Sharing the burden in ‘Risk Society’

The impacts of welfare-to-work policy on the children of sole-parents in Australia

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For the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

29th May, 2017

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A 95,000-word thesis submitted in total fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Abstract

Life in developed Western society has changed significantly from that of just a generation ago. In his book ‘Risk Society’ Ulrich Beck (1992) argues that at the heart of this change lie a number of broad social and economic shifts that have come together to produce individualisation, where people are ‘set free’ from the bonds and norms of traditional society and re-embedded via secondary institutions such as the labour market, education and the welfare state. The research underpinning this thesis sought to discover how these changes are manifest in the lives of Australian children whose sole-parents are receiving income support as part of welfare-to-work policy regimes. It explores how children experience and construct meaning from the impacts of recent policy reforms and their roles as active agents in shaping their lives and the lives of others. The findings contribute to existing knowledge about children’s lives and will inform the design and implementation of welfare and family policy. The study adopted a ‘life-course sensitised’ approach to researching the lived experiences of children, particularly in relation to the interdependent relationships within their families. The qualitative research employed narrative interviews with twenty sole-mothers alongside child-centred participatory methods to allow their children’s voices to be heard directly concerning their experiences and sense-making about poverty and social exclusion resulting from the impacts of welfare-to-work policy in their lives.
Statement of authorship

“Except where reference is made in the text of the thesis, this thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or in part from a thesis submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma. No other person’s work has been used without due acknowledgment in the main text of the thesis. This thesis has not been submitted for the award of any degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution”

Signed:

Jennifer Anne Podesta

29th May, 2017
Preface and Acknowledgements

This thesis is an examination of the impacts of the current welfare-to-work policy in Australia on the lives of children in sole-parent families. As I began my research just over 5 years ago, I was somewhat anxious that policy in this area may change in ways that would make my research irrelevant before I had even submitted my thesis. I need not have been concerned.

The political and economic climate in Australia over the past four to five years has been such that successive governments have only acted to further tighten the amounts of income support and the conditions under which it is paid. The results of this speak for themselves as figures released earlier in 2016 by the Australian Council of Social Services indicate a marked increase in the number of children living in poverty in Australia over the past four years, many of whom are the children of sole-parents.

As an early career sociologist my research interests have consistently focused on the impacts of structural inequality on the lives of families and in particular children. Having returned to study myself as a mature-aged, sole-parent of three children, my own lived experience following a divorce after over twenty years of marriage and the consequences for my children provided valuable insights in this field.

Additionally, my interest in social democratic politics and the burgeoning structural inequalities that have emerged globally under neo-liberal economic policy regimes have led me to believe that it is only through substantial policy initiatives, structural change and a focus on policy interventions at strategic points in young people’s lives that this will change.

The impacts this inequality has had on the lives of the families in this study on occasion left me in despair, as does my doubt that anything will change in significant enough ways to remove the structural barriers that stand in the way of them living full and productive lives. However, I have persisted in the hope that the voices of the children themselves may move hearts and policy in ways that will make a difference. The determination of many of the mothers in this study to ensure that their children had the best possible opportunities regardless of their financial circumstances was also heartening.

I wish to express my sincere thanks to the families that took part in this study. For many it was humiliating and emotionally difficult and the time it took from their already busy and challenging lives was very much appreciated.

I would also like to express my gratitude to my supervisors Dr. Jens Zinn and Dr. Eve Bodsworth, whom along with other academics at the SSPS at University of Melbourne have encouraged, supported and not lost hope in my ability to complete this thesis despite the many interruptions and detours that life has presented along the way.

To my friends and fellow academics with whom I have shared this journey, thank you for your insights, encouragement and company. Even when our respective paths have drawn us apart to work in solitude, those occasional few words or a quick catch-up have sustained me.

I would like to thank my wonderful husband and partner Tim, who has worked so hard to make the time and space for me to do what I needed to do and believed in me and my work.
would also like to thank my remarkable children who continue to be my inspiration and motivation. The love of my family has sustained me.

Towards the end of this long journey I tragically and suddenly lost a very dear friend. He had walked beside me as I undertook this and many other life projects as mentor, counsel and perhaps most importantly drinking mate. He was a young man, full of potential and possibility, generous and wise beyond his years. I dedicate this thesis to his memory. His short years were in no way a measure of his contribution to this world. My short time with him is cherished and his friendship and counsel will be forever missed.

Lachlan William Rhodes

(1987-2016)
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<td>Australian Council of Social Services</td>
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<td>ASIB</td>
<td>Australian Social Inclusion Board</td>
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<tr>
<td>DEEWR</td>
<td>Department of Education, Employment and Work Place Relations, previously Department of Employment and Work Place Relations (DEWR)</td>
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<td>EMA</td>
<td>Education Maintenance Allowance previously paid to welfare recipients to support the costs of further education.</td>
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<td>JET</td>
<td>Job Education and Training</td>
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<td>JSA</td>
<td>Job Search Australia - privatised job agencies that receive payment from the government based on successful job placements, now called Jobs Australia</td>
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<td>OECD</td>
<td>Organisation for Education and Child Development</td>
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<td>UNCRC</td>
<td>United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child</td>
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<td>NSA</td>
<td>Newstart Allowance - an income support programme for unemployed singles and couples and sole-parents with children 8- years-old and over</td>
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<tr>
<td>PLS</td>
<td>Plain Language Statement provided information about the research to participants in language that is easily understood and does not use technical or complex language.</td>
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<tr>
<td>PPS</td>
<td>Parent Payment Single - an income support programme for sole-parents with a youngest child under 8-years-old</td>
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<td>PRA</td>
<td>Participatory Rural Appraisal is a research practice in the constructivist paradigm where the emphasis is on the visual representation of ideas. It is the often used in International Development research generally employed in rural communities where there are low levels of literacy and where the collection of data cannot rely on the reading and writing skills of the participants employed as a research method with children.</td>
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**Definitions**

**Activation**  
Policy approaches that seek to increase the engagement of individuals in the paid labour market.

**Centrelink**  
The bureaucratic institution charged with overseeing the payment of income support and other government social services in Australia.

**Child**  
An individual under the age of 18 years old as defined by UNCRC.

**Governmentality**  
A concept defined by Michel Foucault (1991) to describe the organised practices and strategies (mentalities, rationalities and techniques) employed by governments and by which subjects are rendered governable.

**Individualisation**  
The consequence of social changes in late modernity, in which individuals are increasingly required to construct their own lives.

**Late modernity**  
Sociological concept referring to the technological and social changes since the 1960s. The concept of ‘late modernity’ proposes that contemporary societies are a clear continuation of modern institutional transitions and cultural developments. Giddens (1991) also refers to ‘reflexive modernization’ where social practices are constantly examined and reformed in the light of incoming information about those very practices. Late modernity has also been characterised as ‘liquid modernity’ (Bauman, 2001), and ‘risk society’ (Beck, 1992).

**Life-course**  
The life course approach, also known as the life course perspective or life course theory, refers to an approach developed in the 1960s for analysing people's lives within structural, social, and cultural contexts.

**Poverty-line**  
In this thesis the term poverty is used to describe a condition whereby families are unable to afford the things that would be considered basic human rights in a developed society such as secure housing, food, transport, and health care.

**Regional centre**  
Refers to large populated centres of approximately 50,000 people located or more but situated in a largely rural area.

**Rural town**  
Refers to small townships of less than 5000 people that are usually located some distance from large regional or metropolitan centre.
**Risk**  
A systematic approach to conceptualising and dealing with social, economic and environmental hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernisation itself (Beck 1992:21)

**Social in/exclusion**  
Social exclusion is the process by which individuals or people are systematically blocked from (or denied full access to) various rights, opportunities and resources that are normally available to members of a different group, and are fundamental to social integration within that particular group (e.g., housing, employment, healthcare, civic engagement, democratic participation, and due process).

**Sole-parent**  
A parent who is married/separate or single but has sole responsibility for the primary care and support of their child/ren. Also referred to as single-parents and lone-parents in the literature.

**Welfare-to-work**  
Active labour market policies that seek to closely integrate labour market programs and income support policies that have been progressively introduced since the mid 1980s in Australia along with most other OECD countries. The reforms increased the range and number of people required to look for and accept work and expanded the support and assistance provided to these typically disadvantaged jobseekers. In particular, the reforms targeted principal carer parents, people with disabilities, mature age job seekers and the very long-term unemployed.
1. An introduction to the thesis

In Australia in 2016, over 290,000 children in sole-parent families were living below the poverty line\(^1\). This represents over forty percent of the children in sole-parent families that now make up a third of all Australian children (ACOSS, 2016, pp. 7-9). Recent studies have suggested that sole-parent families in Australia who rely on income support are now up to six thousand dollars per year worse off than they were just a decade ago as a result of the cumulative impacts of cuts to payments and other allowances (Joseph & Phillips, 2016). The Poverty in Australia Report (ACOSS, 2016) found children in sole-parent families are almost three times more like to be living below the income poverty line as children in coupled-parent families. In 2013, welfare policy reform implemented by the Gillard Labor government in Australia moved all sole-parents who were reliant on income support on to Newstart Allowance (NSA) from the more generous Parenting Payment Single (PPS) if their youngest child was eight-years-old or older. The stated aim of this reform was to activate sole-parents into the paid labour market (DEEWR, 2102). It resulted in a significant reduction in the amount of income support paid to sole-parents and a tightening of the conditions under which it was paid. This thesis sheds light on how the sole-parent families in this study have been impacted by these reforms. It has made space within the research for children’s voices to be heard directly about their lived experiences and the roles they play as social actors in adapting, contributing to their family’s resources, and in shaping their lives. To understand both the reality of the lived experiences of the families and also to draw out their sense-making about these

\(^1\) The Poverty in Australia, 2016 Report (ACOSS, 2106) uses the measure <50 percent of median income to define the income poverty line.
experiences, the research employed a qualitative study with twenty sole-parents and their children living in rural and regional Victoria and inner and suburban Melbourne, in Australia.

This introductory chapter begins by setting the policy context and research rationale for this study. It describes the broad social and economic shifts in contemporary Western societies that are epitomised by the changing nature of the welfare state. It then articulates the aims of the research, the thesis question and the guiding themes that seek to add to our knowledge about how these shifts have impacted on the lives of children in sole-parent families in this study. The value of making space within the research to hear the voices of children themselves on these issues is explained and finally, the contributions of this thesis and its overall structure are outlined.

When theorising about societal change towards the end of the twentieth century, sociologists (Bauman, 2000; Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991) have identified a shift in many of the traditional structures and institutions of modern industrial societies. These have been described as ‘liquid modernity’ (Bauman, 2000), ‘late modernity’ (Giddens, 2002) and perhaps most famously as ‘Risk Society’ (Beck, 1992). In what has been described as a process of detraditionalisation where many of the constraints around gender, religion, work, class, ethnicity, and family structures have become weaker, individuals are regarded as increasingly having the liberty, and in some cases the obligation, to choose pathways outside of traditional norms (Bauman, 2001; Beck, 1994; Giddens, 1991). The growth in rates of divorce and the proliferation of other parenting arrangements outside of the traditional nuclear family and the increased participation of women in the labour market are examples of this detraditionalisation.
There appears to be more individual freedoms, greater choice and opportunity, not least for women (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, pp. 54-84). However, the paradoxical nature of these freedoms has also been noted, as individuals are required to make decisions, but often with little actual choice, and are increasingly responsible for managing the risks associated with their decisions. Social issues that had previously been regarded as collective concerns, such as unemployment, are now regarded as largely the responsibility of the individual (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1996, pp. 23-48). This has led to what Taylor-Gooby (2004, pp. 10-11) describes as ‘new social risks’ for individuals and groups at particular life-stages: for example, insecure employment, changes to family and gender relationships with women increasingly in the labour market, and longer life expectancy. These are often more serious for minorities or those who do not have adequate financial resources, education or family support. These new risks have implications for poverty, inequality, individual life chances, and the welfare state. Unlike ‘old risks’ that early welfare states developed to deal with, those primarily related to death (widowhood) or aging (retirement pensions), new social risks affect people from much earlier in their lives and are mainly associated with labour force entry and family care responsibilities (Taylor-Gooby, 2004, p. 10). This thesis draws as its particular focus the new social risks associated with sole-parent families and more specifically the implications for their children. This is an issue of both social and economic relevance in contemporary societies where, as a result of growing divorce rates and non-standard family structures, increasing numbers of children are living in sole-parent families.
In what Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002, pp. 85-100) described as the age of the ‘post-familial family’, sole-parents caring for dependent children now make-up an increasingly significant section of populations across Western societies worldwide (Grall, 2013; ONS, 2012). Over the past two decades in Australia, sole-parent families have increased from fourteen percent of all families to over twenty-one percent in 2012, with two-thirds of these are as a result of divorce or separation. Seventy percent of all sole-mothers in Australia are between thirty and forty-nine years of age (ABS, 2012, 2013a), thus challenging dominant stereotypes of a problem of ‘teenage single-mums’. The recent changes to welfare-to-work policy (CofA, 2012) that are the focus of this study, predominantly impact on these older mothers whose children are at least eight-years-old. Research in Australia has found that although sole-mothers are as likely as coupled mothers to be employed full-time they are far less likely to be employed part-time and more likely to be in low paid work, unemployed or in receipt of income support (HILDA, 2013). Almost half of all sole-parent households are classified as having low economic resources as a result of being in either low-paid employment, on income support, or a combination of both. (ABS, 2012; ACOSS, 2016). The number of sole-parent families in Australia relying on income support is predicted to increase over the next few years (ABS, 2012), potentially leaving even greater numbers of children at risk of experiencing not only financial disadvantage but also complex domestic lives, and social exclusion (Skattebol, Saunders, Redmond, Bedford, & Cass, 2012).

