

Submission on 'A Fair Chance for All'

1. What are the main dimensions of persistent disadvantage that should be included in the Terms of Reference as areas to be investigated?

In my experience of working with clients, the main dimensions of persistent disadvantage are around the inter-connected issues of trauma, mental health issues and addictions, racism/legacy of colonisation, and insecure housing, all of which have strong inter-generational impacts. Varying degrees of mental health issues emerge as a common theme for many disadvantaged people, and sometimes it is difficult to say whether it is cause or the effect of other negative factors in their lives. In either case, mental health needs to be tackled first as one of the key causes of ongoing harm, with early intervention being a priority.

2. Where should the Commission focus its research effort?

I would like to see more research into exploring what degree of personal change is possible if disadvantaged people are given free and unlimited access one-to-one talk therapy or small-group (peer support) workshops - tailored to their individual needs and preferences, rather than a 'one-size-fits-all' approach. I believe that one of the key barriers preventing disadvantaged New Zealanders from reaching their potential is their lack of self-belief - based on past 'failures' - and as a result of that, their inability to see themselves succeeding even if they do try new options/ways of being. If done too quickly or impersonally, well-intentioned interventions can lead to this self-fulfilling prophecy, and set up clients for further disappointments if they are just thrown in the at the deep end of change. However, I have seen some evidence that when people have the opportunity to explore new ways of seeing themselves, at their own pace, and with help to nurture their self-belief in a safe environment, they can start gaining a real sense of hope. Then they can begin imagining possibilities that they had previously thought were beyond their reach.

3. Where should the government focus its effort on finding solutions?

(a) What are the key barriers preventing New Zealanders from reaching their potential?

I believe that trauma – from emotional/physical &/or sexual abuse or abandonment, and discrimination based on race – including the collective trauma of colonisation – and/or social class creates initial barriers. Flowing on from that, their coping mechanisms for dealing with that trauma often include 'self-medicating' with alcohol or other drugs, leading to further personal harm and social consequences.

(b) What are the key triggers or circumstances that can result in people becoming stuck in persistent disadvantage? The following (true) case study illustrates this point. A person with a history of childhood (plus later life) trauma developed generalised anxiety and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. They distrusted the medication they were initially prescribed as they didn't like its side effects, so they preferred to smoke cannabis to self-medicate. That gave them some degree of wellbeing and the sense that they could handle day to day life. They were offered paid employment and eagerly accepted the opportunity to earn more than the benefit provided. After many months of enjoying the work and doing well there, they failed a routine drug test and were faced with a stand-down from the job until they could pass another drug test. Their dilemma is that they can't imagine a way of managing life without self-medicating, so they reluctantly turn their back on the job that was still available for them, and reapply for the benefit again.

(c) Are there key windows of opportunity in a person's life course where positive changes are easier to secure, or where they are more likely to endure?

It is fair to say that the younger a person is the more receptive they could potentially be to hearing positive messages, and that could prevent them from going down a negative track with their life. However, some people are not ready to hear those messages at a young age, and they may require further life experience before they come to the realisation that they do need to try a different way. In my opinion, it is never too late to make positive changes, no matter how old a person is, and if they can truly see for themselves the value of making those changes, they have a good chance of sticking with them. The neuroplasticity of the brain enables people to cement in good habits at any stage of life, if they are willing to consistently put in the effort required.

(d) Which aspects of government policy are most important to focus on?

Mental health needs far more funding, and a greater focus on prevention and early intervention, rather than just supporting people at the crisis stage.

The findings of the Welfare Expert Advisory Group need to be revisited, and implemented in full.

And it is impossible to ignore the importance of fast-tracking the roll-out of new social houses throughout New Zealand, as security of housing tenure undoubtedly leads to greater stability in other areas of a person's life and decreases anxiety. There is also a need to ensure full compliance with the new legislation around warm, dry and safe rental homes.

(e) Are changes needed in the way that government services are provided?

All Government services would be much improved if they were to take a more holistic approach to people's needs. And this presupposes a greater level of cohesion between government agencies to allow for a more joined-up model of service provision.

4. Is there anything else that you would like to see in the Terms of Reference for this enquiry?

All of the above will be good enough 😊