



Peter Saunders, Director of SPRC 1985–2007

For over three decades, SPRC research has focused attention on Australian poverty and inequality, including their level, how they are changing, how we compare internationally and the factors driving change. This body of work has impacted how Australians think about these issues and guided policy making in a range of areas. Specific examples include work on poverty and disability that helped identify a gap that led to the introduction of the NDIS, work on child poverty that shaped the Hawke Government's attack on child poverty in the late-1980s, work on inequality that has cast doubt on the achievements of Australian egalitarianism, and work on budget standards that has been used by the Fair Work Commission in its minimum wage decisions and to develop adequacy benchmarks for superannuation benefits. The centre's unsurpassed authoritative and increasingly influential research is currently being undertaken in collaboration with ACOSS and other leading NGOs under the Poverty and Inequality Initiative. This

major innovation allows researchers and policy practitioners to work together to identify research issues that need addressing and develop appropriate solutions.

It is difficult to imagine an Australia without the SPRC. Over the forty years since its establishment, the centre has contributed to a huge range of policy-relevant social research. It has also played a lead role in promoting the value and use of research, in ensuring that its findings are widely disseminated, in engaging with policy makers and practitioners, in providing on-the-job training and academic supervision to its staff and students, in advancing the discipline of social policy, and in raising the international profile of and knowledge about, Australia's social research and policies.

These contributions have impacted on the way social issues are identified, conceptualised, measured, assessed, debated and addressed, as well as on the way that social policy is conceived, implemented, monitored, evaluated and improved. Impacts have been examined at the individual, household and community level, at the organisational and institutional level and at the national and international level.

These achievements mark the centre out as far broader in the scope of its activity than is normal for a university-based research centre. Few research centres have played such a central role in promoting the discipline of which they are part, including in the centre's case sponsoring, organising and promoting the biennial Australian Social Policy Conference for over 30 years and playing a lead role in the establishment of the Australian Social Policy Association over a decade ago. These initiatives have provided forums for current and future generations of social policy researchers and practitioners to interact with leading researchers and become familiar with major research developments and findings. These interactions will be of lasting value to Australian efforts to draw on research evidence to better understand social problems and guide improved policies to address them.

These claims were implicitly endorsed by ex-Minister for Social Security and Deputy prime Minister Brian Howe, who noted in a speech to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the centre in 2005 that:

'The SPRC ... has survived as an outstanding Centre for excellence for the study of social policy for a quarter of a century [and] is part of a strong tradition of evidenced based research, policy and social reform. I am sure that its impact will be even greater over the next twenty-five years.'

The impact of the centre's work has been greatest in its areas of specialisation, specifically in relation to poverty, social and economic inequality, household needs and living standards, gender, child protection, disability, social security, employment and unemployment, the role and impact of the community sector and social exclusion. In all these areas, its contributions have highlighted the nature of the issues, monitored and interpreted key trends and examined the impact of policy interventions and other factors.

Its many and varied international contributions have impacted how Australia compares with other similar countries in terms of policy effects and effectiveness. Its research on Chinese social policy – often conducted in partnership with Chinese researchers and with the support of leading government agencies and civil society institutions - has generated important advances in understanding of social issues in China and has had profound impacts in several areas. The international community of social policy scholars would recognise the SPRC as the pre-eminent Australian research institute, reflecting its scholarly status as well as its related work and overall impact.

Few discussions of social policy in Australia today take place without some reference to the work of the centre. In the area of poverty, its reporting on current levels and monitoring of trends is widely cited in the media and by political and community leaders as being definitive and providing a baseline for understanding the current situation and developing reform proposals. This is just one area of the centre's many areas of activity and there are many others where similar claims of impact are warranted and apposite. Throughout its four decades of existence, the SPRC has worked to produce the best quality research, always drawing on the best approaches in order to inform community understanding and contribute to improving the circumstances of vulnerable Australians. Developing, disseminating and applying the best research has been and remains the basis for its impact.