Australia is not alone in experiencing these changes. In seeking to provide support for those most affected by these new social risks, governments in developed Western nations have taken a range of approaches over recent decades. These are broadly
based on nationally distinct socio-cultural norms with some, for example most Scandinavian countries, adopting social investment models that heavily subsidise child-care in order to support the full employment of women. ‘Flexicurity’ policy approaches, such as those in implemented in Denmark, attempt to promote a flexible labour market attachment through ‘activation’ combined with the security of a generous social safety-net (Andersen, 2015; Bekker & Wilthagen, 2008). Other countries such as Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom have moved towards ‘activation’ type policies that rely on the tightening of income support in the hopes of coercing sole-parents into paid employment (Grahame & Marston, 2012). Current research in this field (ACOSS, 2017; Joseph & Phillips, 2016) would suggest that the approach adopted in Australia under welfare-to-work policy is not serving sole-parent families well as they become increasingly exposed to poverty and social exclusion. The implications of this approach on the lives of the children in sole-parent families in Australia provides the focus of this thesis.

1.1 The changing welfare state

In most Western industrialised societies between the 1950s and 1970s–the post-war ‘Golden Age’ of welfare capitalism–an ideal model of a life-course with differing but complimentary roles for men and women, and based on a ‘male breadwinner’ family model, was the normative expectation (Kohli, 1986). Under this model the husband assumed full-time paid employment and the wife tended to the unpaid caring and domestic duties in the home. In Australia, this model was the norm for the majority of families and the basis for welfare policy throughout most of the twentieth century; it arguably remains intact today (Bowman, Bodsworth, & Zinn, 2013, pp. 278-279;
Lake, 1999). The welfare state in Australia was undergirded by a blend of policies founded on residual welfare targeting those deemed deserving of support, tariff protection and centralised wage fixing, with full employment as a policy goal (Castles, 1985). The male breadwinner model and the responsibility for adult wage-earners to provide for their families also underpinned neo-liberal market-based policies and provided support for traditional family forms (Daly, 2011). Despite the push of second-wave feminism for economic independence and equality for women in the labour market (Lake, 1999, pp. 4-5), in many developed Western states the lack of structural supports for women’s full workforce participation, such as affordable child care, has resulted in what Esping-Anderson (2009) termed an ‘incomplete revolution’. As a result, for most families a ‘modified’ breadwinner norm with a full-time male earner and part-time mother/worker is the only sustainable option (Cass & Brennan, 2003, p. 40). At a time when the deregulated labour market has eroded the standardised model of employment, creating more flexibility and casualisation, Pocock (2003, p. 8) argues that the global market has found a ‘happy conspirator’ in women’s desire for ‘flexible’ labour. However, accompanying this flexibility is a decrease in employment security and increased risks for women who are less likely than men to be financially autonomous (Bowman et al., 2013). Although women are now participating in work at higher rates, conventional gender norms in the domestic sphere are extremely resistant to change, particularly once children arrive (Esping-Anderson, 2009, pp. 19, 31). For sole-parent families, where the breadwinner and domestic and caring responsibilities are often borne alone, this becomes even more problematic with tensions and contradictions around the nexus of family and work, the public/private balance of child-care provision, traditional family

Australia, similar to many other OECD countries over the past two decades, has increasingly moved from ‘passive welfare’, to policy positions that tighten the conditions under which welfare is provided, favouring policies that individualise the responsibility for managing risks and insecurities (Marston, 2010) and focus on activating recipients into the labour market (Lodemel & Stafford, 2002; OECD, 2007). Known as welfare-to-work or workfare, this policy approach conflates work and welfare in such a way as to make income support conditional on participation in state-sanctioned employment related activities (Marston & MacDonald, 2007; Marston, 2008). Welfare-to-work also aims to enhance economic efficiency and productivity through outcomes such as improved access to the labour market and the development of job-related skills (Lodemel & Stafford, 2002). This ‘activation’ approach is regarded as a key policy lever in the reduction of poverty and disadvantage and there is an argument that ‘an active welfare state will not only encourage job growth, it will also help to bring the socially excluded back into the paid labour market’ (Handler, 2003, p. 230). In Australia, welfare-to-work policy has also been a central feature of the policy goals of the Australian Social Inclusion Board (Adams & Thomas, 2007; ASIB, 2011; Gillard, 2007).

Scholars (Levitas, 2005; Marston, 2008; Murphy, Murray, Chalmers, Martin, & Marston, 2011) argue that the activation approach takes on a distinctly moralising agenda when unemployed groups, such as sole-mothers, are constructed in public and policy discourse as welfare dependent, work averse, and poor role-models for their children. Research in Australia finding links between family joblessness and
children’s future life chances (Gray & Baxter, 2011) has been used by policy makers in Australia to justify ‘activation’ policy approaches as a means to improving outcomes for children. However, as Prout (2000, pp. 305-306) argues, research of this nature linking childhood outcomes with adult circumstances, can lead to policy that focuses on ‘the futurity of children’ or the ‘better [future] adult lives’ it will produce; in doing so it can overlook the effects of policy on the lives of children in the present. Redmond (2010, p. 471) further suggests that the current policy setting creates contradictions between the ways in which children are responding to the ‘activation’ of their mothers and ‘the states expectations of children as objects of investment and protection’.

In recent years, as part of the welfare-to-work agenda, consecutive Australian governments have introduced increasingly punitive measures for sole-parents who are dependent on income support. In what Murphy and colleagues (2011, p. 8) describe as a ‘sticks instead of carrots’ approach, benefits were reduced, the conditions under which they were paid was tightened, and allowances for maternal further education was reduced. In January 2013, continuing a tranche of ongoing reforms over the previous decade, the Gillard Labor government in Australia introduced changes to the Social Security Act (CoA, 2012) that moved an estimated 80,000 sole-parents off the support programme known as Parenting Payment Single (PPS) and onto the unemployment benefit, Newstart Allowance (NSA). These changes have drawn strong criticism from scholars (Bodsworth, 2011; Brady, 2007; Cook, Davis, Smyth, & McKenzie, 2009; Grahame & Marston, 2012; Howe, 2010; McDonald & Marston, 2005) and peak bodies representing welfare recipients and sole-parents (ACOSS, 2012; 2013b; 2016), not least because of the implications they hold for the children in
these families. These reforms were concomitant with other changes to Child Support arrangements in Australia, that have generally led to a reduction in the payments sole-mothers receive from their former partners and fathers of their children (Summerfield, Young, Harman, & Flatau, 2010). Examining these changes in detail is outside the scope of this thesis, however the findings reveal they have contributed to the impacts of the recent policy change on children’s lives. The most recent report from the Australian Council for Social Services (ACOSS, 2016) found that the incidence of poverty in children from sole-parent families had increased from 36.8 percent in 2012 to over forty percent in 2014. This represents an additional 11,000 children living below the poverty line. The report directly attributed this rise to the reduction in the amount of the income support payment for sole-parents on relying on NSA (ACOSS, 2016, pp.7-9).

Poverty and social exclusion can have profound effects on children’s educational outcomes, social and material wellbeing, and their health and this can have significant life-course repercussions (Duncan, Brooks Gunn, & Klebanov, 1994; Ridge, 2002; Skattebol et al., 2012). There has been substantive research focused on the experiences of sole-parents’ and their transitions in and out of employment under welfare-to-work policies (Bodsworth, 2010; Cook et al., 2009; Grahame & Marston, 2012; Smith, 2006). Considerably less is known about how children themselves experience and interpret their parents’ welfare-to-work transitions: the impacts it has on family life as well as their education; peer relationships; sense of security; and future aspirations. Hearing the voices of children themselves can not only assist in developing policy that is more sensitive to their needs but can also contribute to building a social ontology of childhood: what it is like to be a child; what is the same
or different about children’s experiences and children’s agency; and what are the
diverse and varying factors that impact on their lives? Wyness (2012, p. 58) argues
that ‘despite the logic of individualisation opening up space for children’s agency,
contemporary sociological theory ignores the position of children’. As such, this
thesis contributes to an understanding of children, not just as future adults but as an
integral social group in their own right.

The extent that children share the burden of managing and contributing to their
families’ resources as active agents and the implications this has for their own lives is
also somewhat obscured in current research. Ridge’s (2002; 2007) pioneering work
in the United Kingdom and research by Skattebol and colleagues (2012) with
disadvantaged children in Australia are exemplars. This gap in our knowledge can
lead to inadequate adult constructions of childhood that are remote from the lived
experiences and actions of children (Wyness, 20112, p. 8) and policy responses that
‘fail to account for the lives and experiences of children’ (Mason & Danby, 2011, p.
188). Much of the research in Australia into the impacts of poverty and disadvantage
in children’s lives draws on large samples of standardised data from surveys and birth
cohort studies (for example see AIFS, 2011) where data are collected from adults.
Making a space for children’s voices to be heard directly stands this study apart.

1.2 The aims of the study and research questions

This study had two central aims: firstly, to understand the implications of welfare-to-
work policy for sole-parents and their children and how this may be contributing to an
increased risk of poverty and social exclusion in their lives. Secondly, drawing on
sociological conceptualisations of childhood and agency, it seeks to contribute to our
knowledge about the role children play as independent creative agents in supporting their families and contributing to their lives, and how this could be understood within the context of wider social processes of individualisation (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). The implications this has for policy design are also drawn out.

The study took a ‘life-course’ perspective (Elder, 1974), that allowed for the particular social, cultural, and economic influences of the research field (Elder, 1977, 1994), but was also sensitive to the interdependent lives of families and others (Huinink, 2009). The importance of the timing of life events and transitions in an individual’s life (Elder, 1994), and the implications for their future life chances were also considerations, as was an understanding that life events do not always follow in the expected normative orders or timing (Dewilde, 2003). A life-course sensitised approach regards these issues as being integral to processes of adaptation and the agency of individuals and families, and to the appropriate social policy responses (Bowman et al., 2013; Chan, Zinn, & Wang, 2016; Elder, 1994).

The principal research question posed by this study is:

*How do children in sole-parent families in Australia experience and make sense of their mother’s welfare-to-work obligations and how does it impact on their lives?*

It further investigates the following key dimensions that are commonly considered central in this field:

- How do the children of sole-parents on income support make sense of their experiences of poverty and social exclusion in the context of welfare-to-work;
- What role do the interdependent relationships of families and others play in mitigating the experience of poverty and social exclusion;
- What role does children’s agency play in managing and shaping their own and their families lives; and
- In what ways does welfare-to-work expose children to greater risk and responsibility for their own life outcomes?

1.3 Including children in research

The twenty-six children included in this study were aged from eight to seventeen-years-old. Their lives were diverse and the lived experiences of poverty and social exclusion were a feature of all of their stories. James and Prout (1997) contend that the study of childhood in the social sciences has been marked not so much by an absence of interest in children, but by their silence. Similarly, Qvortrup (1997, p. 88) posits that ‘children [are] the invisible group par excellence…not only in statistics but in many other types of social accounting’, arguing that ‘as soon as the dynamics of individual development are replaced by childhood as a factor of societal dynamics, systematic approaches are lacking’. In 1989, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) spawned international interest in children’s participation rights that is regarded to have significantly influenced the emerging field of the Sociology of Childhood (Mayall, 2002; Qvortrup, 1991). The past decades have seen moves to rectify the lack of space within research for children and they have increasingly been given a voice within research across a range of issues (see for examples Backett-Milburn & Harden, 2004; James & Christensen, 2008; Patterson, 2002; Ridge, 2002). More recently researchers have moved to seek perspectives from
children as hidden victims of abuse, neglect and violence (AHRC, 2014; Bagshaw, 2007; Carroll-Lind, Chapman, & Raskauskas, 2011). In Australia however, social scientists have generally been slower to take up research with children. The specific ethical challenges of conducting research with children, particularly when they are already vulnerable, are seen as one reason for this lack of presence (Morris, Hegarty, & Humphreys, 2012).

The benefits to children and to wider society from having a greater understanding of children’s accounts of their lives are significant. Qvortrup (1997: 88-89) warns that in Western societies children represent an increasingly diminishing proportion of the population. This raises concern on two levels: on one hand, as a decreasing minority their welfare will be of less concern to adults as they compete for increasingly scarce government resources; on the other, as their numbers decrease, their welfare, wellbeing, and productivity will be vital to the ongoing sustainability of aging societies in the future. Hence, in providing greater knowledge about children’s lives, this study represents a timely and relevant contribution.

