



# A nation of two halves: How cuts have closed door on most vulnerable job seekers

**Lisa O'Brien**



**R**ecently I listened to a teacher from a high school in Sydney's west tell the story of a project she'd set her class.

From her perspective it was relatively straightforward: she asked them to approach a parent and interview them about their job – what they do, their qualifications and how they found it – and report back. The faces of her students took on a mix of confusion and concern until one of the children put up their hand.

“Miss, what if your mum or dad doesn't have a job?”

In that event, she said, why not interview someone in your extended family or a next-door neighbour?

“But what if you don't know anyone with a job?”

It turned out that in her entire class only two students knew someone in work.

In the end the students interviewed her and other teachers to complete the project.

Australia is rapidly becoming a nation of two halves. In many respects it already is. In pockets of the country, entrenched joblessness and disadvantage have

become the norm. In those same communities the gap in the educational performance between young people and their better-off peers is large, growing larger. And as they reach their teens, children in communities with high levels of early school leaving and unemployment often lack the networks crucial in establishing a pathway to a job.

Think about how you found your first part-time job as a teenager.

Then, as now, it was often a case of who you knew, not what you knew, with most of us getting our first break through a parent's friend or colleague. When a young person comes from a home and community characterised by long-term unemployment – or if a parent is in a low-paid, unskilled job – it's unlikely they will have the kind of connections to give them the same opportunity or to imagine a different future from what is around them.

So many disengage from school or lower their ambitions and the cycle of joblessness and disadvantage continues. The scale of the problem facing us is clear, and quite frankly, bordering on the overwhelming.

According to recent data, youth unemployment has increased in some areas as much as 88 per cent since February last year.

That's why it's so disappointing to see the federal government overlook the importance of supporting vulnerable young people

on the often difficult path from school to work or further study. We understood the likelihood that it would not renew funding to two previous initiatives in this space – the Youth Connections and Partnership Brokers programs – in the recent budget.

Both have made a strong contribution to tackling the problems underpinning youth unemployment but neither had seemed to capture the government's imagination. But we had hoped it would introduce its own initiative in this area, stamp its own authority on the problem. Unfortunately, that hasn't happened.

Australia now faces the prospect of a deteriorating youth unemployment situation and no national



**Sydney Morning Herald, Sydney**

29 May 2014, by Lisa O'Brien

General News, page 18 - 360.00 cm<sup>2</sup>

Capital City Daily - circulation 126,510 (MTWTFSS-)

ID 260203528

BRIEF PPR-PB

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program specifically designed to divert thousands of young people away from the same fate. That's a tragedy for us all but particularly for communities where youth joblessness is getting dangerously close to 20 per cent.

The government's announcement that from July 1 job seekers aged 18 to 30 in 18 areas of high youth unemployment must engage in Work for the Dole for 15 hours a week for six months isn't sufficient to tackle the problem. Work for the Dole can benefit some young people if it helps them stay engaged and provides them with training for a job in the real world. But for many it's too little too late.

That it is being introduced as the national programs that were about assisting young people while still in school – helping them identify careers in local industries and thereby avoid the unemployment queue – are winding down is very disappointing.

Many employers will tell you – even in regions of significant youth unemployment – that there are jobs available, it's just that young people aren't leaving school with the skills they need to take advantage of them. One of the reasons that's the case is because employers and schools, on the whole, find it hard to work together. Not because of any disinterest or lack of desire, but because they're such different beasts.

In the absence of programs that help bridge the gap between school and work, The Smith Family will continue to advocate for a way to bring principals, business owners, community agencies, students and other local representatives together to improve year 12 retention and smooth young peoples' pathway to a job. It's a practical, common-sense response to a hugely serious problem.

We can't claim to be serious about addressing the blight of youth unemployment if we don't have a plan for investing in and fostering these relationships.

Lisa O'Brien is chief executive of The Smith Family.