

Western Sydney  
Anti-Poverty Network

Community Survey

September 2021

## Table of Contents

<b>Acknowledgments</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>4</b>
Demographics	4
Disability	4
Mental Health	4
Financial Hardship	4
Problems with Job Services Australia / Disability Employment Services	5
Problems with Government Departments	5
<b>Background and Objectives</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Survey Methodology</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Survey Results</b>	<b>8</b>
Demographics	8
Disability	9
Mental health	11
Financial hardship	11
Problems with Job Services Australia/Disability Employment Services	15
Problems with Government Departments	15
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>Appendices</b>	<b>21</b>
Appendix A: Survey form	21

## Acknowledgments

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.” - Margaret Mead

There are so many people who have supported this idea that I had to start Western Sydney Anti-Poverty Network that I can't thank them all, however some people have done more than I could ever expect of them.

Without Anne O'Grady, a dear friend and my partner in crime, this project would not have been possible. She has given freely of her skills, time and energy to complete this project, and it wouldn't be possible without her. She has been with me every step of the way, and will never know how grateful I am.

Hayden Patterson is my friend and a passionate advocate for many years in the rights of people on social security. His enthusiasm for Western Sydney Anti-Poverty Network, and his confidence in me to run it, has been very important.

Pas Forgione, a friend who inspires me through his ongoing commitment to raising Newstart/Jobseeker, came up with the idea to do this survey. He has changed my life for the better.

I also want to acknowledge the people who shared the survey, thank you for helping us get the word out.

Last, and most importantly, I want to acknowledge everyone who completed the survey. We asked for very personal information on topics that are hard to talk about, and I am honoured that you trusted us. My personal commitment to you is that I will do my very best to make sure that the voices of Western Sydney are heard.

Yours sincerely

Kristy Mounsey

Founder of Western Sydney Anti-Poverty Network

[westernsydneyantipoverty@gmail.com](mailto:westernsydneyantipoverty@gmail.com)

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/wsapn/>

# Executive Summary

Our survey's results indicate that social security recipients would experience improved outcomes if all social security payments were above the poverty line.

It also indicates that there is a need for a complete overhaul to both individual and systemic advocacy for dealing with Job Services Australia (JSA), mental health care providers, Disability Employment Service (DES), and government departments including the National Disability Insurance Agency, Centrelink, and public housing providers.

## Demographics

- There were 106 unique respondents who live in Greater Western Sydney, with some data missing for 14 of those respondents.
- 74% of respondents were on a Centrelink payment (social security).
- 29% of respondents said they lost work due to Covid-19.

## Disability

- 52% of respondents identified as having one or more disabilities, and 9% were unsure if they had a disability.
- 22% of all respondents reported being on Disability Support Pensions, and 10% of respondents were on Carers's Allowance.
- Only 5% of all respondents reported being on the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). 24% of respondents specified they had trouble accessing NDIS. The number one reason given for this was the process was overwhelming.
- 14% of respondents who specified they had trouble accessing the NDIS found the cost of getting specialist reports was a barrier to participation in the scheme.

## Mental Health

- While only 25% of respondents specified a mental health condition as their disability, 75% responded "yes" and/or "ongoing" regarding their having a mental health journey.
- Of those who had a mental health journey, 32% of respondents identified as having difficulty accessing mental health services in the last 12 months.
- The two most common reasons given for difficulty accessing mental health services were affordability (76%) and wait times (47%).

## Financial Hardship

- 29% of respondents specified they lost work due to Covid-19.
- 58% of respondents reported having to rely on financial support from family and/or friends in the last 12 months.

- 39% of respondents skipped at least one meal in the last fortnight because they didn't have enough money. The median number of meals missed, for those who missed meals, was six (IQR 3.9 to 11.8).

### Problems with Job Services Australia / Disability Employment Services

- 17% of respondents reported having a significant issue with a Job Network Provider or a Disability Employment Service in the last 12 months.
- 17% reported knowing someone who had a significant issue with a Job Network Provider or a Disability Employment Service.

### Problems with Government Departments

- 38% responded yes and/or ongoing to the question: "Have you had issues with a government agency within the past 12 months?"
  - Of those who specified a government agency, 44% wrote "Centrelink".

## Background and Objectives

Western Sydney Anti-Poverty Network is a volunteer organisation dedicated to systemic advocacy. It started with a Facebook group in 2020. This survey is the first major project.

The main objective of this survey was to listen to the people of Western Sydney, in particular to the lived experience of residents experiencing poverty, so we can better advocate on their behalf.