The past two decades have seen a gradual increase in the inclusion of children’s voices in social research along with improvements in research methods to draw out richer first-hand data from children’s experiences and perspectives. A change in paradigmatic stance about children as agents and thinkers (Christensen & James, 2008; Greene & Hogan, 2005; Hallet & Prout, 2003; MacNaughton, Smith, & Davis, 2007; Thomson, 2008) and the fruition of participatory and creative methods, means social research can better influence practices and policies to be more child-centred and appropriate to children’s contemporary circumstances.
In Australia, where the responsibility for providing for and raising children is largely regarded as a private matter, family life and the needs of children are often excluded from the distributional justice of the welfare state designed to mitigate the effects of social risks (Deater-Deckard & Dunn, 1999, p. 221; Redmond, 2010). Although state support for families has increased in recent years (for example, for child-care and paid maternity leave) this is largely justified as a productivity measure to support working mothers in the labour market, rather than as meeting the needs of children per say. Wintersberger (1986) contends that all welfare states are to a large extent ‘child-blind’ in the sense that children are neglected both conceptually and practically. Others (Prout, 2000; Lister, 2003) argue that whilst children have valid claims to welfare based purely on their current needs and interests, their contribution and relevance for the economic and productive system, both in the present and the future, are generally overlooked in social policy. Even in Sweden, which is regarded as one of the most generous ‘child-friendly’ welfare states, Fernqvist (2011, p. 227) contends children are ‘passive non-participants in the welfare discourse’. She, along with other scholars (Fernqvist, 2011; Olk & Wintersberger, 2007), calls for ‘a child-oriented welfare perspective’ built around criteria that take account of children’s experiences and access to resources as children.

Our understandings of childhood, both through scholarly and popular literature, construct children and childhood in ways that are imbued with cultural, historical, and philosophical meanings (Qvortrup, 1991). The constructions of childhood that emerge from many academic approaches, and this study is no exception, represent essentially Western understandings of children as ‘priceless’ (Zelizer, 1985) and protected objects of investment (Redmond, 2012). Sociologically this thesis proposes
a construction of the child as an active participant: encouraging and valuing their contribution to the existing body of knowledge about their lives and their worlds but at the same time acknowledging the interdependence of the parent-child relationship. It acts upon the principles of the UNCRC (1989), in particular Article 3.6, and Article 12, that stipulate that: children have an explicit right not to be discriminated against; to have their views heard and respected; and to influence decisions about their lives. It also takes from the UNCRC its definition of ‘a child’ as being under eighteen years of age and as such ignores conventional research boundaries between childhood and youth studies, although this is acknowledged and accommodated within the research design detailed in Chapter Five.

1.4 The contributions of the thesis

The findings from this study provide a sense of the diversity that exists within the group ‘sole-parent families’, highlighting a range of socio-structural factors that intersect to mediate the implications of welfare-to-work policy for families. These include poor health and mental health, maternal educational attainment, lack of social support networks, limited public transport and the cost of maintaining a vehicle, limited financial resources, and housing insecurity. They point to how these factors can act as barriers to work-force participation for sole-parents. Through the deep, rich data collected in the narrative interviews with the mothers and the participatory research and conversations with their children, a powerful sense of their lived experiences of poverty and social exclusion emerge. These lend support to existing calls for changes to policy approaches to be more sensitive to the needs of families and children and an increase in the dollar amount of income support (ACOSS, 2013b;
The most significant finding to emerge from this study was extent to which moving sole-parents onto NSA has resulted in food and housing insecurity for families, pointing to an urgent need for a reconsideration of the current policy settings. The study also found that following the recent policy reforms, the mothers and their children felt it had become more difficult to participate in extra-curricular and social activities; children’s options for subjects at school were limited, and there was increased pressure felt by older children to engage in paid employment or move on to welfare themselves to help support their families. For families living in rural and regional areas in particular, the cost and availability of transport was also a key mitigating factor in the mothers’ ability to participate in paid work and to access other social and recreational activities for the family. Time pressures for mothers who were juggling work with care also placed constraints on children’s participation in a range of social and recreational activities. These findings suggest that for children in sole-parent families the current welfare-to-work policy settings may be contributing to increased experiences of social exclusion.

The importance for policymakers to take account of the interdependence of family relationships was also revealed. The study found that whilst welfare-to-work policy targets sole-parents, it holds implications for others: children and grandparents in particular. This highlights the need for an integrated policy approach that responds to the whole family as an interdependent unit with varying needs and resources across time, rather than an approach that addresses the mother as an individual gender-neutral ‘latent worker’.
Basing policy on normative chronological age related assumptions (e.g. the policy takes effect when the youngest child in the family turns eight-years-old) was found to be problematic as children’s need for additional parental and financial support was determined by a range of factors and varied greatly across the group. In taking a life-course sensitised approach, the need for policy reforms to be perceptive to the impacts of the timing of transitions for families also emerged from the findings.

The study further contributes to our knowledge about the strategies families and children employ to adapt to their circumstances and the role played by socialisation in this process. Strategies included ‘going without’, self-exclusion from social and recreational activities, taking on additional roles and responsibilities, and adapting preferences and expectations. Understanding the sense-making individuals employ to make choices about their lives provides some insights that may be helpful for policy makers when considering how best to support families and promote participation and social inclusion.

A further sociological understanding of how agency is employed by children and how their capacity as actors can be mitigated by socio-structural factors is revealed in the study. As such, it provides some empirical understandings of how children’s lives are shaped by social processes of individualisation, but also how they might be seen to be actively shaping their own worlds. Finally, the research adds to methodological practice and knowledge through its use of child-centred participatory methods and contributes to the ‘social ontology’ of childhood through the recognition of children as rational social actors with important contributions to make to our knowledge.
1.5 Structure of the thesis

Chapter Two of the thesis begins by examining the welfare-to-work policy agenda: its historic context, origins, and implementation in Australia. In recognising social welfare policy as responding to specific ‘problems’, the economic, moral, and social concerns welfare-to-work seeks to address are identified and discussed and in particular its links to the social inclusion agenda. The chapter concludes with a summary of the critical literature relating to the welfare-to-work policy agenda as it applies to families and children. This literature broadly falls into five themes: welfare-to-work as governmentality; barriers to labour market participation for sole-parents; decision-making rationales about work and care that are employed by mothers; the ‘devalourising’ of unpaid care; and the failure of policy to adequately consider the needs of children. Many of the critiques point to a mismatch between institutions and the changing needs of families in modern societies where gender and family structures are less traditional and women have increased participation in the labour market place.

Chapter Three examines the literature as it relates to the changing nature of the family in late modernity and in particular the rise in the prevalence of sole-parent families in Australia. It then reviews the literature and identifies the deficits in current knowledge about children in sole-parent families: the impacts of social exclusion and poverty; how they are affected by changes to welfare policy; and the role played by children as active agents in sharing the burden of the family/work project (Millar & Ridge, 2002).
In considering the guiding themes of the research and how they interrelate in children’s lives, Chapter Four presents the conceptual framework that underpins this thesis highlighting the tensions between children’s individual freedom, dependency on others, and the structural constraints of their lives. It begins by reviewing current and emerging sociological theory positioning children as active social agents who creatively shape their own lives but are also constrained by the socio-structural conditions of their worlds. It draws on the work of contemporary sociologists (Bauman, 2001; Beck, 1992; Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1991) in conceptualising the social and economic changes of late modernity where individuals are increasingly given greater freedoms in their lives but also greater responsibility for managing the consequences and risks associated with those freedoms. These changes are seen to create tensions between an individual’s agency, the socio-economic constraints of their situations and their reliance on institutions, potentially exposing them to increased risk.

These issues can best be understood in the context of an individual’s life. This includes the embeddedness of the individual in everyday life but also the long term effects of earlier experiences on later life. As such, a ‘life-course perspective’ (Elder, 2009) is employed to analyse and organise the data. It draws on the key themes of historical/cultural influences, linked lives, timings and transitions, and human agency that were used as sensitising concepts to guide the coding. The chapter concludes by providing an outline of these themes as they apply to children and how they have been employed to construct a conceptual framework that informed the research rationale and design for this thesis.
Chapter Five details the Methodology employed for this study. It begins by explaining the research rationale drawing on the principles of critical realism (Bhaksar, 1979) and ‘grounded theory’ (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). It describes the research tools: structured questionnaires with the mothers to provide a sense of the socio-structural context of the lives of the families; narrative interviews to understand the deeper meanings they attach to their lived experiences; and child-centred participatory research tools and conversations that provided a space in the research for children’s voices to be heard. The challenges and particular ethical considerations around consent, relationships of power and enhancing children’s agency are then detailed and the chapter concludes with an outline of the collection and analysis of the data and a discussion about the limitations of the study.

In Chapters Six through to Ten the research findings are presented. Chapter Six outlines the demographic and family characteristics from the data collected in the structured questionnaires with the mothers. This provides a snapshot of the social, cultural and economic factors that intersect to create the background context of the families’ lives and influences how they experience the effects of the welfare-to-work policy. Chapter Seven draws primarily on an analysis of the data from the narrative interviews with the mothers to understand how recent changes to welfare-to-work policies influence the everyday lives of their families and particularly their children. These findings provide a powerful sense of the effects of poverty and social exclusion and the tensions between policy assumptions and expectations and the lived experience of these families. Chapter Eight weaves the analysis of the narrative interviews with mothers and participatory research and conversations with their children, drawing on a key dimension of the ‘life-course’ perspective, ‘linked lives’.  

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to highlight the interdependent relationships of mothers, children, and others (Elder, 1974; Huinink, 2009). In understanding that the lives of families are connected and that events and transitions in the life of one will have consequences for others, the chapter reveals the ways that choices around work, family, and care are tightly intertwined for families and how policies that are designed to activate mothers have significant implications in the lives of their children and also others.

In Chapters Nine and Ten the major findings are grouped around two further ‘life-course’ themes. Firstly, Chapter Nine reveals the importance of the timing of events and transitions, or when they occur, in mediating their impact. In Chapter Ten the ways that children are responding to individualisation as agents, actively adapting to their circumstances through flexibility in living conditions, role relationships, and the influence of their socialisation is revealed. It draws on Lister’s (2004, p. 130) ‘Four types of agency’ model to explore how the agency of the children in this study can be understood in tension with the institutional and socio-structural constraints of their lives.

Finally, Chapter Eleven draws together the literature and conceptual framework with the findings in relation to the central thesis question and themes and concludes with some specific policy recommendations. In sum, it posits that the current policy approach is essentially ‘child-blind’ and calls for a ‘child-oriented welfare approach’ that is sensitive to the impacts of policy on children, both in the present and also across their life-course. It contends that children have valid claims to welfare support based on their current needs, as well as in their capacity as potential contributors to the social, economic and productive systems of the future.
The following chapter begins the body of the thesis by outlining the changing public and policy discourse that has informed the welfare-to-work reforms in Australia. It identifies the way sole-parents are socially and politically constructed within the policy and details the overarching policy context for this thesis.
2. Welfare-to-work: discourse and policy

This chapter sets the policy context for this thesis by exploring the historical changes to welfare policy in Australia and the public and political discourses that have informed those changes. It discusses the economic, moral, and social concerns that welfare-to-work or *activation* type policies are designed to address and in particular the social inclusion agenda, of which participation in paid work is regarded as a key pillar (ASIB, 2011). This thesis seeks to challenge the legitimacy of these concerns and the appropriateness of the current policy settings to address them, with an investigation into the consequences they hold for children in sole-parent families.

The gradual implementation of activation type policies for sole-parents in Australia over the past two decades is traced, followed by an examination of critiques of the policy approach with a particular focus on those that have implications for children. Firstly, the literature applying a ‘governmentality’ lens (Foucault, 1974) to activation policy approaches is examined, with welfare-to-work policies perceived to be part of a wider government agenda to regulate the work orientations and practices of income support recipients (Brady, 2007, 2011). This literature highlights how sole-parents are constructed as a problem or ‘risk group’ within social policy. This creates universal and homogenised categories (e.g. based on marital status and gender), in which the diversity of individual and family situations can be obscured and structural forces, such as labour market conditions or gender inequalities that create barriers for individuals, are largely ignored.
Secondly, gender based critiques of activation policies are examined, raising the contradictions between the gender-neutral economic rationalities assumed by these policies and the socially and culturally mediated rationalities employed by mothers in making decisions about the appropriate balance between work and family life (Bowman et al., 2013). Critiques of the ways that care is devalued or unrecognised within welfare-to-work policies are then examined. These argue that welfare-to-work type policies contribute to the devalourising of unpaid care such as child-care, and overlook the additional challenges for sole-parents in managing the family-work interface. To conclude, this chapter examines literature that suggests that children become ‘useful’ partners in supporting the welfare-to-work policy agenda through their own early ‘activation’ into the adult worlds of care and work (Redmond, 2010; Ridge, 2006). The welfare-to-work agenda, as such, is a response to a political discourse that regards the poor as responsible for their own circumstances as the following section suggests.

