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## Media release

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### **Households in the dark – mapping electricity disconnections in South Australia, Victoria, NSW, and South East Queensland.**

A first time study on households most at risk of electricity disconnections recommends increased social security payments for disadvantaged communities and other protections, as smart meters are rolled out across Victoria and other parts of Australia.

The St Vincent de Paul Society's *Households in the dark* report is an analysis of approximately 200,000 electricity disconnections across South Australia, Victoria, NSW and South East Queensland over a three year period, from July 2012 to July 2015.

It found those living in regional and metropolitan Victoria were most at risk of being cut off multiple times.

"In Victoria, the roll out of smart meters, which enable disconnections to be done remotely instead of during a site visit, results in an increase in the disconnection completion rate," Gavin Dufty, energy spokesperson for the St Vincent de Paul Society said.

The report's recommendations are directed at energy policy makers and energy regulators at state and Commonwealth level.

"Energy policy and regulatory measures alone cannot prevent households from being disconnected," Mr Dufty said.

"Increased social security payments are also necessary to help households out of poverty."

The report includes maps and data tracking the frequency of disconnections at various times of the year, lending to commentary on whether weather driven consumption plays a role.

Other maps and data detail which postcodes incur the most number of disconnections.

In the outer western Melbourne suburb of Werribee, for example, it is estimated around 570 customers were disconnected twice during the three year period. 100 were cut off three times.

"When several households in a community are disconnected from electricity more than once over a three year period, we are arguably looking at members in these communities faced with entrenched poverty or ongoing financial hardship," Mr Dufty said.

"While the aim would always be that no households get disconnected from electricity due to an

inability to pay, we acknowledge that assistance and measures to reduce the number of disconnections occurring needs to be targeted, in order to reach households most at risk, as well as those most at risk of on-going financial hardship and multiple disconnections.”

Social harm caused by electricity disconnection include anxiety, emotional disorders, a loss of food and an inability to wash, St Vincent de Paul National Council CEO Dr John Falzon said.

“Electricity disconnections and energy exclusion are a growing problem that is entrenching poverty and hardship across Australia,” he said.

“Being disconnected can have profound impacts for households already struggling with everyday living costs, leading to adverse health and wellbeing effects, including an inability to cook, store food, heat or cool rooms, or stay in touch with the wider world.”

The report’s recommendations include:

- Scaling up energy efficiency programs targeting low-income households, particularly those in private rental properties and social and public housing.
- Strengthening regulatory protections for low-income and vulnerable households, including wrongful disconnection payments by retailers who do not follow the required processes when cutting off customers from their electricity supply.
- Improving the adequacy and targeting of energy concessions.
- Increased social security payments for households needing to be lifted out of poverty.
- Education programs that inform households about concession arrangements, access to energy retailer hardship programs, relief schemes and other relevant support measures, including information on how to navigate the energy retail market, by shopping around for the best deal.

A full copy of the report is available at [via www.vinnies.org.au/householdsinthedark](http://www.vinnies.org.au/householdsinthedark)

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