The estimated Western Sydney resident population for 2020 was 2,591,234 (Western Sydney University).

In September 2021, 117,669 people, or 6.9% of people aged 15-64 in Greater Western Sydney, qualified for Jobseeker or Youth Allowance (Western Sydney University).

“In Australia, the poverty line (measured as 50% median income) is \$457/week for a single adult. The Australian welfare system is not designed to match the poverty line, but in fact sits significantly below it. For instance:

- Youth Allowance is \$168/Week below the poverty line
- JobSeeker is \$117/Week below the poverty line
- Age Pension is \$10/Week below the poverty line

“As a result, more than 3.24 million Australians live below the poverty line, including 774,000 children under the age of 15. This is one in eight adults, and one in six children who are struggling to survive.” (Christians Against Poverty)

## Survey Methodology

The survey was self-administered by people who found it on social media during the month of September 2021. It was shared in the Western Sydney Anti-Poverty Network Facebook group and in several other places on Facebook. We boosted a Facebook post for four days, targeting people who live in Greater Western Sydney. We asked people involved in activism on Twitter to share the survey. We also emailed it to around 150 community organisations as well as 25 state and federal politicians.

Due to the effects of Covid-19, the survey was only able to be completed online. In future surveys, we hope to be able to reach across the digital divide by handing out paper surveys to people outside Centrelink offices. It must be remembered that people dealing with poverty may not have access to the internet. People may have also faced literacy and language barriers in completing the survey.

The survey collected both quantitative and qualitative data about people's living conditions in Western Sydney. Most of the people who responded to the survey were in receipt of a social security benefit, as was expected. We don't know how many people chose not to complete the survey because they don't identify as living in poverty, even though they are struggling financially.

Of the 122 surveys collected, three were duplicates, and 11 lived outside the Western Sydney area, leaving 106. Unfortunately some of the data for 24 surveys was lost due to human error. We reached out to these people to request they redo the survey, and 10 people did so, leaving us with 14 incomplete surveys. These surveys have been included in the analysis where possible, because the three compulsory questions were completed and all other data was optional. Otherwise the 92 complete surveys have been used in the analysis.

If future surveys are undertaken by Western Sydney Anti-Poverty Network, more demographic questions, and questions regarding housing, will be asked.

# Survey Results

## Demographics

**Table 1 “Age”**

<b>Ages</b>		
16-24	2	2%
25-34	13	12%
35-44	24	23%
45-54	29	27%
55-64	23	22%
65+	15	14%
<b>Total</b>	<b>106</b>	

**Table 2 “Gender”**

<b>3. Gender</b>		
Female	85	79%
Male	14	13%
Non-binary	6	6%
Other	1	1%
Prefer not to say	1	1%
<b>Total</b>	<b>107</b>	

There was a diverse range of ages among those who did the survey, and the majority of respondents were female. One respondent ticked two boxes for gender.

33% of respondents had a child under 18 years living with them.

90 respondents answered the question about whether they were on a Centrelink payment. Of those 90, 67 (74%) identified as receiving a Centrelink payment. Jobseeker and Disability Support Pension were the most common payments.



**Table 3 “If yes, would you like to tell us which payment?” (After “Are you on a Centrelink payment?”)**

<b>7. Centrelink Payment</b>		
Jobseeker	26	29%
Disability Support Pension	23	26%
Carer's Allowance	11	12%
Other	10	11%
Aged Pension	9	10%
Single Parenting Payment	8	9%
Austudy/Abstudy	1	1%
Youth Allowance	1	1%
<b>Total</b>	<b>89</b>	