2.1 Changing discourse, changing policy

Scholars (Bacchi, 2005; Levitas, 2005; Marston, 2008; Taylor-Gooby, 2004) have argued that changes in welfare policy can be linked to changes in the public and political discourse associated with particular groups or concerns. Marston (2008) adds that ‘new discourses about social problems do not just sweep away the old—they reconstitute and reshape traditional meanings and moral orders’ (Marston, 2008, p. 360). In the post-war years the previously dominant discourse about the ‘moral hazard’ associated with providing social support was pushed to the background as most of the Western world moved towards addressing social inequality as a structural
issue. Keynesian models of greater regulation and stronger welfare state building were employed to address it (Marston, 2008, p. 360; Taylor-Gooby, 2004). The period until the mid-1970’s saw a burgeoning of the welfare state when it was seen as one of the great social and economic advances of the post war era: ‘The Golden Age of Welfare’ (Esping-Andersen, 1996; Feduzi & Runde, p. 614). Likewise, in Australia, new groups in need of support were identified: programmes developed and the blossoming public sector needed to facilitate these programmes created employment for the growing educated middle-class. In 1973, the Supporting Mother’s Benefit was introduced as a means-tested income support for mothers without partners, recognising the need for mothers to have independence from former male-breadwinner partners following the introduction of ‘no fault divorce’ the previous year. In 1977 this benefit was extended to sole-fathers and renamed Supporting Parent’s Benefit. By the 1980’s however, as a result of growing unemployment, declining tax revenues, evidence of a continued increase in inequality, and the perceived disincentive effects of income support, public opinion and policy direction began to change. In 1987, the benefit was restricted to those whose youngest child was under sixteen years and in 1989 it was renamed Sole Parent Pension (Saunders, 2002, pp. 62-63). The late 1980’s also saw the foundation of the Prices and Wages Accord between the Hawke-Keating Labor Government and the unions in Australia that represented a fundamental shift in policy approach towards a focus on individual mutual obligation and activation into the labour market. The role of the Accord’s pro-business, liberal market reforms in contributing to the rise of precarious work, informal business arrangements, wage inequality and making public policy less sympathetic to workers’ interests, is seen by some scholars as the
unintended consequences of the Accord that still has impacts on labour markets today (Wright, 2014, p. 267).

Since the late 1990’s there has been a further shift in the way governments in Australia deal with income support. This shift follows similar moves in the United Kingdom, United States, Canada, and New Zealand in constructing a problem of ‘welfare dependency’ that can be addressed through greater individual responsibility (Esping-Andersen, 1996). All have embarked on reforms that link income support with obligations to work and ‘redraw the boundaries between public and private responsibility for social welfare’ (Marston, 2008, p. 360). The title of the current legislation under the Welfare-to-Work Act: Social Security Legislation Amendment (Fair Incentives to Work) Bill 2012, points clearly to the policy’s agenda to ‘incentivise’ work (CofA, 2012).

These changes mark a significant transition that has been referred to as ‘the great risk shift’ (Hacker, 2006) or the ‘new welfare state’ (Taylor-Gooby, 2004). Bonoli and Natali (2012, p. 8) define it as ‘putting the emphasis less on income replacement and more on the promotion of labour market participation through activation and investment in human capital’. These are also regarded as a by-product of wider neo-liberal social and economic shifts characteristic of late modernity: 

detrationalisation, market deregulation and individualisation (Beck, 1992; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Over this same period there have also been changes in traditional family structures and gender roles, particularly for women, that challenge the normative ideal of the male-breadwinner model that underpins the traditional nuclear-family model. Greater casualisation and flexibility in the work place has also
resulted in heightened job insecurity, the consequences of which are increasingly regarded as an individual responsibility (see Chapter Four for further on this).

Saunders (2002, p. 61) contends that all systems of income support reflect intrinsic values about who is entitled to what and under what conditions: choosing between different political agendas and the ways that particular groups perceive and pursue their own interests. Governments, in fact, provide income support to their populations in a variety of ways. Drawing on a formulation of welfare developed by social policy theorist Richard Titmuss (1958), Bryson (1992) described how middle and upper income groups in Australia benefit from fiscal welfare (cash transfers from the state via the taxation system) and occupational welfare (benefits that accrue to individuals through their employment), both of which enjoy wide public support. Poorer Australians however, mainly only benefit from social welfare (government-financed services and direct cash benefits). Spies-Butcher (2014) similarly identifies three modes of social provision: Means-tested (Newstart and Public housing); Affluence-tested (Pensions and Family Payments); and Affluence targeted (Superannuation and Private Health) Despite the diverse and wide reaching largesse of welfare in Australia the notion of rights to social welfare support has historically been relatively weak\(^2\), with attitudes towards sole-parents and the unemployed in particular ranging from indifference to hostility (Eardley & Matheson, 1999). Murphy and colleagues (2011, pp. 2,5) argue that when government policy and public sentiment reflect a perceived sense of the problem as essentially about ‘welfare dependency’, it results in a highly stigmatising system of welfare benefits.

\(^2\) Until WW2 the trade union movement and Australian Labour [sic] Party strongly supported work-based welfare in opposition to ‘insurance’ models preferred by conservatives. (Carney, 2007)
In 2006, the Howard government in Australia implemented a tranche of radical changes to the previous welfare policies. Welfare moved from a model of a financial ‘safety net’ where there was no ‘activation’ requirements attached to income support, to a welfare-to-work model that reframed recipients such as sole-parents as latent unemployed workers (Grahame & Marston, 2012, p. 73; MacIntyre, 1999; Murphy et al., 2011). The new model focused on ‘activating’ recipients to paid work through individualised interventions intended to reduce ‘welfare dependency’ and promote individual responsibility (Brady, 2007). At the time the reforms where promoted as an integral part of the Government’s strategies to manage structural demographic aging by increasing the size of the available work-force (Carney, 2007, p. 12), as well as managing the budget and decreasing welfare dependency for specific groups including sole-parents (Summerfield et al., 2010, p. 70). The policy changes adopted a rationale that required the acceptance of ‘any job, of any duration or quality’, in contrast to similar models in the United Kingdom at the time, that prioritised sustainable or quality work (Carney, 2007, p. 12; Minuchin, 2002, p. 34). These changes saw the requirement for recipients of the Parenting Payment Single (PPS) to enter into activity agreements once their youngest child turned six-years-old.

Consistent with the existing Job Education and Training programme (JET), this emphasised a ‘mutual obligation’ framework for sole-parents, and the implementation of sanctions in a ‘jobs-first’ policy setting (Carney, 2007, p. 12; MacIntyre, 1999). The model included requirements to participate in individual capacity building through career planning, training, reporting, and paid and unpaid employment. The changes were based on new ‘work first principles’: that employment provides the best form of family income; income support recipients of working age have an obligation
to participate in the workforce; and services should focus on assisting recipients into the workforce (Summerfield et al., 2010).

Other changes at the time saw sole-parents who were claiming income support for the first time immediately placed on the Newstart Allowance (NSA) if their youngest child was eight-years-old or over (the age prior to this time was sixteen years). NSA was designed for single, childless, unemployed individuals and has increased participation and reporting requirements and significantly smaller fortnightly income support payments than the PPS. Recipients are required to demonstrate evidence of having applied for a minimum number of jobs each month, and are required to be completing further training or to participate in state-sanctioned paid or voluntary work for a minimum thirty hours per fortnight. Failure to comply with reporting and participation requirements can result in the suspension or cancellation of payments (DHS, 2017; Summerfield et al., 2010, p. 70). Those sole-parents who were already on PPS at the time of these changes were allowed to remain in a ‘grandfathering’ arrangement until their youngest child turned sixteen years. This effectively set up an unequal two-tiered system for families who were otherwise in the same circumstances.

In late 2012 the Gillard Labor Government announced further reforms under the Social Security Legislation Amendment (Fair Incentives to Work) Bill, 2012 (CofA, 2012), that moved all sole-parents with a youngest child of eight-years-old or over on to NSA from January 1, 2013, arguing that it was removing the two-tiered-system in the interests of maintaining fairness and equality (DEEWR, 2012). Offering some

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3 A provision in which an old rule continues to apply to some existing situations while a new rule will apply to all future cases. Those exempt from the new rule are said to have grandfather rights or acquired rights.
# TABLE 2.1 CHANGES TO PAYMENTS AND SUPPLEMENTS FOR SOLE-PARENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BENEFIT NAME</th>
<th>Description and Changes to Eligibility</th>
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| Parenting Pension Single (PPS)      | Prior to 2006 available to all sole-parents with youngest child under 16 years with little or no obligation to find employment  
**2006 reforms** - available to existing eligible sole-parents with youngest child under 16 years but with additional job-related activity requirements once youngest child turned 6 years  
**2013 reforms** - changed to only be available to sole-parents with youngest child under 8 years |
| Newstart Allowance (NSA)            | Lower payment amount than PPS by $50-100 per week depending on number of children; lower income thresholds; more demanding job-seeking and reskilling requirements and penalties for non-compliance  
**2006 reforms** - all new sole-parent applicants if youngest child was 8 years with  
**2013** - changed to include all existing eligible sole-parents if youngest child 8 years or over |
| Family Tax Benefit A (FTB A)        | Means-tested supplement if have care for a dependent child who is:  
• 0 to 15 years of age, or  
• 16 to 19 years of age, and  
  o is in full time secondary study in an approved course leading towards a year 12 or equivalent qualification  
  o has an acceptable study load, or  
  o has been granted an exemption |
| Family Tax Benefit B (FTB B)        | • Supplement paid to all Australian families/carers where the main or sole income earner earns less than $100,000 pa and have 35% or more care for a child younger than 16 years of age, or a full time secondary student, up until the end of the calendar year in which they turn 18 years of age |
| Child Care Benefit (CCB)            | Means-tested payment of a maximum of $195 per week that provides financial assistance to help families with child care costs at approved child-care facilities. |
| Pensioner Educational Scheme (PES)  | Fortnightly Payment ($62.40 in 2013) for assistance with approved educational costs for those on PPS or NSA |
| Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA) | A payment of up to $300 pa for educational costs to disadvantaged families by the Victorian Government- discontinued in 2014. |
additional provisions for child-care support (Child Care Benefit) when mothers were in work and accompanied by assertions that ‘the best form of welfare is a job’, it also drew strongly on the social inclusion agenda that holds participation in paid work as a central objective (ASIB, 2011; DEEWR, 2012). The effect of this change left sole-parents, who had previously been on the more generous PPS, between sixty to one hundred dollars a week worse off and recent studies suggest it impacted on as many as 80,000 families (ACOSS, 2015). These were not ‘activation’ policies as such, as sole-parents were already required to participate in or seek paid work under the PPS once their youngest child turned six. The change amounted to a reduction in net income support and tighter eligibility obligations. It also reduced the income test threshold so if parents did find work the income support payment was reduced sooner, some concessions were lost, and the education supplement for those wanting to take up study was removed (ACOSS, 2012; Baxter & Renda, 2011, p. 106; Bodsworth, 2010; Summerfield et al., 2010, p. 75). Most significantly moving sole-parents on to NSA reframed them as latent workers and with participation requirements that were designed for individuals without the responsibility of dependent children. Whilst these changes can be seen to be part of a shifting political landscape, successive governments have also employed a range of justifications to support the need for these changes.

**2.2 The ‘problems’ welfare-to-work seeks to address**

In seeking to justify the need for the welfare-to-work reform agenda, successive Australian governments of both Labor and Conservative persuasion have identified a range of economic, social, and moral arguments that are examined in this section.


2.2.1 Economic Imperatives

When the Howard conservative government began instituting the welfare-to-work reforms in 2006, it had already been flagged some two years earlier as part of plans to ‘widen the pool of workforce participants’ (Andrews, 2005). The ‘jobs first’ rationale of the changes became even more evident with the shift of the majority of social security programmes for working age recipients to the oversight of the Department of Education and Workplace Relations (Carney, 2007). As such welfare-to-work formed an integral part of the government’s response to the Intergenerational Reports (Australian Government, 2011; Treasury, 2004) that identified the issue of structural demographic aging and the need to ‘activate’ a growing cohort of dependent citizens as a key issue for securing Australia’s future economic growth (Carney, 2007).

The best way to respond to the economic and fiscal pressures of an ageing population is to support strong, sustainable economic growth. Economic growth will be supported by sound policies that support productivity, participation and population — the ‘3Ps’.

Productivity is the key to higher economic growth in the face of an ageing population. Policies that support higher productivity, including investments in nation building infrastructure and skills and education, will raise economic growth, improve living standards and enhance Australia's capacity to fund the fiscal pressures of an ageing population. While aggregate participation rates will fall as a result of an ageing population, steps to improve participation would minimise the impacts (Treasury, 2004).

It is the participation aspect of this three-pronged approach that welfare-to-work primarily seeks to address. Redmond (2010, p. 479) suggests that one of the more perverse impacts of the current policy approach is its potential to diminish access to education and skills training for sole-parents and their children, thereby creating
greater structural barriers to future work-force participation and increasing their risk of poverty and social exclusion. Investigating these concerns is one of the key aims of this study. In seeking to justify the need for ‘activation’ policies governments have also drawn on normative moral arguments.

