

BREAKING THE CYCLE OF CHARITY DEPENDENCE

Charity is foundational to Catholic values, and underpins assistance provided by organisations such as St Vincent de Paul Society Queensland (Vinnies Queensland). Yet evidence of what triggers charity requests, and the characteristics of charity services that make an actual difference, has been unclear to charity providers. ISSR researchers have now shed some light on this issue through research commissioned by Vinnies Queensland, providing insights on the cycle of charity seeking and giving through the organisation. This research has identified housing instability as a major driver of repeat charity requests, while the time spent by volunteers attending to people in need actually reduces further requests for charity.

ISSR researchers Associate Professor Cameron Parsell and Dr Chris Ambrey analysed 10 years of records in Vinnies Queensland's database, which archives hundreds of thousands of interactions between the charity's staff and volunteers, and people requesting emergency relief. The research confirms that housing insecurity, poverty and welfare dependency are all connected. People rely on food, clothing, furniture and money from charities because state welfare payments often amount to living below the poverty line. Various social and health factors, such as domestic violence, addiction, mental health or simply bad luck, can force individuals and families to seek assistance, even when income from gainful employment may appear sufficient. Sometimes an unusually high bill or unexpected event can push people over the tipping point. When people in these circumstances are forced to move to find work or escape spiralling rents, for example, they become further entrenched in poverty – and they turn to charities for immediate necessities. The cost of relocation, storage, new schools for children, bonds for utilities, and additional travel time are just a few of the expenses that trigger charity requests to provide the basic necessities when funds were otherwise directed. On this evidence, poverty and disadvantage are well-established in our communities.

Requests for material assistance consistently increased over the decade-long records, and the vast majority of requests were repeated within a 12-month period. While demand is much higher in metropolitan areas, requests from people experiencing hardship in regional areas is increasing at a faster rate. The finding that time spent by volunteers reduces further requests was a surprising outcome, but perhaps intuitive for Vincentians. Vinnies state president John Forrest said, "Personal engagement and relationships based on mutual trust and respect led to better outcomes than material aid alone. Help has to be personal as well as practical." This could have far-reaching effects on the way in which Vinnies Queensland, other charities and indeed other arms of the welfare state go about assisting the most disadvantaged in our communities.

Project leader Associate Professor Cameron Parsell said, "This remarkable evidence, to the best of our knowledge, is the first of its kind." Charities in developed countries work alongside formal social services, provided through welfare states, to assist people living in poverty. The work of charities with socially and economically marginalised people, however, often takes place in the absence of robust evidence about what impact charity actually has on people's lives. This research, supported by Vinnies Queensland, has the potential to identify actions, and influence policy, to meaningfully reduce poverty.

KEY FINDINGS



Each increase in individuals' number of home addresses in a year corresponds to approximately 26% more requests per person.



A one hour increase in time spent providing assistance relates to an estimated reduction in requests, per person, of 25% through a home visit model and 49% through a support centre model.



Changing the service model from home visits to a support centre corresponds to an estimated reduction in requests, per person, of 7% to 15% within the first year and 14% to 64% beyond that.

