

The destitution of asylum seekers in Australia: Cuts to Status Resolution Support Service Payments



St Vincent de Paul Society National Council
POLICY BRIEFING | updated AUGUST 2018

SUMMARY: It is a fundamental belief of St Vincent de Paul Society members that all people are entitled to dignity and all are companions in our journey through life. Extreme poverty and destitution is an insult to a person's dignity. It is for this reason that the Society views with increasing concern the destitution forced on many people seeking asylum in our country.

Who are the people who are seeking asylum and vulnerable to destitution?

There are more than 15,000 people who are living in the Australian community on a bridging visa while their claim for refugee protection is processed. Most of these people had to wait at least three years before they were able to lodge their application for protection.

Why are these people who are seeking asylum becoming destitute?

Over the past year St Vincent de Paul Society has seen a significant increase in the number of people seeking asylum who need financial support to survive while awaiting resolution of their refugee status. For instance, in NSW, the [Asylum Seeker Program](#) has assisted over 30 people, including families, with living costs. Recent changes in Australian Government policy (including those relating to the 'Final Departure Bridging Visa E' and SRSS cuts) have meant that more people seeking asylum are at increasing risk of homelessness. As of March 2018, more than a third (37%) of the people supported by the Asylum Seeker Program had been sleeping rough at the time of referral, while the remainder (63%) were at risk of eviction and homelessness. The increase in homelessness and financial hardship has meant that Vinnies have started to play a larger role rather than only being called on to assist people from time to time in emergencies or because of unexpected costs.

A similar pattern is seen at the Vinnies Migrant and Refugee Centre in South Australia, as well as by Society members throughout the country as they respond to calls for assistance.

One of the major reasons that more and more people seeking asylum are becoming destitute is because the Australian Government has changed the way it administers the Status Resolution Support Service.

What is the Status Resolution Support Service Payment?

Support for people seeking asylum has been provided in recent years through the SRSS program. This program includes a basic living allowance which is provided to people while their claim for protection is being assessed. The payment is typically 89 percent of the Newstart Allowance (\$243 a week for a single person without children). The SRSS program also provides casework support and access to torture and trauma counselling.

As at 28 February 2018, 13,299 people were receiving support via the SRSS program.

While the SRSS payment is made through the Department of Human Services, it is the Department of Home Affairs that funds and decides who is eligible under the directive of the Minister. The rules of eligibility are unclear. The Department of Human Services website only states that:

"The Department of Home Affairs will decide if you can get this payment."



Unlike payments in our social security system where there are clear and transparent eligibility criteria, SRSS criteria can be changed at the discretion of the Minister and do not require Cabinet approval or legislative change. Consequently, it is difficult for those who receive the payment and those who give them assistance to understand what is happening when changes are made.

How have the rules for receiving the SRSS Payment changed?

The Department has heightened the vulnerability threshold and are unveiling a new, reduced support model with a number of restrictive eligibility criteria.

The precise nature of the new criteria has been unclear. Some changes have already been applied, while others are yet to be rolled out. People studying full-time and those who have sent money home to family and friends have already started losing their SRSS support. Exclusions have also applied to new applicants and asylum seekers who were on tourist, student or work visa before applying for refugee protection, and whose initial visa has not yet expired.

Initial indications from the Department suggested that people would be exited from the program if they were deemed "job ready". The most recent information suggests that job readiness will *not* be considered when assessing eligibility. Instead, to qualify for the payment asylum seekers will need to demonstrate they meet a high threshold of vulnerability, including:

- Physical health barriers that are ongoing, permanent disability, or cognitive impairment;
- Mental health barriers, with a current diagnosis and treatment plan in place;
- Single parents with pre-school aged children (children under six), pregnant women with complications, a primary carer for someone with a significant vulnerability, people aged 70 and over;
- A major crisis for the client (family violence, house fire, flood, etc).

Very few people will fit the new restrictive criteria. Under the revised rules, the Government has stated it intends to reduce the number of people receiving assistance to fewer than 5,000. This means around 8,000 currently on the program could lose access to basic income assistance, and thousands more will be unable to access any support if they need it at some point in the future.

The new rules are being rolled out progressively, initially targeting single adult men and women with work rights. In late June 2018, the first group of people assessed under the new draconian criteria (around 1,500) were notified they would be exited from the program. Income support started being cut off from this group in late July; access to all other SRSS support (e.g. torture and trauma counselling) was withdrawn in August.

Over the coming months, the new criteria will be progressively rolled out to other groups, including families with children. The Department has not announced when the next tranches of asylum seekers will be cut off from SRSS payments and support.

What other barriers are preventing asylum seekers from accessing SRSS payments?

A long-standing problem is that SRSS payments have not been paid to people who are awaiting a final decision on their refugee applications from the Courts after having their applications for refugee protection rejected by the Department of Home Affairs and the Immigration Assessment Authority. People who have recently put in an application to the Courts will need to wait years before their case is heard (some have even been given court dates in 2021). In the interim they receive no casework or financial support from the Australian Government.