2.2.2 Moral imperatives

Scholars (Dodson, 2007; Marston, 2008, p. 360; Murphy et al., 2011; Schram, 1995) argue that in Western liberal, capitalist societies there is a longstanding discourse of the ‘moral hazard’ associated with providing people in need of support with public assistance lest they be corrupted and dependent. The notion of individualised failure and responsibility and the role for the welfare state in managing it gained momentum in the 1990’s when influential social theorist Lawrence Mead (1997) argued that growing up poor led to a culture of ‘welfare dependency’ that was passed on to children. As such welfare dependent sole-mothers are seen to pose a moral hazard, not only to themselves but also by modelling poor behaviours to their children.

According to this narrative, ‘welfare dependency’ leads to a life in an ‘underclass’ of loafers, criminals, addicts and the mentally ill (Walters, 1997). Recent highly gendered calls in the popular media in Australia for welfare payments to be contingent on women being on contraception, could be interpreted as adding irresponsibly and promiscuity to this trope (Johns, 2015). Mead (1997) argued for a system of welfare that ‘prodded the poor into action for their own good’. In what was dubbed ‘new paternalism’, he claimed that if the poor would not help themselves to self-reliance then the state must implement policies of both ‘carrots’ and ‘sticks’ to make them do so. He argued that ‘programmes that support the disadvantaged and unemployed have been permissive in character, not authoritative [and] they have set
few requirements for how they ought to function in return’ (Mead, 1997, p. 1). Mead (1986) also favoured making welfare more conditional with contractual obligations to work in return for support. As such, ‘dependence on welfare became a moral bad while dependence on the labour market, a moral good’ (Marston, 2008, p. 361). The focus of social policy became less about creating equality in the labour market or providing legitimate support for a social value, and more about how to make the ‘welfare dependent’ more work ready.

Marston (2008) argues that when a discursive frame ignores or deflects attention from structural issues and instead places the focus on categorising and labelling the individual, it represents a form of what Bourdieu terms ‘symbolic violence’ (Bourdieu, 1984, 1992, 1998). Bourdieu (1984, pp. 176-177) defined this in terms of the state’s ‘monopoly of the legitimised use of physical and symbolic violence…that in addition to its power to create and impose laws, also envisages various forms of social categorisation dedicated to the…regulation of various activities and establishes boundaries and allocates advantages and obligations’. He argued that discourse played a powerful role in this process of categorising that confers greater power and privilege on some whilst acting to stigmatise or disempower others (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 40). This excerpt from a speech by the then Minister for Employment in Australia, referring to people who are selective about the jobs they take as ‘job snobs’, provides an example of how by labelling a particular group, stigma and blame are apportioned.

…I think there is a risk of people getting too fussy, people becoming job snobs. That is to say, yes they want to work, but only on their own terms (Abbott, 2004).
More recently, media comments by a conservative political candidate in Western Australia labelling sole-mothers as undeserving of tax-payer funded income support and ‘too lazy and ugly to hold on to a man’ (Dunstan, 2017), suggest there are also strongly gendered undertones in these types of moral discourses.

The role of stigma and shame in maintaining inequality, actively constituting identity and social hierarchies (Goffman, 1968; Honneth, 2001), and impeding the agency of individuals (Lister, 2004) is well understood. For sole-parents and their children the potential for the stigma attached to their circumstances to be internalised and lead to social exclusion is a theme that is powerfully revealed in the findings from this study.

2.2.3 Social Inclusion Agenda

In the literature about sole-parent families and welfare-to-work policy the concept of social exclusion features prominently (Good-Gingrich, 2008; Levitas, 1996, 2005; Martin, 2004; Murphy et al., 2011). This is in part due to the high incidence in sole-parent families of many of the characteristics associated with social exclusion and also that welfare-to-work policy has been widely employed by governments across the globe in attempts to mitigate it (CSSA, 2010; EU, 2008; Levitas, 2005). The Rudd-Gillard Labor Government in Australia joined that trend in 2009 by establishing the Australian Social Inclusion Board (ASIB).

Social exclusion has been defined as ‘a dynamic process of progressive multidimensional rupturing of the social bond at individual and collective levels’ (Silver, 2007:1). Its key features are linked multiple disadvantages where individuals and families have complex interrelated problems that may include: unemployment or insecure employment; low income and assets; low education and skill levels; housing
stress; and poor health. This often also results in entrenched or persistent disadvantage as a result of an accumulation of problems with intergenerational transmission placing children at far greater risk of experiencing disadvantage due to the disadvantage of their parents. Social exclusion can also have a place-based or ethnic element where concentrated disadvantage, common in housing estates and remote communities, creates entire neighbourhoods of social exclusion (CofA, 2010; CSSA, 2010; World EU, 2008; Silver, 2007).

In imagining the causes and outcomes of poverty to be multi-faceted and as much about social factors as financial ones, the ideas that underpin the social inclusion agenda are not new and can be traced back to the likes of Beatrice and Sidney Webb in Britain (Webb & Webb, 1911, p. 49 cited in CSSA, 2010, p. 17) and Swedish economist Gunnar Myrdal (1963, pp. 23-24). The term arrived in France with Rene Lenoir’s 1974 book, Les Exclus (1974). Other sources (CSSA, 2010) find American academics also using the term in the late 1960’s and early seventies in connection with the idea of an ‘underclass’: a group seen as being excluded from paid employment and social participation as a result of structural changes in the market economy. Its concepts, if not the term itself, can be found in President Johnson’s ‘War on Poverty’ and the writers and academics that inspired it (CSSA, 2010, p. 9). It remained an essentially European term where poverty and disadvantage were seen as a failing of social solidarity rather than a concern of the individual.

The term ‘social exclusion’ appears in Britain under the Blair ‘New Labour’ government when in 1997 they established the Social Exclusion Unit. Room (1995 cited in Whiteford, 2001, p. 51) sees very distinct differences between the European
and British (he includes Australia in this) liberal notions of social exclusion. He
describes the European model as coming from the French tradition that regards
‘society [as] bound together by mutual rights and obligations rooted in a broader
moral order’: relational issues of power, lack of social participation and integration.
He compares this to the liberal conception, that instead imagines a mass of individuals
in competition within the market economy and social policy that works to enable
individuals to have sufficient resources to compete. This quote from former Shadow
Minister for DEWR, Julia Gillard, announcing Labor’s plan to establish a Social
Inclusion Board if elected in 2007, suggest a similar interpretation:

Let me be clear: our social inclusion initiatives will not be about welfare–they will be an
investment strategy to join social policy to economic policy to the benefit of both. For
this reason, our Social Inclusion Unit and Board will be made up of serious economic and
social thinkers, not just welfare representatives. This won’t be a memorial to good
intentions–it will be about action and hard-headed economics. (Gillard, 2007)

The concept of social exclusion recognises poverty as being not simply an issue about
financial resources but also about the ways in which social, economic, and political
structures can work to improve or hinder the progress of people’s lives and life
chances (Smyth, 2010, p. 6). Scholars have, nonetheless, argued that using the term
social exclusion can also act as justification for government inaction on poverty
directly (Levitas, 2005, p. 148) or in the case of the Australian welfare-to-work policy
to implement cuts to income support that induce poverty (ACOSS, 2013a).

Smyth (2012, pp. 12-13) posits that Australia’s later-coming to the concept of social
exclusion was attributable to the US led neo-liberal welfare policies pursued by the
Howard Liberal government from the mid-1990’s until 2007, that were framed in terms such as ‘ending welfare dependency’. They reflected ‘an essentially economic perspective’ that followed the neo-liberal ideology that individuals should be able to compete effectively in the market place. Whiteford (2001, p. 41) argues it also tended towards a view that individual dependence on the welfare state was responsible for causing the poverty it was intended to alleviate.

Levitas (2005, p. 14) defines three distinct discourses of social exclusion and argues that the extent to which governments adopt one, or a combination of these discourses, will significantly shape the policy direction they take. The first she calls the ‘redistributionist discourse (RED)’, that tends to emphasise material poverty as a prime cause of social exclusion. It implies a reduction of poverty through increases in benefits and a radical reduction of inequality and redistribution of wealth, resources and power. It focuses more on the processes that produce inequality and conceptualises citizenship as the obverse to exclusion: addressing social, political, cultural, and economic citizenship which includes but is not limited to material inequality, and importantly it valourises unpaid work.

The second discourse, that of the ‘moral under-class’ (MUD), essentially places the blame for poverty at the feet of the poor with references to the ‘under-class’ and ‘welfare dependency’ ‘embedded in a discourse concerned with social order and moral integration’ (Levitas, 2005, p. 14). This discourse represents the underclass or excluded as culturally distinct from the mainstream and focuses on the behaviour of the poor rather than the structures of society. Implying that welfare benefits are bad for people, dependence on the state is seen as problematic, but the dependence of
women and children on a male-breadwinner is not: rather it is regarded as civilising and functional. It largely ignores the inequalities that exist across society, does not acknowledge unpaid work and as Levitas (2005, p. 21) argues, is increasingly a gendered discourse about single-mothers.

The third discourse, Levitas (2005, pp. 26-27) terms the ‘social integrationist discourse’ (SID). It essentially reframes the social as economic and market activity. Its features are a narrowing of the definition of social inclusion to participation in paid employment, moving away from questioning why people who are not employed are consigned to poverty. This discourse is seen to largely ignore work place inequalities between paid workers on the basis of gender and class and to remove from view traditional class issues of capital and labour. By failing to adequately address issues of unpaid work it therefore, implies an increase in women’s share of the work load and undermines the legitimacy of non-participation in paid work.

The welfare-to-work policies employed by most Western governments (including Australia) as the core policy action to address social exclusion find their inspiration in the SID and to some extent MUD discourses. The individual becomes the unit of analysis and the site of state intervention (Good-Gingrich, 2008, p. 379). The responsibility lies with the individual to change and improve their life by moving into paid work and in doing so achieving what Levitas (2005, p. 157) terms a ‘performative inclusion’. As such only work that takes place in the public sphere through market-based mechanisms is seen as socially inclusive and social inclusion is operationalised as a measure of an individual’s consumption and production (Good-Gingrich, 2008, p. 381). In a paradoxical way it implies that unpaid work, such as
parenting and caring, is not work unless it is done through the labour market (Levitas, 2005, p. 145) and it normalises the gender-neutral adult worker model and ‘free-market imperatives in everyday social interactions and institutions’ (Bowman et al., 2013; Good-Gingrich, 2008, p. 381).

What becomes clear is that, by linking social inclusion for sole-parent families so closely to paid employment, the policy also ties the welfare of the children in these families to the employment outcomes of their parents. Whilst social exclusion is well-understood to be multi-faceted, seeking to address it through welfare-to-work policy alone may be overlooking other important factors such as labour market conditions, gender inequality, and the caring needs of children. The following section reviews the critical literature about welfare-to-work policy with a focus on a number of these factors and the implications they hold for children.

2.3 Critiques of the welfare-to-work policy agenda

The critical literature about welfare-to-work policy falls into five main themes that are reviewed in this section. Firstly, it points to the ways that the policy can be viewed through a ‘governmentality’ lens as a strategy to shape or ‘normalise’ the behaviours of individuals to fit a desired or standard outcome: in this case engagement in the labour market. Secondly, the literature identifies the failures of policy to adequately allow for demographic and labour market changes that create barriers to workforce participation for mothers. A third theme of the critical literature highlights the contradiction between the policy assumption that a mother’s decision-making about work is based primarily on economic rationales, and the strongly gendered ideologies and rationales that actually inform their decision-making. Fourthly, the literature
examining the policy’s failure to recognise the social and economic value of unpaid caring and parenting work and to provide support for those who do this work is reviewed, followed finally by critiques of the policy’s failure to adequately support children’s rights and needs.

2.3.1 Welfare-to work as ‘conducting the conduct’

Scholars (Brady, 2011; O'Malley, 1996; Wacquant, 2009) have utilised a ‘governmentality’ analysis to describe how welfare-to-work policy employs what Foucault (1988) termed ‘technologies of the self’, implemented as part of a wider government agenda to normalise the work orientations and practices of welfare recipients: in other words, ‘to conduct their conduct’. Foucault describes the purpose of disciplinary technologies as forging a ‘docile body that may be subjected, used, transformed, and improved’ through drills and training, and standardisation of actions over time, engendering a system that normalises certain behaviours. It has been noted that despite the policy rhetoric of autonomy, empowerment, and enablement the capacity building initiatives that are an integral part of welfare-to-work programmes operate to discipline and normalise welfare recipients through closed surveillance. The state attempts to foster enterprising subjectivities, attitudes, and dispositions among citizens thus encouraging particular behaviours and discouraging others (Brady, 2007, p. 188; 2011; Foucault, 1991; Rose, 1999). O’Malley (2008) suggests that governing actions (or inactions) are constructed from particular ways of thinking about the nature of a specific problem or risk group (O'Malley, 2008, pp. 53-54). Sole-parent families provide an exemplar here both in respect to the ways that they are constructed as a social and/or economic problem or risk group, but also in the
techniques that governments devise to manage them and shape their behaviours, particularly around work.

