THE SYMPTOMS OF POVERTY

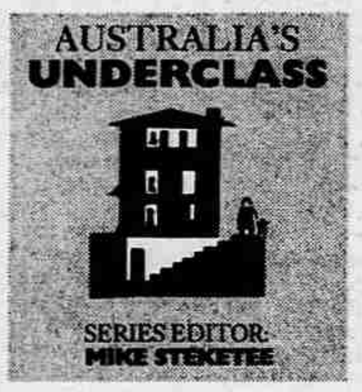
Robbery, arson, child abuse and, yes, even murder – the price of the recession has yet to be paid in terms of crime. The sad link between crime rates and disadvantage, unemployment and inequality is obvious in the United States. Now it's Australia's turn.

MIKE STEKETEE reports.

THE increased crime bred by high unemployment and growing inequality may take six years or more to emerge and much longer to eradicate.

Higher crime rates are likely to accompany permanent unemployment for some, long-term unemployment for many and the despair of many more who have given up hope before they have obtained their first job. People who become alienated from society are less likely to feel a compulsion to abide by its rules of behaviour. That is one of the manifestations of an underclass.

The link between crime rates and disadvantage, unemployment and inequality is obvious enough in the United States. Studies in Australia have made the same connection, and the stories which do the rounds in the western suburbs are another sign – such as the recent party at Emerton, near Mount Druitt, which put four boys aged between 13 and 16 in hospital, one with a punctured lung, after they were attacked. It is not that such violence does not occur in wealthier areas: it just happens less often.



AUSTRALIA'S
UNDERCLASS

SERIES EDITOR:
MIKE STEKETEE

Calculations by the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research of offences as recorded by local court appearances confirm that in Sydney the highest crime rates are in areas with high proportions of poor families, unemployment and single-parent families. Updated for the *Herald* from an earlier study, the accompanying map shows court appearances by the local government area in which defendants were living in 1991 (rather than where they committed crimes). Eighty-four per cent of the appearances resulted in convictions. According to Dr Don Weatherburn, the director of the bureau, the figures show the connection between disadvantage and crime to be remarkably consistent. The high rates for Sydney and South Sydney are a reminder that not all the poor live in the west. Despite gentrification, inner-city areas, particularly suburbs such as Waterloo, are some of the most disadvantaged in Sydney and so are parts of the Central Coast.

Thus the crime rate in the Sydney City Council area is more than eight times that in Ku-ring-gai, the area with the lowest court appearances per head. For South Sydney, it is almost seven times the Ku-ring-gai rate and for Liverpool 3½ times.

There is no proof that unemployment causes crime, but there is a strong association between them. Forty-one per cent of persons convicted in Local Courts in NSW in 1986 were unemployed. In her book *Killing the Beloved*, published last month, Dr Patricia Eastel, of the Australian Institute of Criminology, found that only 36 per cent of the men who murdered their wives in the two years from 1989-90 had jobs, as did only 27 per cent of women who murdered their husbands. That does not mean all the rest were unemployed – some would have been out of the workforce because of age, disability or other reasons. But it compares with the 76 per cent of men and 52 per cent of women over 15 who were in jobs or wanted to be in June 1990.

The Fairfield office of the State Department of Community Services receives between 60 and 65 notifications a month of children who need protection. That is about 10 a month more than last year, a trend also evident in the rest of the State. About half the cases involve neglect of children, 20 per cent sexual assault and 30 per cent threatened or actual violence.

Greg Skelly, the manager of the office, said he could not say what was causing the increase, but it could be related to economic circumstances. "There seems to be an increase in the number of notifications where there is an element of physical abuse, and that does not necessarily just refer to children with bruises. We have had cases of babies with fractured ribs and broken legs. In recent years, we had two babies die in circumstances which the doctor thought at the time were not accidental."

Skelly said unemployment often affected the attitudes and aspirations of young people. "Maybe 20 years ago, the experience of many adolescents was for mum and dad, or perhaps mum or dad, to go off to work and for them to complete their schooling and start thinking about a career. That is no longer the reality for many: they would not be thinking in terms of being married with 2.1 children and a mortgage."

The relationship between economic adversity and crime is not a straightforward one. For the four years to the end of 1992, the number of car thefts in NSW fell by 31 per cent and the number of break, enter and steal offences by 9.3 per cent. In the same period, robberies rose by 18 per cent and arson offences by 52 per cent. Weatherburn speculated that the reduction in car thefts and housebreaking might be due to the reduced demand during the recession for consumer goods such as cars, car parts and video recorders, while the incentives rose for cash-generating crimes such as robbery and arson.