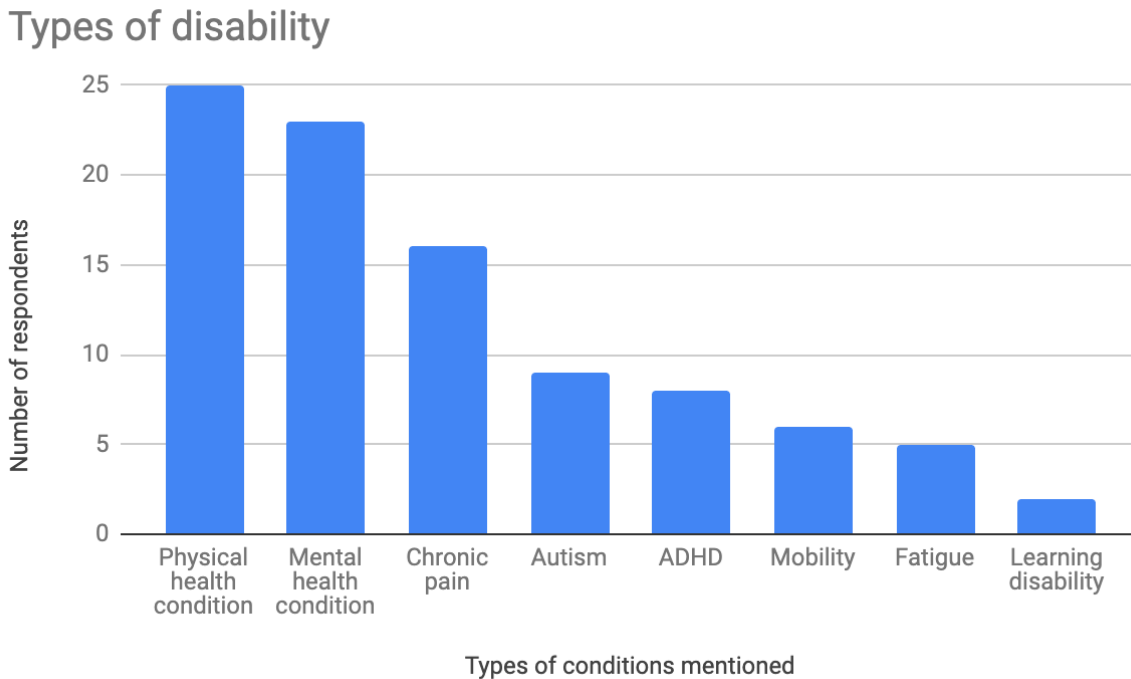
A number of potential demographic questions were omitted to help preserve the anonymity of respondents.

## **Disability**

52% of respondents identified as having one or more disabilities, and 9% were unsure if they had a disability.

The disabilities reported were tabled in the below graph. It was common for people to report multiple disabilities.

**Figure 1 “Would you like to share what your disability is?” Answered by 40 out of 92 respondents.**



22% of all respondents reported being on Disability Support Pensions, and 10% of respondents were on Carer’s Allowance.

Only 5% of all respondents reported being on the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). 24% of respondents specified they had trouble accessing NDIS. The number one reason given for this was that the process was overwhelming.

One respondent wrote: *“It’s such an overwhelming process that I’ve given up.”*

Another respondent who was eventually accepted by the NDIS wrote:

*“It took over 3 Years and multiple applications before I was accepted onto the NDIS. I also had to endure the extra suffering of having to take the NDIA to tribunal after being refused multiple times.*

*“They then invaded my privacy by summoning 5 years of records from both the mental health team who has been helping me to manage my mental health but also my G.P who has little to do with my mental health. The tribunal then decided that I needed to be subject to an assessment by a Psychiatrist of their choosing because I guess the entire team of mental health professionals who each submitted support letters and had been part of my care/recovery wasn’t enough? But then to add insult to injury they didn’t seem to even take note of what their Psychiatrist reported.”*

People who have disabilities are more likely to rely on social security payments than those without disabilities, and they can also incur extra expenses in accessing the community and treatments.

## Mental health

Only 23 respondents specified mental health issues as their disability, however 78 respondents answered yes and/or ongoing to the question of having a mental health journey.

Not everyone experiencing mental health issues will qualify for, be able to access, or want to utilise the NDIS, and some people do not identify their mental illness as a psychosocial disability, so we asked 'have you had a mental health journey?' in a separate question.

Out of 78 respondents who said yes and/or ongoing to having a mental health journey, 25 respondents (32%) identified as having difficulty accessing mental health services in the last 12 months.

**Table 4 “If yes, would you like to share your experiences?” (after “Have you had difficulty accessing mental health services in the last 12 months?”)**

Mental health experiences		
Affordability	13	76%
Waiting time	8	47%
Inadequate treatment	5	29%
Medication side effects	2	12%
<b>Total</b>	<b>17</b>	

One respondent wrote:

*“My doctor and counsellor referred me to a psychiatrist that I've had to wait 5 months to get an initial appointment. The cost involved in seeing a private psychiatrist also makes it difficult.”*

Another respondent wrote: *“Long wait time to see a public psychiatrist, I paid privately \$350 per session with rebate.”*