Researchers find that many aspects of welfare-to-work programmes are normalising and disciplining (Brady, 2011; Cruikshank, 1996; Dean, 1995, 2010; McDonald & Marston, 2005). An example of this is the personalised planning programmes that are ‘designed’ by a case manager at Job Services Australia (JSA)⁴, which include retraining and other activities to make the individual more ‘work-ready’. Whilst they may increase the ability of income support recipients to undertake certain activities, they also restrict the behavioural options open to them. For sole-mothers this may impact on their freedom to make their own decisions about the appropriate balance between work and parenting for their children or to adapt their employment to be compatible with their children’s needs, for example around school holidays. As such, this also serves to normalise a market-based model of care whereby mothers are obliged to work and while they do so, to pay others to care for their children. The stringent reporting and financial accounting procedures, requirements to report in person and fulfil minimum job seeking obligations, and the speed with which benefits are suspended through failure to comply, along with the punitive reductions to income support payments, all act to discipline and re-frame sole-parents as latent workers who are failing to meet obligations and need monitoring and coercing to do so.

Wacquant (2009) describes similar ‘workfare’⁵ policies in the US:

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⁴ Job Services Australia was replaced in July, 2015 by Jobs Australia see https://www.ja.com.au/policy-advocacy/policy/job-services-australia
⁵ ‘Workfare’ is the term used in the US for programme of welfare linked to work requirements in a similar way to welfare-to-work in Australia and the UK. (Peck, 2001)
The public aid bureaucracy, now reconverted to an administrative spring-board into precarious poverty-level employment, takes up the mission of inculcating the duty of working for work’s sake among poor women (and indirectly their children) … and [making aid] conditional upon upholding certain behavioural norms and upon performing onerous and humiliating bureaucratic obligations. (Wacquant, 2009, pp. 15,59)

Brady (2011, p. 266) argues that a governmentality lens illuminates how:

…certain forms of thought, practices and subjectivities that exist in the present become established as natural and necessary, allowing…historical contrasts between problematisations of capacities in the present, and how they have been understood differently in the past.

For example, normative stereotypes of young ‘single-mothers’ as ‘welfare cheats’ that are unwilling to work, or more recent discourses that normalise the necessity for mothers to engage in paid work, could all be regarded as historically based ‘forms of thought’. A governmentality analysis also reveals how by merging individual welfare recipients into a universal problem group the important social and economic factors that impact on individuals in diverse and particular ways may be overlooked. For sole-mothers this has been found to include their ability to find secure paid employment and to manage the balance between the needs of their families, both of which can be mediated by factors such as the availability or lack of support networks, maternal education and geographical location (Brady, 2011; Cook et al., 2009).

Brady (2011) further suggests that the language of policy discourse can work to encourage the self-disciplining of individuals. The feelings of shame, humiliation, and stigma and its impacts on individual agency emerged as powerful themes in this
research. Investigating whether these practices might also be normalising certain
behaviours for mothers and children is an area of interest in this study: for example,
mothers taking on work they do not really want or that is detrimental to their
children’s needs. For children the early engagement with the welfare state and
activation into employment, and the shaping of their attitudes, practices, aspirations
and expectations around education, work, welfare and gender are also examples.

2.3.2 A changing labour market

Critiques (Bowman et al., 2013; Grahame & Marston, 2012; Howe, 2010) of the
welfare-to-work policy agenda have also argued that it fails to account for broader
demographic and structural changes, in particular neo-liberal economic policies that
have emerged since the late 1980’s. These policies, as outlined in Chapter One, have
created a more insecure and deregulated labour market, particularly in areas of low-
paid, low-skilled employment that are often all that are available to sole-mothers
trying to fit work around family caring obligations. Others have argued that welfare-
to-work approaches do not allow for the additional costs imposed through work, such
as for child-care, transport, and loss of income support payments that all reduce the
Scholars (Gardiner, 1999, p. 44; Glenn, 1994) also contend that far from improving
the lot of sole-parents, welfare-to-work policies ensure an ongoing subsistence
standard of living for sole-mothers and reinforce gender differentiation by filtering
women into traditional service sector jobs such as child-care and aged-care, cleaning,
hospitality, retail, and office work. Research (Baxter & Renda, 2011; Bodsworth,
2010) finds that often these are low-paid and casualised positions, as women seek
employment options that are flexible enough to fit around the demands of their
parenting duties. The insecurity of the casualised workplace means women are often moving in and out of paid employment. Research (Ridge, 2006, pp. 34-35) from the United Kingdom has found that when low-income sole-parents transition in and out of work and welfare it makes families even more vulnerable to poverty. Geographical location may also be significant as sole-parents seeking cheaper housing options gravitate towards urban fringes and rural areas where the employment market is often even more limited (Birrell, Rapson, & Hourigan, 2002). The reality of an increasingly competitive, casualised, and insecure job market in which large numbers of poorly educated sole-mothers are seeking low paid, ‘pink collar’ and typically unskilled employment also hints at elements of governmentality described in the previous section, where even low-paid menial work is regarded as more advantageous than unpaid domestic or caring work outside of the labour market. The role this also plays in shaping children’s (especially girls) behaviours and preferences around study and future work was an area of interest for this study. Gender is a significant issue as the next section explains. For mothers, gendered ideologies and rationales inform much of their decision-making about the right balance between work and caring for their children.

2.3.3 Gendered rationalities and ideologies of motherhood
The changing expectations and experiences of gender roles have been identified as significant in the structuring of welfare, parenting, and labour market participation and in the growing incidence of social inequality (Bowman et al., 2013). Despite this, scholars (Eveline & Bacchi, 2005; Walby, 2005) have noted the move towards ‘gender-mainstreaming’ within policy discourse, where an economically defined, gender-neutral, and autonomous individual, ‘the sole-parent’, is imagined by policy-
makers. This tends to obscure the fact that around ninety percent of sole-parents affected by welfare-to-work policy are mothers (women). Whilst the use of subjective labels like ‘single-mother’ come with their own stereotypes and prejudices, removing gendered terms from a policy that to an overwhelming degree impacts on women, runs the risk of missing mediating factors that are strongly connected to gender, such as child-birth and child-care. By extension these policy issues also impact on children in these families. The gender-neutral, adult, ‘worker first’ model imagined by the policy (Bowman et al., 2013) exists in tension with a normative conservative public discourse of maternal responsibility and ‘the good-mother’ that is still very dominant in Australia (van Acker, 2005). This discourse posits maternal primary care throughout a child’s formative years as most desirable for children (Gardiner, 1999, p. 43). However, this discourse also assumes a traditional nuclear family model where there is also a male bread-winner allowing the mother to more freely and easily negotiate her family-work balance than when she is parenting alone.

Critiques of the welfare-to-work policy approach based on gender are varied and complex and focus on sole-mothers ‘who appear caught in a web of contradictions and tensions across the dichotomy of private and public interest’ (van Acker, 2005, p. 91). Firstly, it is argued that welfare-to-work policy responds to an expertly defined neo-liberal economic imperative that is met through the preparation for and provision of paid work and promoting paid employment and individual autonomy for sole-mothers as the normative ideal (Gardiner, 1999). It assumes mothers to be economically rational beings who will act out of individualistic economic self-interest. Contrary to this, research (Duncan and Edwards, 1999) has found that in fact, mothers tend to exercise ‘gendered moral rationalities’ that balance caring and
other responsibilities, the impacts on others, especially their children and economic and personal costs and benefits (Altman, 2007; Bodsworth, 2008) that operate in socially mediated, particular, and complex ways.

Mink (1999, pp. 181-183) argues the feminist discourse that affirms not just a women’s right, but her obligation to pursue independence and a ‘rewarding’ working career outside of the domestic sphere, has led to an assumption that any job outside the home is better and more socially productive than caring for one’s own in the home. This ‘feminist work ethic’ perceives housework as oppressive and ensuring dependence on fathers and husbands, whereas work outside of the home is seen as the alternative to domesticity and a defining element of full and equal citizenship. For many women work outside the home is socially and personally rewarding (Braun, Vincent, & Ball, 2008). However, ‘second wave’ feminism eschews a mother’s right to choose not to work in favour of staying home and caring for her children full-time should that be her preference (Campo, 2009). This ‘choice’ is clearly only sanctioned for those who have the financial means to engage in the unpaid care of their children, usually by way of support from a male-breadwinner. For sole-mothers who rely on income support the option to prioritise the care of their children over paid work is not regarded as a legitimate choice, particularly once their children reach school age. This study seeks to understand more about the issues that inform a mother’s choices around work and care and about the implications of this for her school age children. It also seeks to learn more about how children themselves perceive these issues and their experiences and preferences in relation to their mother’s work and caring choices.
2.3.4 The devalourising of unpaid care

The failure of welfare-to-work policy to recognise the demanding role of the sole-parent as primary carer and the devalourising of unpaid care work more broadly in favour of market-based models has been widely recognised by researchers (Cass, 2006; Fraser, 1995; Good-Gingrich, 2008; Kittay, 1999; Morrison, 2010). Arguably the current policy settings still support traditional family practices and primary maternal care by providing unconditional income support for the parents of children who are less than six years of age: however, the needs of older children appear to be less supported. This study seeks to understand more about how older children and their parents interpret those needs and the role they play in mediating mothers’ choices and decisions about work.

As has already been identified, family and gender issues are generally relegated to a subsidiary role in traditional welfare models that are built around assumptions that women and family would be provided for by the male-breadwinner. This has resulted in what Esping-Anderson (2009) has described as an ‘incomplete revolution’, where welfare models fail to provide the structural support needed for those with the primary responsibility to raise and care for children. Welfare-to-work policy is based on an assumed citizen model of an independent wage earner: as such a welfare recipient is not considered a full citizen until they become a wage earner (Kittay, 1999, p. 190). It follows though, that with work and families and for women in particular, child-care becomes problematic.

Kittay (1999, pp. 194,198) argues that as care giving is rarely compatible with wage earning women’s poverty and dependence on welfare has increased alongside their
greater participation in the workforce and equality of opportunity. She adds that when welfare is designed to support a mother it is directly linked to the dependency and caring needs of the child. In drawing on the notion of ‘doula’ (caring for the carers) she notes that care-givers are usually vulnerable to derived dependency as care ‘involves the charge of one who is in many ways helpless without a caretaker: therefore, the moral obligation transcends the bounds of most jobs’ (Kittay, 1999, p. 199). Whilst arguably it may be possible for sole-mothers to work during the day (if suitable work is available) when children are at school and not requiring care, this ignores the burden of the ‘double-shift’ (parenting/domestic work and paid work in the labour market) and in some case ‘triple-shift’ (taking the role of mother, father and paid worker) that is experienced by sole-parents who often have no other support (Cook et al., 2009). Kittay (1999, p. 200) further argues that by demanding that sole-mothers also engage in paid work, not only is their unpaid caring work devalued but their need to be adequately supported while they do that work is denied. By imposing a male-breadwinner welfare model on care-givers, she contends the policy fails to recognise the dependency and demands of caring work. Understanding how the demands of managing the family-work interface impacts on the well-being of sole-mothers and as a consequence on their children is a central aim of this study.

Research in Australia (Cook et al., 2009; Loxton, Mooney, & Young, 2006; Robinson, 2009) indicating a high incidence of mental health issues and depression in sole-parents provides some evidence that there is indeed a need for greater support for mothers in order to secure the well-being of their children. Redmond (2010, p. 479) also argues more empirical work is needed to understand how activation policies such as welfare-to-work may also be leaving sole-parents with little choice but to ‘activate’
their children into the adult world of work, self-care, and the care of others. This has
the potential to restrict children’s access to the systems of protection and social
investments (e.g. further education) that are generally available to children who are in
more fortunate situations.

2.3.5 The failure to provide for the ‘best interests of the child’

In a further critique of the welfare-to-work policy, ACOSS have written to the United
Nations (ACOSS, 2013b) challenging the Australian Government to address its
current policy position as a potential violation of the UNCRC by failing to provide for
the best interests of children. Of particular concern to ACOSS were the impacts of
the cuts to income support of up to one hundred dollars per week for families, and the
fact that the policy overwhelmingly impacts on families who are already marginalised
and disadvantaged. These rights include the rights to social security, (Article 9), the
right to an adequate standard of living (Article 11), and the prohibition of non-
discrimination in the enjoyment of these rights (Article 2, Paragraph 2). The letter
states that there could also be a violation of additional provisions of the UNCRC such
as the prohibition of retrogressive measures (Article 2 Paragraph 1) and the general
limitation clause (Article 4). Also of concern are the apparent violations of the

Conventions on the Rights of the Child and on the Elimination of all forms of

Discrimination against Women that states that:

...in all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social
welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the
best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration” (ACOSS 2013).
The impact of financial disadvantage on families and children is well documented and the following chapter further examines the literature in this field. What the concerns of ACOSS and the UNCRC highlight is that the implications of the recent changes to the policy for children was largely overlooked. Findings from the recent ACOSS Report (ACOSS, 2016) that there has been a significant increase in the rates of child poverty in Australia in the past four years, primarily as a result of the impacts of the welfare-to-work policy, supports the findings from this study.