He painted a portrait of a constantly changing population of offenders, with new people coming into crime as others were leaving. On average, a career in crime lasts five years. Economic adversity can have multiple effects: it can increase the number of people taking up a life of crime, slow down the numbers giving it up and increase the rate of crime among present offenders.

> "If you have a less equal society, you will have more crimes ..."

But the whole process happens slowly. Weatherburn's analogy is of taps dripping into two sinks. "Imagine that the effect of an increase in economic adversity is to double the rate at which one of the taps is dripping. You won't see any changes first off, but over time there will be double the amount of water in the sink."

Weatherburn estimated that it might take six years or longer for the effects of the current recession to work their way into crime rates. "The price of the current recession has yet to be paid in terms of crime," he said.

Rising inequality had a larger effect on crime rates than absolute levels of disadvantage. "The implications of that are very important: we can't judge ourselves to have turned the corner once we get a growth rate fast enough to reduce unemployment if underneath that we get a segment of society permanently alienated."

Professor John Braithwaite, a criminologist at the Australian National University, agrees that the increase in long-term unemployment is storing up future crime problems. He said that the aging of the population meant a falling proportion of teenagers in the population – the group which had the highest crime rates. "On the demographics, our crime rate should be falling quite sharply already."

Braithwaite said there no longer was any doubt that unemployment and particularly income inequality increased the rate of crime. "If you have a less equal society, you will have more crimes and that is one of the ways to look at the extraordinary crime rates in the US. If that is the way we want to go as a society, we need to think about it."

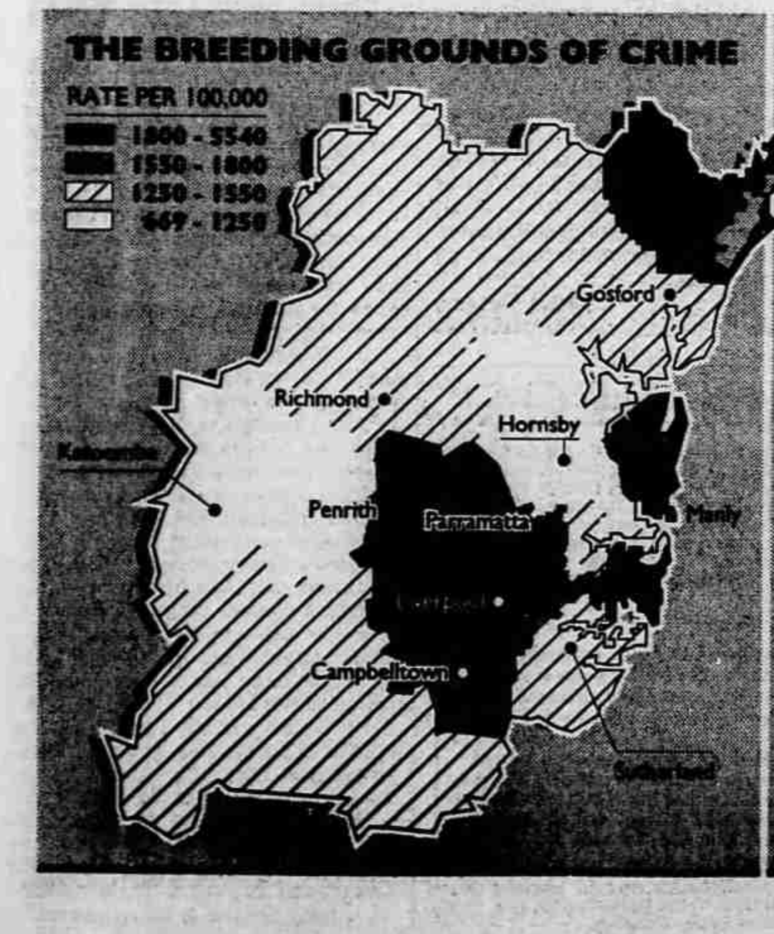
The NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics' earlier study by Christopher Devery showed that, in the country, high crime rates were associated with high proportions of single-parent families, public housing renters and Aborigines, with unemployment more strongly associated with property crime than violent crime. In Bourke in 1987 and 1988, the conviction rate for all offences against the person was 3,572 per 100,000 of population. This was almost eight times the rate for Blacktown, the worst area in Sydney, and 108 times that for the best local government area in the State, Nymboida on the North Coast.

John Walker, the senior criminologist at the Australian Institute of Criminology, agreed that unemployment was a significant determinant of crime. Areas such as Liverpool in England now were grappling with third-generation unemployment. "I don't think they know where to go because they see it as a crime problem and not as a problem of inequality," he said.

"It is equivalent to the problem we have here with Aboriginal offenders. People don't like to hear statements like 'Aboriginal people offend a lot'. But they do and the reason for it is alienation – a total break in the links to the rest of society – just as it is in Liverpool."

