

# Australia: Welfare cut leaves asylum seekers facing destitution

By Max Newman  
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In April, the Liberal-National Coalition government, then headed by Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, announced it would strip welfare payments from those asylum seekers temporarily living in Australia on bridging visas, and force them to look for work.

Since August, Prime Minister Scott Morrison has continued the policy, which affects refugees still waiting, often for many years, to have their protection visa applications finalised.

As of February, some 13,300 people relied on these payments. So far, roughly 1,000 people have been cut off. A new report by the Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA) reveals that this has placed almost 80 percent of them at risk of homelessness and destitution.

The Labor Party fully backed the decision to end the Status Resolution Support Service (SRSS). Shayne Neumann, Labor's immigration spokesman, declared that welfare "abuses" needed to be stamped out.

The paltry level of the SRSS payment has already pushed people into deprivation. It was set at 89 percent of the poverty-level Newstart unemployment benefit, leaving asylum seekers with just \$270 a week.

The SRSS provided essential casework services to help asylum seekers find cheap accommodation, as well as torture and trauma counselling. Now, overburdened charities are the sole suppliers of food and housing supports.

The RCOA surveyed the clients of 24 of these non-government organisations and concluded that 79 percent were at risk of homelessness and destitution without the SRSS. Of the 24 organisations, 17 were already providing emergency food and housing relief to people.

Just 8 percent of respondents had full-time work and only 20 percent were considered "job ready." Two-thirds were unable to find employment or were

not looking because of care requirements, age or poor health.

The Home Affairs Department claims to be cutting off only asylum seekers who have the capacity to support themselves. In April a departmental spokesperson said: "Individuals on a bridging visa with work rights and who have the capacity to work are expected to support themselves prior to being granted a substantive visa or departing Australia."

The RCOA survey, however, revealed extensive evidence that very vulnerable people have been affected. "It's undeniable," RCOA deputy director Rebecca Eckard said. "We know of people who are already couch-surfing, people staying in parks, living in each other's cars. It is, unfortunately, very much happening.

"If it weren't for some of the community organisations providing not just emergency relief but giving free housing or heavily subsidised housing, people would be completely on the streets."

The government specifically targeted people studying full-time. The departmental spokesperson said: "If an adult chooses to study full-time, when they are able to work, they are not eligible for SRSS income support."

A young female asylum seeker, Sarvenaz, told the *Guardian* she lost her benefit payments on her first day of study. "They actually didn't tell me, they just cut it off without explanation," she said. "I went to Centrelink to check what's going on and they said because you were studying we have to automatically stop your payment from the beginning of the semester."

Sarvenaz and her family had been on bridging visas for over four years. Initially forbidden to work, and then unable to find jobs, Sarvenaz and her sister volunteered with a charity organisation and enrolled at

a university. Sarvenaz's course required full-time attendance and she was ineligible for any student welfare support.

Sarvenaz commented: "How do people expect someone to arrive to this country—who doesn't have access to the services, who is stressing from the trauma they have been through and is an applicant who hasn't been processed, and doesn't have skills to work with and whose education history isn't accepted—[to] find work?"

The government has branded these people the "legacy caseload." The Greens-backed Gillard Labor government placed approximately 30,000 asylum seekers on bridging visas in 2012, when it scrapped permanent protection visas. The visas denied the right to family reunion and to work.

In dealing with the "legacy caseload," the government has introduced measures to speed up their deportation. In 2014, the Fast Track Assessment Program abolished previous rights to appeal visa refusals to a tribunal. Instead, the Immigration Assessment Authority (IAA) performs "on paper" reviews, in which applicants have no right to produce additional evidence. Since the IAA commenced operation, the application success rates have dropped from 90 percent to 70 percent.

In March 2017, with Labor's support, the government announced that refugees on bridging visas had 60 days to complete complex visa application documents or face deportation.

This year, the government stripped income support from around 190 refugees who had been transferred to Australia for medical treatment from the immigration prison camps on Nauru and Papua New Guinea's Manus Island. The refugees were thrust onto bridging visas and evicted from community detention houses.

Successive Coalition and Labor governments in Australia have pioneered the cruel and inhumane treatment of asylum seekers. Their "border protection" regime seeks to make refugees scapegoats for the deteriorating working and living conditions inflicted on the working class.

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