2.4 Summary

This chapter has shown how the critiques of welfare-to-work policy for sole-parents span a range of issues with many related to its lack of sensitivity to the challenges of managing the family-work interface when there is only one adult caring for dependent children. The policy is regarded as being based on a traditional male-breadwinner model and as such fails to account for the specific challenges and needs of sole-parent families. It assumes a gender-neutral adult worker who applies economic rationalities to their decision-making, thus overlooking the diverse range of socially and culturally informed rationales mothers apply when making choices about the appropriate balance between work and the needs of their children. In moving sole-parents on to NSA and prioritising participation in paid work over caring responsibilities, the welfare-to-work policy approach is also regarded as failing to provide support for those who perform caring responsibilities outside of the labour market. These all have implications when considering the interdependent lives of mothers and children and highlight a central failing of the policy approach.
Whilst many of the aforementioned critiques recognise that the policy will have implications for children, until recently there was no published research from Australia taking as its focus the consequences of the policy reform for children’s health and well-being, educational outcomes, and social inclusion, all of which have implications for their future life chances. We do however, have a knowledge base pertaining to how children experience and negotiate family breakdown, poverty, and social exclusion more broadly and their roles as active agents in shaping their lives and the lives of those around them. These provide some foundations upon which to build further knowledge in this field and many of these themes are investigated further in the following chapter.
3. Children’s families, children’s lives

Two major issues arise from recent sociological thinking about childhood: firstly, how children fare in the wake of familial instability and marriage breakdown; and secondly, concern around the growing levels of child poverty in developed countries (Corsaro, 2011; James & Prout, 1997; Mayall, 2002; Wyness, 2012). Both have relevance for this study. Scott (2004, p. 112) argues that children’s lives are ‘inextricably linked to changes in the lives of women and shifting boundaries of public and private spheres’ resulting in a ‘feminisation of childhood’. Children and women in sole-parent families are disproportionally represented in poverty statistics and as such, Scott (2004, p. 112) contends the ‘feminisation and pauperisation’ of children in these families goes hand in hand.

Over two-thirds of the sole-parent families in Australia occur as a result of separation or divorce with many experiencing poverty and disadvantage (ABS, 2013c). In seeking to understand more about the consequences of these experiences for children this chapter begins with a review of the literature about the impacts of family breakdown and changing family relationships on children’s lives. It then examines the literature pertaining to the effects of poverty and social exclusion and the nexus between the two in children’s lives. Whilst there is a gap in the literature about how children in Australia experience their sole-parent’s participation in welfare-to-work programmes, Ridge’s (2002, 2007, 2009) work with children in the United Kingdom provides some useful parallels to draw from in this field. This study seeks to understand more about the impact of ‘activation’ policies in Australia and the burdens they place on sole-parent families: the obligation to find jobs, attend interviews,
manage insecure employment that is often low-paid, whilst at the same time caring for children with minimal resources and often little in the way of social support networks.

To conclude the chapter there is an investigation of the literature about the roles children play as active agents in supporting their families and creatively shaping their lives through adapting and mediating their own needs and wants, contributing to domestic labour and family resources, and supporting the work of others.

3.1 Children in sole-parent families

Although there is little evidence that ‘traditional’ nuclear families have been the norm historically or culturally, concern has been expressed about whether the diverse range of modern family structures (sole-parent households, blended families, same sex families, step-families) are ideal for children (Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Gilding, 2001; Scott, 2004). Indeed, there is a normative assumption that children fare less well if they are not brought up in a two-parent heterosexual family with particular concern around children in sole-parent families (Evans & Swift, 2000; van Acker, 2005).

Much of the research in this field would, on the surface, appear to support these assumptions. Psychologists (Amato & Keith, 1991; Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Dawson, 1991) find that generally children in sole-parent families are more prone to health problems, poorer social and motor development, as well as a higher probability of internalising (depression, mental illness) and externalising (delinquency, disruptive behaviour) problems. Sociologists (Pryor & Trinder, 2004, p. 332) have observed that as adolescents the children of sole-parents are more likely to leave school early, enter partnerships early, become parents early and in adulthood to have higher risks of
alcohol and drug abuse, mental health, depression and suicide, and partnership breakdown. However, many children growing up in sole-parent families do as well as an average child in a two-parent family. Richards and Schmiege (1993, p. 277) argue that:

…studies that compare sole-parent families to two parent families ignore the variability in this increasingly common family form. This lack of attention to family diversity within single parent families contributes to negative judgments and inhibits the targeting of services to parents and children that most need assistance.

This raises the question: if family structure itself is not the main determinant of outcomes for children, what are the factors that do produce poorer outcomes?

Research (Amato, 1993; Amato & Afifi, 2006; Amato & Keith, 1991; Simons, Lin, Gordon, Conger, & Lorenz, 1999; Zubrick, Smith, Nicholson, Sanson, & Jackiewicz, 2008) suggests that it is a range of socio-structural factors such as poor parental care, financial strain, parental mental health, and parental conflict that have a far higher incidence in sole-parent families and pose the greatest risk to children’s well-being. Maternal cultural capital, particularly educational attainment has also been found to be a key indicator of outcomes of children (Duncan & Brooks Gunn, 1997; Duncan et al., 1994; Duncan, 2005). There are also strong correlates between socio-economic status and poorer outcomes for children around education (Bradshaw, 2002; Chesters & Smith, 2015; Considine & Zappalà, 2002) and the links between poverty and social exclusion for children are well understood and are discussed later in this chapter (Ridge, 2006; Skattebol et al., 2012).
Conflict and tension between ex-spouses are also found to lead to a prevalence of problems and children are frequently caught in the middle trying to be ‘fair’ to both parents (Pryor & Trinder, 2004, p. 335). Children are often given very little explanation about why their parents have separated, although this knowledge has been found to help in their ability to cope and adapt. Likewise, research in this area has tended to overlook the experiences and perspectives of children themselves, taking an ‘implicitly caretaking, welfarist approach’ (Pryor & Trinder, 2004, p. 334).

For many children family breakdown or the divorce of their parents also means adapting to transitions between different families and complex relationship structures: marriage-divorce chains, conjugal succession, multi-parent families, and ‘patchwork’ families. There are no longer clear definitions about who belongs to the family: instead each family member has their own definitions of who belongs to the family and ‘lives out their own version of the patchwork family’ (Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p. 34). These come with differing rules and routines, values, expectations, and everyday practices that have to be negotiated and agreed to with the likelihood of clashes in habits and outlook (Giddens, 1997, p. 157).

Changes in children’s lives are mediated through families as children’s lives are co-dependent (Scott, 2004, p. 404). For children in families that have experienced breakdown, divorce, and domestic violence there are many factors that can create barriers to their well-being and that require them to adapt and navigate complex and sometimes difficult relationships. However, for many children in sole-parent families who are on income support it is not their family structure or the experiences of family breakdown that are the most problematic, but the effects of the poverty and the social
exclusion that has resulted that create the greatest challenges to their security and wellbeing (Grahame & Marston, 2012).

3.2 Children and Social Exclusion
In Chapter Two it was posited that the social inclusion agenda as outlined by the ASIB (Gillard, 2007) was not inconsistent with the welfare-to work agenda in Australia and as such provided the justification for the Gillard government’s 2012 reforms. This study seeks to understand how as a result of the current welfare-to-work policy settings children may in fact be at greater risk of social exclusion and how the experiences of social exclusion may be different for children than for adults. The connection between a range of factors that make social exclusion for children about more than just poverty highlights the implications of the welfare-to-work policy for them both in the present and across their life-course (Dewilde, 2003; Vandecasteele, 2011).

Ridge’s (2002, 2006) research with children whose sole-mothers were participating in welfare-to-work type programmes in the United Kingdom, found social participation to be a key factor in ameliorating social exclusion in children’s lives. She found that for many children the experiences of social exclusion were in part constituted by their inability to join in and share accepted social practices with their peers due to their lack of financial resources (Ridge, 2002, p. 59; 2006, p. 23). As well as material poverty these children also experienced a paucity of social capital through the absence of social networks, mentors, role models, contacts and access to information, territorial exclusion due to living in ‘risky’ neighbourhoods with a high prevalence of gangs, drugs and alcohol, and adult gatekeepers who acted to restrict children’s access to
certain areas (Ridge, 2006, pp. 41-42). Risky and dangerous neighbourhoods, traffic, lack of safe public transport, and stigma due to family financial or marital status, or ethnic and cultural difference, can also play a role in isolating children (Davis & Hill, 2006, p. 6; Skattebol et al., 2012). Children have also been found to be concerned about the quality of their homes, neighbourhoods, and schools. Poor quality in one domain has flow on effects to others (e.g. to school) and also on their sense of themselves, particularly in relation to education (Skattebol et al., 2012: iii).

Ridge (2002, p. 102) found poor children’s opportunities to participate were restricted due to a lack of resources and opportunity. This in turn encroached on their capacity to develop socially and cognitively. Other studies have found that there are direct links between a lack of participation in organised extracurricular activities for adolescents and their participation in risky behaviours such as alcohol, smoking, and drugs (Le, 2013). Chesters and Smith (2015) also found correlations between participation in extra-curricular activities, the acquisition of social capital, and educational aspiration and outcomes.

Ridge also (2002) found many of children’s social inclusion concerns coalesce around leisure and as a result of the commodification of childhood, the importance of goods and services also plays an important role. Whilst consumer goods, particularly fashion clothing and footwear might be considered unnecessary luxuries (especially for those on welfare) she found they were culturally and symbolically powerful makers of individuality and belonging (Ridge, 2006, p. 29) as well as playing a role in the development of self-esteem and building confidence, particularly for adolescents (Ridge, 2002, p. 67). The needs of children to stay connected to the prevailing
fashions and trends present difficulties for low income families as does the inability to access transport, entrance fees, and appropriate clothing and equipment for many recreational activities. This is often exacerbated by the knowledge that others in their peer groups can afford these things. Ridge (2002, p. 67; 2006, p. 25) also found that lack of transport affected reciprocity and hampered participation in events like sleepovers and birthday parties thereby limiting the establishment of friendships and social networks that are critical to the development of human and social capital.

Peer friendships act as arbiters of identity and provide the context in which young people construct and reconstruct their identities. Corsaro (2011) posits that developing and maintaining friendship relationships is a major concern for children. Without peer connections children are vulnerable to social isolation and exclusion. Ridge (2006, pp. 27-29) found that children fear isolation and being seen as different which can lead to them being bullied and singled out. In contrast, secure friendships can assist children in negotiating transitions and disruption in their lives. Children are frequently excluded by others, including by their peers, based on personal characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, age, and appearance as well as by being part of a disadvantaged social milieu (Davis & Hill, 2006, p. 3). Rabello de Castro (2004, p. 470) found children engaged in ‘othering’ in the midst of social inequality to deal with inclusion/exclusion that either favours or hinders their participation in wider social encounters.

Poverty and disadvantage can place constraints on children’s capacity as autonomous actors and their ability to negotiate and resolve social dilemmas, but at the same time they have been found to be protective of their parents, deny or moderate their own
needs and demands or take on unpaid care of siblings or paid employment to assist their families (Ridge, 2006, p. 31). Skattebol and colleagues (2012: ii) found that poor children adapt their preferences or deny wanting things they know they cannot have, narrowing their interests and desires as a mechanism for self-protection and to avoid disappointment, but also so as not to put stress on their parents. As Sen (1987, p. 10) notes: ‘the defeated and the downtrodden come to lack the courage to desire things that others more favourably treated by society desire with easy confidence’.

Many social inclusion initiatives focus on the individual as having the deficit and thereby responsibility for their own social exclusion (Levitas, 2005). Skattebol and colleagues (2012, p. 8) posit that ‘the poor’ are frequently ‘othered’ or characterised, even by social scientists, as having their own norms, habits, and customs that pose a threat to the mainstream. Edwards (2010, p. 19) argues that adolescent children are often seen as problems. The problem of exclusion is frequently represented as being about disaffection amongst potentially rebellious youth who are characterised as ‘bad citizens’. Themes of ‘risk’, poor transitions, and moral panics are all linked to good citizenship and gainful employment. In this way the notion of ‘risk’ plays an important part in justifying pre-emptive policy intervention to mitigate against ‘social exclusion’: a danger young people must be protected from. Research (Gray & Baxter, 2011) finding links between parental ‘joblessness’ and poorer educational outcomes for children for example, provides the justification policymakers need to support policy approaches such as welfare-to-work. However, it is important for research of this type to control for social class and other socio-economic factors such as the financial, social and cultural capital of the parents. More nuanced approaches are likely to offer a better understanding of what can in fact deliver improved outcomes.
and social inclusion for children. In the context of this study, gaining a better understanding of the mediating factors that impact on children’s access and attitudes to education and work for example is of central interest.

Sole-parents in particular are frequently constructed socially, politically and through the popular media as a problem: pathologised, stigmatised and blamed for their own poverty and that of their children (Evans & Swift, 2000; Skattebol et al., 2012, p. 8). This study found there is additional stigma associated with their family situation for children in sole-parent families, as well as uncertainty and stress as a result of family breakdown, family violence, and changing living arrangements. The tendency for studies devoted to measuring social exclusion to lead to surveillance and labelling of young people, highlights the need for research and policy that are both sensitive to context, include the voices of young people, and are grounded in their reality (Edwards, 2010; Ridge, 2006).