## Financial hardship

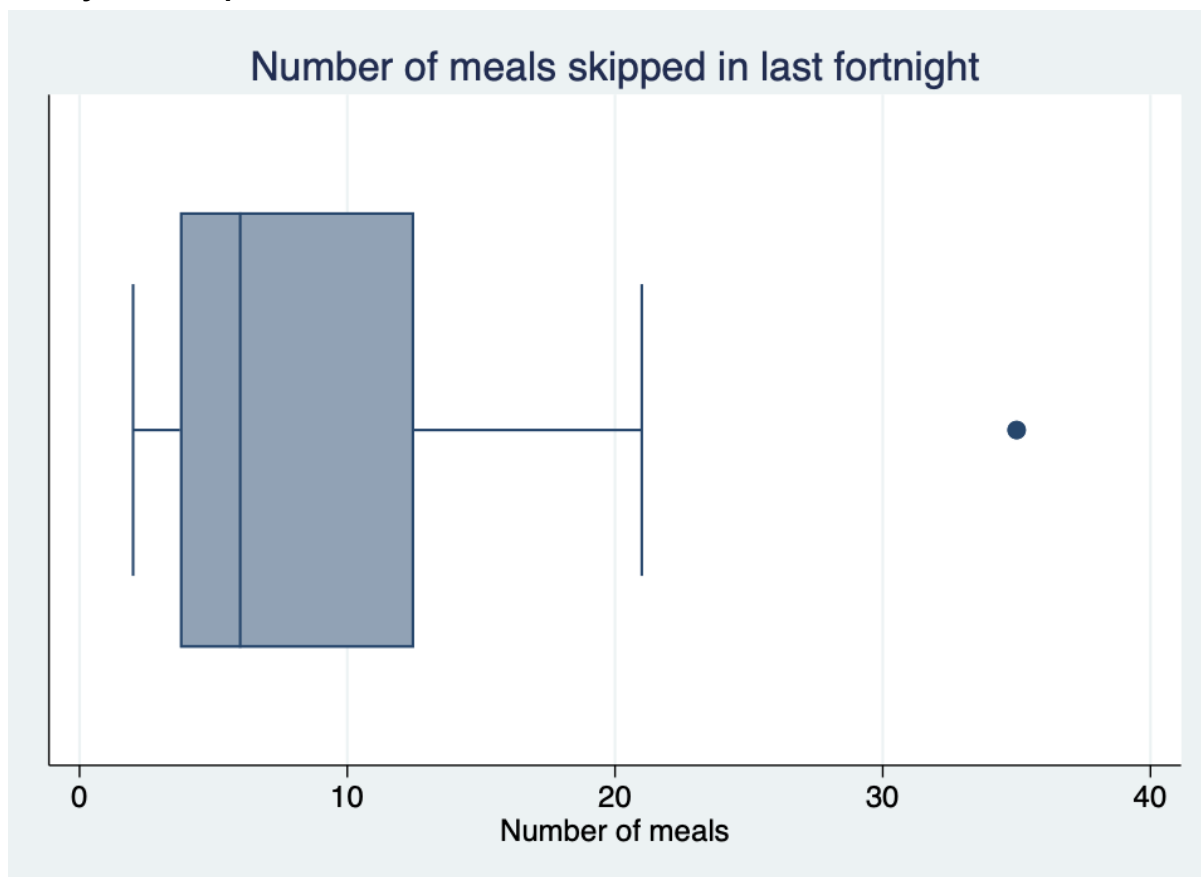
27 respondents (29%) specified they lost work due to Covid-19.

51 respondents (58%) reported having to rely on financial support from family/friends in the last 12 months.

Food is an area where it is common for people in financial hardship to make sacrifices. 36 respondents (39%) skipped at least one meal in the last fortnight because they didn't have enough money. Of the 36 respondents who skipped at least one meal in the last fortnight, the median number of meals skipped was six (IQR 3.9 to 11.8).

One respondent reported skipping 1-2 meals per day. Another wrote: *“Lost count.. maybe every 2nd day i eat”*, which we interpreted as eating one meal every two days, skipping 35 meals a fortnight. This data point is the outlier in Figure 2.

**Figure 2 “In the past fortnight, how many meals have you “skipped” due to lack of money?” 36 respondents answered one or more.**