Aborigines have many of the characteristics of an underclass, particularly in their alienation from the rest of society. The question is how many other Australians join them.

THE BREEDING GROUNDS OF CRIME



LOCAL COURT APPEARANCES 1991

By area of residence	Rate per 100,000		
Sydney	5540	Burwood	1527
South Sydney	4530	Gosford	1499
Liverpool	2396	Sutherland	1492
Wyong	2318	Hawkesbury	1472
Marrickville	2216	Wollondilly	1467
Leichhardt	2139	Ashfield	1438
Campbelltown	2050	Hurstville	1434
Manly	1997	Kogarah	1294
Blacktown	1925	Ryde	1288
Botany	1839	Drummoyne	1279
Fairfield	1821	North Sydney	1246
Waverley	1786	Woollahra	1206
Holroyd	1765	Strathfield	1188
Parramatta	1701	Blue Mountains	1164
Randwick	1688	Willoughby	1091
Camden	1651	Concord	1041
Warringah	1633	Hornsby	962
Canterbury	1627	Hunters Hill	952
Auburn	1618	Mosman	951
Bankstown	1605	Baulkham Hills	923
Rockdale	1578	Lane Cove	815
Penrith	1554	Ku-ring-gai	669

Source: NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research

"Our job is to tell them how good they are . . ." Karen and Ken Ross of the Alive Christian Church. Picture by DEAN SEWELL

Where jobs are the mission

THE charismatics are the latest wave of missionaries to descend upon the regions of chronic unemployment in western Sydney. But all over these parts religion and poverty march hand in hand.

At the Sydney City Mission's Mt Druitt employment centre the instructors pray each morning before class. They ask God to find jobs for the unemployed at the end of their courses.

At the Catholic Church at St Mary's there are six different religious orders doing all kinds of good works. The Sisters of Mercy run training courses for the unemployed; the Christian Brothers run two refuges and a school for truants; while the Salesian priests recently opened a $1.7 million youth centre (also funded by Penrith Council and the church).

Even the Jesuits – renowned for their elite schools on the North Shore – have moved into the Mt Druitt area and opened a senior high school. At the church at Mt Druitt they run courses in basic reading and writing for about 640 people.

There is also the usual mix of welfare groups, all working flat out. The St Vincent de Paul Society's main centre in Mt Druitt gets more than 1,000 calls a week for emergency assistance. People come from nine parishes in Sydney to visit people in their homes and give them food parcels or electricity vouchers. They come from as far afield as Asquith and Wahroonga.

But in recent years the strong growth has been in charismatic churches. In three of these churches in the Mt Druitt area between 50 and 75 per cent of the adults do not have paid work. Two churches have opened up in the past two years, both attracting between 80 and 100 people to the Sunday service.

One of them, the Alive Christian Church, uses a tin shed adjacent to the railway line at Mr Druitt. The church, which opened just 18 months ago, has been painted bright green and at first sight leaps out of its bleak surroundings.

The pastors of the church, Ken and Karen Ross, told the *Herald* how many of the congregation had learnt to read and write after finding God.

The Alive Church attracts about 70 people on a Sunday, but the Rosses could name only three adults who had jobs. They estimate that 70 per cent of the adults did not have paid work.

It's a similar story at Christian Outreach Church at Emerton (a Mt Druitt suburb), where about half the congregation of 100 does not work. And at the Western Christian Centre at Shalvey only five of the 20 adults who attend the service have paid work.

Ken Ross still works full-time as a builder because the church cannot support him, while Karen runs a shop at the church.

Likewise Vladamir and Susan Zrinski, who run the Emerton church, work full-time. Vladamir works as a painter and does pastoral work in the evenings, while Susan helps run the church. The church at Emerton Shop was opened just five months ago, after starting up in a private home.

Ian Rains, the pastor from the Shalvey church, also works full-time at a bank in the city.

The Rosses say they have many success stories.

Joe, for example, had been unemployed and could not read or write. Karen said he was part of the "welfare syndrome" – he was unemployed and waiting for a Housing Commission home. Now, he has a steady job and has bought a home.

Robert, 30, is married with four young children but has not worked for more than five years. He told the *Herald* how he could not read or write a couple of years ago, but since coming into contact with the church he has completed a literacy course and Year 9 at TAFE. He is now studying year 10.

Karen Ross said many of the people in Mt Druitt were part of the welfare syndrome. "You put your name on a list, wait four years for a Housing Commission home and then you're set for life," she said.

Ken Ross said people in the area had an attitude that they were "entitled to live off welfare". Instead, the church tried to teach them that there are "a lot of opportunities out there that can benefit them more than the system."

"Our job is to tell them how good they are and how capable," Karen said.

