communities. Andrew Forrest's recommendation regarding his idea of the healthy welfare card proposes it apply to Indigenous and non-Indigenous people alike. Whether people agree with cashless welfare or not, it is the right approach to apply reforms to everyone. We should not single out Indigenous people in welfare and income management.

Family dysfunction is an intergenerational problem. We as a society owe it to the next generation of these families to turn them around so that we can have safe, sustainable and productive communities. And safe, healthy and happy children.

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Highly respected and influential businessman, political strategist and advocate for empowering Australia's First People to build a sustained economy and to create business opportunities, Warren's life and career have been shaped by a personal commitment to the Australian and Australia's First Peoples' communities. More than 26 years' experience working in the public, private and community sectors, Nyunggai Warren Mundine is a member of the ynggirr and Yuin peoples of NSW.



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