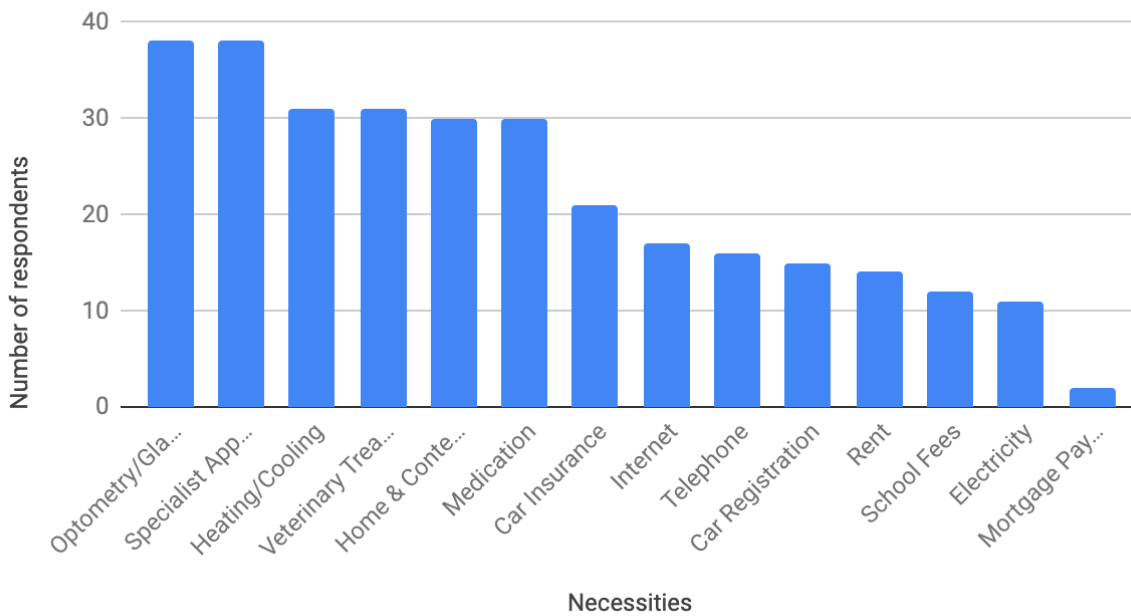
Some 14% of respondents who specified their difficulties accessing the NDIS found the costs involved in getting reports to access NDIS was a barrier to participation in the scheme. One respondent wrote: *“specialist costs for documents and diagnoses have been prohibitively expensive”*. Other respondents echoed similar sentiments.

Accessing mental health care is another financial burden for many respondents. One respondent wrote: *“it’s been difficult to access mental health services due to the lack of finances.”*

We asked about the necessities people had to go without. Of the 84 respondents who answered this question, more than half went without dental treatment, while just under half went without optometrist or other specialist appointments.

**Figure 3 “Is there a necessity you have gone without in the last 12 months because you haven’t had the money?” 84 respondents answered this question.**

### Necessities gone without in last 12 months

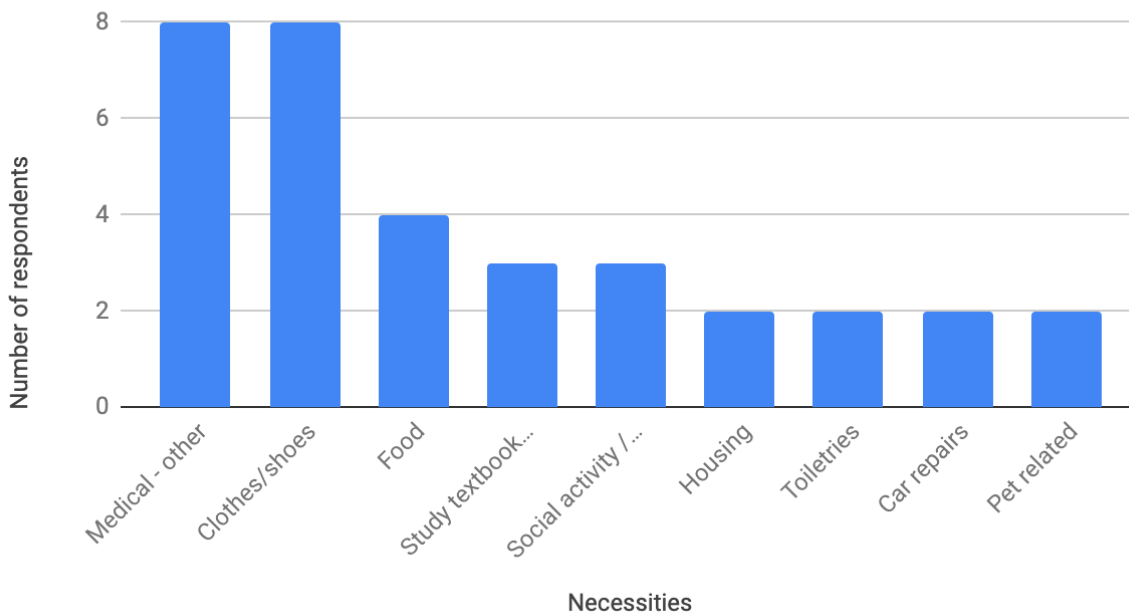


When we asked people to list any other necessities they went without, 8 of the 25 respondents (32%) listed a medical-related expense. One respondent wrote: *“I could get better treatment for my conditions if I could afford to pay for them”*. Another respondent listed podiatry, and another listed non-PBS medications as necessities they can’t afford.