She said it was "so hard to stay honest" in the welfare system. For example, it was difficult to encourage couples to get married when they could remain in a de facto relationship and live in a government house that cost $40 a week.

She said there was little incentive to get a job because people then had to pay more rent in government housing. "It's very hard to build the moral when you look at it practically. It's not worth it. It's very hard.

"It's a real trap. It's very hard to stay honest. It's very hard to push that extra bit in people.

"They think they have a right to it, but then again they feel useless. They can't get a job, they get depressed, they spend their money. It just goes round and round to the point where they don't know how to go out and get a job.

"They just lose so much that was in there before."

The Rosses say they are often called on to help sort out family crises in the parish. And, more often than not, the real dramas occur in the families where no-one works.

☐ PAUL CLEARY

It's enough to make you sick

ANY lingering belief that the unemployed live the life of Riley has been shattered by recent studies that show those out of work and on low incomes are sicker, physically and mentally, than other Australians.

Moreover, the unemployed get sicker the longer they are out of work and the health of their immediate families is likely to suffer as well.

Last year the National Health Strategy (NHS), a Federal Government inquiry into health, released the most comprehensive study ever conducted of the relationship between disadvantage and health in Australia. The study found that:

- Men between 25 and 64 living in the best areas died at an annual rate of 338 per 100,000, while in the most disadvantaged areas they died at a rate of 568 per 100,000 – a 68 per cent difference.
- Men from the worst off areas were 77 per cent more likely to commit suicide than those from the best off areas.
- Men between 25 and 54 who were unemployed or not in the workforce had death rates 17 per cent higher than those with jobs.
- In conditions which had lasted at least six months, or were expected to, working-age unemployed males had 66 per cent more disabilities than employed males and unemployed women had 29 per cent more disabilities than employed women. In the case of serious chronic illnesses, the corresponding figures were 26 per cent higher for unemployed men and 42 per cent higher for unemployed women.
- Children with no parent in paid employment were 25 per cent more likely to have serious chronic illnesses.
- Boys in single parent families were 28 per cent (girls 21 per cent) more likely to suffer serious chronic illness.
- Female sole parents had 54 per cent more serious chronic illnesses than women of the same age who were married with children.

The story is much the same across different categories. "The association between poor health and poverty, between poor health and inadequate housing, between poor health and unemployment is unequivocal," the report concluded.

The NHS study also found that those who are the least well off are more likely to smoke, to be overweight and to be inactive – although they are less likely to be excessive drinkers. Many of the disorders which affect the least well off, such as lung cancer, bronchitis, strokes and heart attacks, are associated with these habits. But the study concluded that, even when these higher risk factors were taken into account, low-income earners still had poorer health.

Like with the chicken and the egg, it also is possible that poor health may come before unemployment and other influences on low income. But several British studies suggest that low socio-economic status often precedes poor health.

The NHS points to a possible spiralling effect, with disadvantage leading to poor health which makes the disadvantage worse.

According to Professor Charles Kerr of the Department of Public Health at Sydney University: "There is now virtually irrefutable evidence that unemployment kills people and seriously endangers health in other ways. Taken overall, the case that unemployment is a serious risk to health is comparable to the case that smoking causes lung cancer. In both instances, the weight of circumstantial evidence is so great that no other conclusions appear valid."

A survey last year by the Western Sydney Health Area found that health in the western suburbs generally was poorer than in the rest of the State and that Blacktown was the worst of all. Dr Roger Gurr, the director of psychiatry at the Blacktown and Mount Druitt Psychiatric Service, told the *Herald* that, during the first five months of this year the number of people his service had seen had risen by 68 per cent compared with the corresponding period in 1990.

Often, those who suffered most stress as a result of unemployment were middle-aged men who had been made redundant after working all their lives.

"They can't believe that they can't get another job," he said. "Usually they have not been taught the skills of applying for jobs. They get very stressed about being at home and the wife and others think they are not trying hard enough."

Research by the Department of Public Health at Sydney University found that while female Australian suicide rates generally were stable from 1907 to 1990, for males they increased sharply with higher unemployment.

Compared with the US, and even many European countries, Australia has a health system which provides access to the poor along with the rich and a social security net which catches almost all of those who fall on hard times. The importance of maintaining these will grow as the effects of long-term unemployment set in. "Factors such as class, income and poverty are very important in the spread of diseases like HIV and AIDS," Bill Bowtell, the outgoing president of the Australian Federation of AIDS Organisations, said. "In the US, where the health system has broken down for a large part of the population, where there are no educational resources devoted to the health needs of the bottom 30 per cent of society, HIV/AIDS has become a catastrophic epidemic amongst those people. In the end, society has to pay for that."

☐ MIKE STEKETEE