A further complication arises because the issuing of bridging visas has been inconsistent. A bridging visa is a temporary arrangement that allows someone to stay before they receive a substantive visa such as a work, student, family or refugee visa.

There are no clear details on this policy from the Department of Home Affairs. Some people are issued bridging visas without income support, access to Medicare, work rights or study rights.

What has been the effect on people seeking asylum?

Case studies

Denying asylum seekers basic income support has pushed an already vulnerable group into deeper hardship. The case studies that follow give an insight into how the changes to SRSS have affected the lives of vulnerable people living in Australia (note some details have been changed to protect identities).

Case Study A

W is a 30-year-old Iranian man who escaped government persecution and came to Australia to seek protection. W received SRSS payments as he had a number of serious health concerns that prevented him from working, including Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), epilepsy and diabetes. When W received a negative decision and was told the only option was to appeal to the Courts, his SRSS payments were cut off. He was unable to pay for rent and was at risk of being evicted. Worse, he could not afford his medications and went for weeks at a time without insulin until he could borrow from friends. W was referred to the Vinnies Asylum Seeker Program in NSW, where financial assistance helped him to pay his rental arrears and stay in his accommodation. Even with this support, W remains very ill due to the stress of his visa conditions and the lack of options and support in Sydney.

Case Study B

X arrived by boat from Iran as a teenager and is seeking asylum. She currently holds a Bridging Visa but has applied for a SHEV (Safe Haven Enterprise Visa). She has managed to win a scholarship to study at a major university. The scholarship is for three years and provides her with an annual stipend of \$2,500. She is expected to use this money in part to pay an administration fee of \$500 and pay for books and any other items required for her course. Since being granted the scholarship, she has been informed that her SRSS benefit will no longer be paid. She is looking for part-time work but has not managed to find any yet.

Case Study C

Y and Z and their four children are Tamils seeking asylum who originally came from Sri Lanka. They escaped the civil war in that country by travelling to India, where they were told that they must return to Sri Lanka. Knowing that this was not an option, due to fears for their safety and ongoing persecution of Tamil people, they came to Australia by boat to seek asylum. They spent time in detention before being released into the community. Their application for a SHEV has been refused, despite clear evidence that people of Tamil background continue to be persecuted in Sri Lanka, especially those who have returned after seeking asylum elsewhere. The SRSS payments to the family of six were cut the moment the initial decision to refuse their application for a SHEV was made. They are appealing the decision – something that is very costly – and currently have no income whatsoever.

What are the implications of abandoning the notion of a universal safety net?

Since the middle of the twentieth century, Australia has committed to a universal safety net for all who live here. Partly this has been in response to the realisation that human rights for all people are important to guarantee peace and social cohesion. Partly, it is due to the Australian sense of a fair go for



everyone and the notion that no one in a prosperous country such as ours should be condemned to poverty. Finally, it is due to an empathetic realisation that anyone of us could fall on hard times; and if that happened to us, we would like there to be a safety net.

Since the late twentieth century, a countervailing view has gained momentum that promotes individual self-interest and the acquisition of wealth. In this vision, the marketplace has become the defining model for understanding people and society. People are valued, not because they have intrinsic worth, but because they have value to the market, which usually means that they have value to an employer. This narrow vision has contributed to a global reduction in safety net payments, and an increasing exclusion of the people who already bear the brunt of inequality and poverty.

It is important to see how our treatment of people who need SRSS payments is part of a wider pattern of exclusion of certain groups. In Australia, we see similar policies enacted against those on Disability Support Pension, Newstart Allowance, Youth Allowance and Austudy.

It is therefore important that this particularly vulnerable group of people, who have often experienced great suffering in the country from which they have come, are extended a firm and secure safety net. If we begin to unravel the safety net under them, we may find that the safety net eventually unravels under us all.

Recommendations – policy asks

We recommend that:

- all people seeking asylum in Australia be issued with bridging visas with the right to work, the right to study, and access to income support and Medicare;
- SRSS payments be paid on the basis of need to all those awaiting assessments or review of their claims for protection, including claims before the Courts;
- the eligibility criteria for SRSS payments be clearly set out in a public document that is published on the Department of Human Services website;
- the practice of denying SRSS payments to persons because they are studying or otherwise deemed eligible to work be discontinued. The criteria for the denial of the payment should be if the person is working and their income reaches a level which would exclude them if they were receiving Newstart Allowance; and,
- SRSS payments be increased to the level of the Newstart Allowance.

What can you do to help asylum seekers and change the policy?

Click [here](#) to access a letter to send to your local Member of Parliament.

Link with a local Vinnies support group for refugees and asylum seekers.

If in NSW you can download [posters](#) or contact social.justice@vinnies.org.au to order stickers to show your support.