One respondent wrote: *“medical equipment such as a special type of wheelchair which heightens to assist me to reach my kitchen bench”*. As she was over the age of 65 when she realised she would never walk again, she only qualifies for an aged care package. She wrote that My Aged Care *“does not properly help those with a disability”*.

**Figure 4 “Are there any necessities you have gone without that are not listed above?” 25 respondents answered this question by writing in their own responses.**

### Additional necessities gone without in last 12 months



The cost of study equipment including textbooks and computers can be a hurdle for students and even deter some from study. 24 respondents (26%) said they are currently studying.

One respondent wrote:

*“I need a laptop for my uni course but I can't afford it so I'm using an old computer without a camera or microphone which means I will get a poor grade for effort because I can't make contributions each week in my tutorials. It's just the way it is. I am doing my best in all the written work but it's depressing how they just expect everyone to have access to all the best equipment. I am also limited during Covid in terms of going to a library to use their equipment so I am just doing my best. But it gets me down at times.”*

Another student wrote that they went without textbooks because of the cost.

Some people who were not on Centrelink payments also expressed that they were struggling financially.

*“I work full time but consider myself poor after I pay my bills and buy food there is not much left. I support my 5 kids by myself as their father passed away, I cannot get ahead ever I cannot save the cost of living is far to high I feel like I will never break out of this cycle.”*

Another respondent wrote about how she didn't qualify for Disability Support Pension because she was partnered, and how hard that was because she could not contribute financially to the care of her family.

*"Having no money because I'm partnered isn't fair when your sick and can't contribute, we all suffer. My partner owes over 15000 trying to support us and his debts too."*

## **Problems with Job Services Australia/Disability Employment Services**

15 respondents (17%) reported having significant issues with their Job Network Provider or Disability Employment Services in the last 12 months, and 15 respondents (17%) reported knowing someone who had a significant issue with a Job Network Provider or Disability Employment Service. Each person reported individual stories of distress where they felt the agency didn't help them get a job and/or didn't understand their circumstances.

One respondent reported bullying and harassment from a specific employment agency.

Another reported a lack of compassion for her caring responsibilities to both her partner, who has Alzheimer's, and her elderly parents, while she was also recovering from surgery.

Other responses included:

*"They keep harassing me with calls and to do job activities / mutual obligations even when mutual obligations has been suspended."*

*"Just utter disbelief that they make money doing exactly nothing for me."*

*"Bullied into applying for jobs that I am not suited for and that would never hire me, no support for actual job issues (eg. requested interview training)"*

*"They don't help get a job only call U in to sign papers so they can get money"*

## **Problems with Government Departments**

There were 86 responses to the question: "Have you had issues with a government agency within the past 12 months". 33 people (38%) responded yes and/or ongoing. 44% of those who specified a department or agency wrote "Centrelink".

**Table 5 “Would you like to tell us which department or agency?” (after “Have you had issues with a government agency within the past 12 months”)**

<b>Govt Depts - Self</b>		
Centrelink	12	44%
Housing	4	15%
Health/Hospital	3	11%
Job network	3	11%
Home care	2	7%
MP	1	4%
Medicare	1	4%
Service NSW	1	4%
NDIA	1	4%
Vic Roads	1	4%
ATO	1	4%
<b>Total answered</b>	<b>27</b>	

These are some of the written complaints about Centrelink:

*“They took me off PPS on 31/7 and forgot to change me over onto Jobseeker for the next payment even though all paperwork was handed in, which then left my 2 children and myself for 3weeks with no money at all in our bank account.”*

*“As due to Covid only the person is allowed in not carer.”*

*“Centrelink just kill me mentally I needed a social worker for agers to communicate that put me in hospital from stress  
Having no money because im partnered isn't fair when your sick and can't contribute we all suffer...”*

*“Trying to access jobkeeper - took months - no communication from them and had to borrow to get by.”*

*“Their Robodebt system. Also supporting my son onto Youth Allowance.”*

Complaints about public housing providers included:

*“They keep giving me notice of termination and demanding strangers enter my home when I cant have family.”*

*“Stonewalling despite desperate need. Cruelty in emergency housing situation.”*

*“They are rude and outright nasty.”*



*“I don't feel safe when they attend to do inspections and take photos for no real reason.”*

*“Currently having issues regarding my disabled daughter residency where her father went into care trying to get her to take over his lease under the anti discrimination act. They stopped his rent then started with threatening letters of eviction yet I was under the impression there was a memorandum in place to cease evictions.”*

There were three complaints about Health including: *“cancelling operations without notifying me...poor management”*.

43 respondents (51%) reported knowing others who had issues with a government agency. 70% of those who specified a government agency wrote “Centrelink”.

**Table 6 “Do you know which department/agency?” (after “Has someone you know had issues with a government agency within the past 12 months?”)**

<b>Govt Depts - Others</b>		
Centrelink	21	70%
Housing	3	10%
NDIA	7	23%
Job network	1	3%
Department of Social Services	2	7%
Department of Communities and Justice	1	3%
FACS	1	3%
Many	1	3%
<b>Total answered</b>	<b>30</b>	

## Conclusion

Although this survey is only a small sample, it highlights that more research into poverty in Western Sydney is needed.

According to this survey, one of the biggest areas of financial hardship was medical expenses. Lack of money proved a barrier for accessing the National Disability Insurance Scheme, appropriate mental health care, dentistry, optometry, specialist appointments, and medical aids. For one person, this meant an appropriate wheelchair.

Poor nutrition can also have a major impact on the health of people who struggle financially. Food was an area where people tried to save money, with 39% of respondents having skipped at least one meal in the last fortnight due to finances. Of those who skipped at least one meal in the last fortnight, the median number of meals skipped by those 36 people is six (IQR 3.9 to 11.8).

52% of respondents identified as having one or more disabilities, and 9% of respondents were unsure if they had a disability, as opposed to the general Australian population where only 18% of people have disabilities (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare - "Prevalence of Disability"). People with disabilities generally report much poorer health outcomes than people without disabilities. According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 24% of people with a disability report very good or excellent health as opposed to 65% of people without a disability.

77% of respondents specified that they had a mental health journey or that this journey was ongoing. This is much higher than the National Health Survey 2017-18 estimate that 1 in 5 (20% or 4.8 million) Australians have a mental or behavioural condition (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Mental Health).

People reported being overwhelmed by the process of applying for NDIS, and the other major barrier to access was the financial costs of reports. In mental healthcare the largest barriers to access were affordability and wait times.

From the data collected by this survey it is obvious that there is a correlation between people having mental illnesses and/or other disabilities and their experiences of poverty. An increase in social security payments would therefore make it easier for people to receive appropriate medical care, including reports to access NDIS when required. Advocating for better and more accessible disability and mental health care as well as an increase to social-security payments is a goal of Western Sydney Anti-Poverty Network.

17% of respondents reported having a significant issue with a Job Network Provider or a Disability Employment Service in the last 12 months, and 17% reported knowing someone who had a significant issue with a Job Network Provider or a Disability Employment Service.

44% of respondents who specified a government department they had issues with in the last 12 months wrote "Centrelink". 70% of people who indicated they knew someone who had a significant issue with a government department and specified the government department wrote "Centrelink".

This survey indicates that social security recipients would experience significantly better outcomes if social security payments were above the poverty line. It would improve recipients' health outcomes by allowing them to access dental care, other medical treatments, and regular meals. It would also improve educational outcomes for recipients, by making textbooks and technology more affordable.

It also indicates that there is a need for a complete overhaul to both individual and systemic advocacy for dealing with Job Services Australia (JSA), Disability Employment Services (DES), mental health care providers, and government departments, including the National Disability Insurance Agency, Centrelink, and public housing providers. Independent advocates can assist people to make complaints, especially in cases where there is an imbalance of power. Recipients need instructions on how to contact an advocacy service *before* they need to complain. A complaints line staffed by professional advocates is also needed. To deal with the influx of new service users, advocacy services need appropriate resourcing and staff levels.

To have these two above reforms made into law, Western Sydney Anti-Poverty Network will be working with the community to lobby all concerned, including state and federal representatives.

## References

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Mental Health  
<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-health/mental-health>  
23/7/2020

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Prevalence of Disability  
<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/disability/people-with-disability-in-australia/contents/people-with-disability/prevalence-of-disability> 2/10/2020

Christians Against Poverty, How can there be poverty in Australia when we have welfare?,  
<https://capaust.org/blog/how-can-there-be-poverty-in-australian-when-we-have-welfare/>  
5/2/2021

Western Sydney University, ID demographic resources - Welcome to Western Sydney,  
<http://home.id.com.au/demographic-resources/>

Western Sydney University, ID demographic resources - JobSeeker and Youth Allowance recipients  
<https://profile.id.com.au/cws/job-seeker>

## Appendices

Appendix A: Survey form

## WESTERN SYDNEY ANTI-POVERTY NETWORK

---

Email \*

Zip/Postal Code \*

Australia ▼

Age

- 16-24
- 25-34
- 35-44
- 45-54
- 55-64
- 65+

Gender

- Male
- Female
- Non-Binary
- Other
- Prefer not to say

Do you have a minor under 18 years living with you?

- Yes
- No

Have you lost any employment due to COVID?

- Yes
- No

Are you on a Centrelink payment?

- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to say

If yes, would you like to tell us which payment?

- JobSeeker
- Youth Allowance
- Austudy/Abstudy
- Single Parenting Payment
- Disability Support Pension
- Carer's Allowance
- Aged Pension
- Other
- Prefer not to say

How much money per fortnight do you have remaining after paying accommodation costs (rent/mortgage/etc)? Feel free not to answer.

Are you currently studying?

- Yes
- No

Have you had to draw on your superannuation to afford your day to day living expenses?

- Yes
- No

Do you have a disability?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

Would you like to share what your disability is?

use your own words here

Are you on NDIS?

- Yes
- No

Have you had difficulty trying to access NDIS?

- Yes
- No
- Ongoing
- Not Applicable

Would you like to share your experiences?

use your own words here



Have you had a mental health journey?

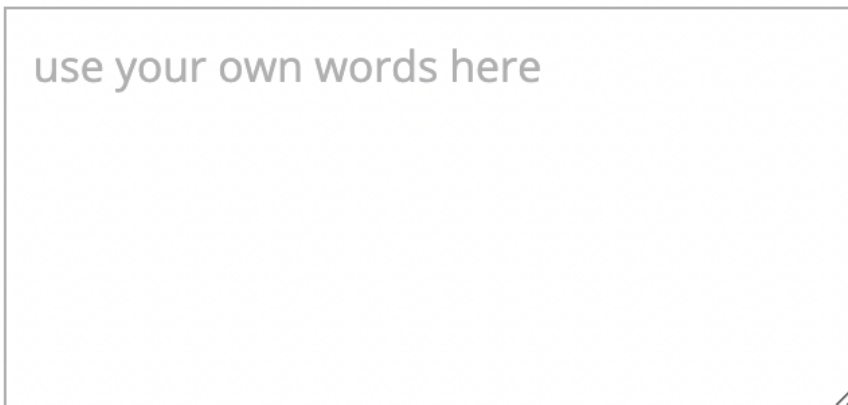
- Yes
- No
- Ongoing

Have you had difficulty accessing mental health services in the last 12 months?

- Yes
- No
- Not Applicable

If yes, would you like to share your experiences?

use your own words here



In the past fortnight, how many meals have you 'skipped' due to lack of money?

write your number here



During the last twelve months have you had to rely on financial support from your family/friends just to get by?

- Yes
- No

Is there a necessity you have gone without in the last 12 months because you haven't had the money?

- Medication
- Dental Treatment
- Optometry/Glasses
- Specialist Appointments
- Rent
- Electricity
- Mortgage Payments
- Heating/Cooling
- Internet
- Telephone
- School Fees
- Car Registration
- Car Insurance
- Home & Contents Insurance
- Veterinary Treatments

Are there any necessities you have gone without that are not listed above?

list them here

Have you had a significant issue/s in the past 12 months with your Job Network Provider/Disability Employment Service Provider?

- Yes
- No
- Not Applicable

Would you like to share your experience?

use your own words here

Has someone you know had a significant issue in the past 12 months with their Job Network Provider/Disability Employment Service Provider?

- Yes
- No
- Not Applicable

Have you had issues with a government agency within the past 12 months?

- Yes
- No
- Ongoing

Would you like to tell us which department or agency?

name them here

If yes, would you like to share your experience?

use your own words

Has someone you know had issues with a government agency within the past 12 months?

- Yes
- No

Do you know which Department/Agency?

name them here

Western Sydney Anti-Poverty Network is committed to fight against poverty and injustice in Sydney's West. Would you like to join our Facebook group?  
[www.facebook.com/groups/wsapn](http://www.facebook.com/groups/wsapn).

- Yes
- No

Would you like to join our mailing list?

- Yes
- No

Do you have any skills that you would like to share with Western Sydney Anti-Poverty Network?

- Yes
- No