In the research about social exclusion little is found about the ways in which children adapt their own needs and desires, self-exclude themselves from social activities or about the complex family networks that can work to mitigate outcomes (Skattebol et al., 2102; Micklewright, 2002; van der Hoek, 2005).

It is the voices of poor children who are least likely to be heard, being silenced as a result of their age, poverty and perceived naivety and vulnerability (Morris et al., 2012; Ridge, 2006). More needs to be known about the implications for children from the welfare-to-work transitions of their mothers; how they manage and contribute to support them, and at what potential cost to their own future welfare. Whilst this study cannot draw conclusions about future outcomes, understanding more
about children’s experiences as a result of policy in the present provides some useful insights into the choices they make and why.

3.3 Sharing the burden: the ‘family work project’

Scholars have highlighted the need to take a family approach to welfare where the ‘linked lives’ (Elder, 1974) of parents, children, other family members, and even wider social networks are considered in policy (Bowman et al., 2013; Eisenstadt, 2011; Millar & Ridge, 2008; Ridge, 2007). Cox and Paley (1997, p. 246) describe families as systems where ‘any individual family member is inextricably embedded in the larger family system and can never be fully understood independent of the context of that system’. These systems or relationships provide a vital link in facilitating the care, work, and support needs of families: what Millar and Ridge (2008) term the ‘family-work project’. This includes children adapting to changes in care arrangements, contributing to their own care and the care of others, moderating their expectations around time with their mother, contributing to the domestic labour and also to the family resources through paid work, providing care and ‘emotional labour’ (Hochshild, 2010).

Redmond (2010, p. 474) has argued that there has been a shift in social and public policy in Australia towards ‘quarantining childhood as a space regulated by affection and education rather than work or profit’. He draws on work by Zelizer (1985, p. 209) who argues that the social value of the child has undergone a transformation in the last fifty years from a period when the work and contribution of children played an important part in family and ‘real’ economies, to a sentiment of the ‘priceless child’. Redmond further argues that this ‘priceless’ image of the child is embodied in
welfare-to-work policy rationales, which as well as having economic imperatives, are expressed in moral terms such as giving children good role models and preventing social exclusion (Blaxland, 2009). Redmond (2010, p. 474) contends however, that the policy ideal of this imagined ‘priceless’ child stands in contradiction to the ‘usefulness’ and agency of poor children who support themselves and their families through domestic work, emotional labour, and paid employment. Redmond (2010, p. 479-80) further suggests that by pressuring sole-parents to take up paid work that is not compatible with their caring responsibilities and with income support payments that are not adequate to support their families, the current welfare policy settings in Australia may be ‘activating’ children prematurely into the adult worlds of work, self-care, and the care of others. As such he argues that children become key agents in supporting the welfare-to-work process.

3.3.1 Children and work

Ridge (2002) found that children in economically disadvantaged families were often preoccupied with earning money from part-time work. Whilst taking on responsibility and work is not of itself problematic, poor children tend to find work that is less rewarding and well paid than children from more affluent families and are often less able to regulate their hours (Fattore, 2005). Working then presents difficulties for children as they struggle to balance the demands of schooling, social and recreational activities, work, and making the choice between doing better at school and earning for themselves and their families (Ridge, 2002: 141). Redmond (2010, p. 479) argues that whilst children may appear to enjoy and even be proud of their contributions through work, if it removes them from the systems of protection and social investment that prepares them for fewer structural constraints in their
futures, then a policy problem exists that may be contributing to unequal outcomes in later life. As such, when children who engage in work and take on caring roles they are sometimes protecting themselves and their families at considerable personal cost (Ridge, 2007, p. 410-411). However, not all work is bad for children: it can be a positive element of a child’s life and a rite of passage to adulthood (James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998, p. 108).

Nevertheless, children’s work is often invisible in Western society. Morrow (1995) argues that:

…the social construction of childhood as a period marked by dependency and an absence of responsibility prevents us from knowing about cases of children working and taking responsibility…children have continued to work but their labour has been made invisible behind a conception of the child as dependent, non-productive and maintained within the family unit (Morrow, 1995, p. 226).

There is a need to understand children’s agency within the organisation of work and the meanings such work might have (James et al., 1998, p. 119). Labels attached to work tell us about the social relations in which it is embedded: for example, chores versus housework, baby-sitting versus childcare. What do these labels mean; whose interpretations are they; what do they imply and why? Zelizer (2005) argues that the meaning and consequences of children's work depends on the social setting where that work occurs. ‘To understand what is going on, to explain puzzling variations, we need to look closely at the web of social relations in which these children's efforts take place’ (Zelizer, 2005, p. 185). Before the mid-1970’s domestic work fell outside of
the purview of even the sociology of work so it is not surprising that most of what children do in the home is not considered real work.

Research (Ridge, 2006; Scott, 2004) has found children contribute to the division of labour as participants in the construction, maintenance, and advancement of the family through self-care, maintaining family relations, household cleaning, clearing, cooking, and care of others. They play important roles both in immediate production of goods and services and in the accumulation of physical, financial, human, social, and cultural capital for themselves and their families (Zelizer, 2005, p. 187). Studies have found that forty percent of children participate in domestic labour with eight to thirteen year olds doing on average between two and four hours of domestic chores per week and fourteen to eighteen-year-olds doing between six and nine hours per week (Mayall, 2002, p. 65). Corsaro (2011, p. 107) found that there are also gender differences in the work type and amount that reflect the adult gendered division of domestic labour: girls contribute more and perform more gender-typed tasks; sons contributed less as a result of stereotyped assumptions that daughters can perform housework tasks better than sons. It may be important to understand how household labour relates to other features of children's lives: for example, gender relationships, conceptions of self, study and work choices (Corsaro, 2011, p. 39) and also how this varies with a mother’s transitions in and out of welfare and work. There is very little research into how children understand the different activities in which they are involved: which ones they see as work; in what contexts; what are the motivations for engagement; how it affects or is impacted by family and peers; implications for negotiations about age and its meanings; and the reasons why children work (Corsaro, 2011, p. 120). Children have also been found to provide emotional labour in roles of
support, as confidantes, conflict mediators, and language brokers for their parents (Scott, 2004, p. 114).

In their research interviewing Australian adolescents, Skattebol and colleagues (2012, p. iv) found that there was considerable diversity in how children perceived their sense of individual agency in relation to their family’s financial circumstances and their current and future education and employment trajectories. For many, ‘their views about routes out of poverty were also associated with the views of their families and those in the social networks in which they were immersed’. Interrupted learning dovetailed with the confusion and stigma of coming from unstable family formations. Managing these parallel complexities had significant effects on young people’s engagement with curriculum as well as their capacities to join peer networks (Skattebol et al. 2012: p. vi).

Overall children have been found to engage in a complex range of work, caring and coping strategies that seek to ease the burden of low-income and the pressures of the ‘family work project’ (Millar & Ridge, 2008) in their lives, highlighting their roles as active social agents. ‘These strategies are largely concealed and easily go unnoticed and unacknowledged in policy debate yet they can have far-reaching implications for children’s lives and well-being’ (Ridge, 2007, p. 410).

3.3.2 Relationships of care

When a mother starts work her daily life changes and so do the lives of her children and those of other family members who may be involved in childcare or providing other forms of support. ‘The family-work project is thus as much about sustaining care as it is about sustaining work’ (Millar & Ridge, 2008, p. 109). Sustaining work
over time is a process that actively involves not just the mother as an individual but social relationships in the home, at work, in care, and at school. Ridge (2007, p. 408) found that children often missed the quality time they had with their mothers when they returned to work even though it improved their lives financially. Older children took more responsibility for self-care and sometimes younger children spent time alone at home waiting for their mothers to come home from work or spent time with other family. Children were also conscious of the well-being of their mothers and the stresses that work and raising a family alone placed on them. Taylor and Nelms (2006) and Ridge (2007) also found that children often went to school even when they were unwell so that their mothers did not need to take time off work.

A mother’s engagement in paid work often results in children being cared for outside the home with positive and negative consequences. Millar and Ridge (2008, p. 109) found that children often were required to negotiate a range of caring relationships as a result of their mothers’ employment. Ridge (2002) found that for some children, experiences of outside care was problematic, particularly for older children when care was outside the home. Bullying, boredom, stigma, feelings of ‘being left’ especially when parents were late to pick them up, and being excluded from social activities with their peers were common (Millar & Ridge, 2008; Ridge, 2002).

As well as before and after in-school care a sole-mother’s transition to paid work often involved family members such as older siblings or grandparents in new roles as carers, but also their mother’s new partners, step-parents, step-siblings, friends and neighbours. Whilst these caring relationships were often supportive and positive they could also be challenging for children and create uncertainty and insecurity. Ridge
(2008, p. 503) found that older children had strong views about the type and quality of childcare that was available to them and revealed a general dissatisfaction and a sense of stigma particularly about before and after in-school care. For some children changes in care arrangements also have to be navigated alongside other changes including moving house, changing schools, the changing relationships of their parents, and also changes to the quality and amount of time spent with their parents (Millar & Ridge, 2008, pp. 115-116).

3.4 Summary
The literature reviewed in this chapter supports the rationale for this thesis’ investigation into how the current welfare-to-work policy in Australia imposes an additional burden on sole-parents that is shared by their children. It positions sole-parents as latent workers rather than as mothers and carers and as such diminishes the value of parenting work and arguably stands in contradiction to the state’s expectations in regards to children as objects of investment, protection and as sources of potential risk. Whilst the literature indicates that children in sole-parent families are indeed at greater risk of poor outcomes across a range of indicators, it also suggests that this is not always causally linked to family structure but rather to the cumulative effect of a range of socio-structural factors (Vandecasteele, 2011) including maternal cultural capital (McLanahan & Percheski, 2008). The enduring links between sole-parents, socio-economic disadvantage, and educational outcomes for children, highlights the need for policy approaches that take what Fernqvist (2011, p. 229) describes as ‘a child-oriented welfare perspective’. This suggests the need to understand more about the impacts of policy on children’s agency, their contributions
to supporting the welfare-to-work agenda, and the effects of implementing policies that effectively leave children with little choice but to take on adult roles of work and care. The complex multi-dimensional nature of social exclusion and its impacts on children suggests that it is important to understand more about the experiences of social exclusion for children and not to assume that they are the same as for adults. For children this can be as much about their identity making, sense of belonging, and their ability to participate in peer relationships and recreational activities.

The ways in which children have been found to actively support and participate in the ‘family-work project’ (Millar & Ridge, 2008) suggest that there are very direct links between welfare-to-work policy and children’s lives. Children’s support allows parents to move into paid employment; they support their families’ well-being through their own labour and financial contributions and often at some cost to their own lives in the present and future in ways that need to be understood. As Redmond (2010) suggests, if the ‘activation’ of children potentially compromises their ‘pricelessness’ by hampering their education or impacting on their well-being, it may also have implications for their future capacity to navigate structural barriers such as the labour market and their agency as adults.

What becomes clear from the literature is that children are experiencing the impacts of change within their families, within society and as a result of policy. They are required to adapt, make choices and take on individualised responsibility for themselves and their families. Whilst the experiences of children from sole-parent families living on welfare are not totally different from those of more affluent children–the challenges of managing work and care and domestic labour are common
for most families--further research to understand the agency of children and how it is impacted by their social and financial circumstances adds to our knowledge in this field. This demands a more complex sociological understanding about these issues and how adult-centric approaches to research and policy may be obscuring the impacts on children’s lives. In critiquing what they regard as the patriarchal relations of the welfare state emanating from the needs and prerequisites of the middle-aged citizen, Olk and Wintersberger (2007) call for new criteria for evaluating national welfare policies that takes into account children’s experiences and access to resources (cited in Fernqvist, 2011, p. 229). The following chapter presents the conceptual framework on which such an approach might be built, positioning children as active co-constructors of their social worlds (Qvortrup, 1991).
4. Children’s lives in ‘Risk Society’

This chapter presents the theoretical framework for this thesis. It begins with an overview of how the social and economic changes that characterise late modernity (Beck, 1992; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1991) might also be conceptualised in relation to children’s lives based on an understanding that children are exposed to many of the same social and economic forces as adults (James & James, 2004; Qvortrup, 1991). It then examines the emerging field of the sociology of childhood and the conceptual ideas that underpin this study’s interest in children’s lives. The ways in which social and economic processes have led to individualisation and how this can be understood in relation to children’s lives are then explored.

Beck’s (1992) notion of institutional individualism provides a useful conceptualisation of how social institutions such as the welfare state, families, and schools may be compelling children to become individualised, reflexive actors in ways that may place them at increased risk of structurally based disadvantage in their future (Redmond, 2010). Finally, this chapter draws upon a further sociological perspective, the life-course, to fully capture the multiple dimensions and complexity of children’s lives (Bowman et al., 2013; Elder, 2009). The value of this approach to building a child-centred theoretical framework is the sensitivity of the life-course perspective to the significance of historic socio-cultural forces, the interdependence of family and other relationships, the significance of the timing of transitions and life events, and the role human agency and socialisation plays in determining how individuals adapt to the conditions of their lives. As such, it provides a suitable lens for this investigation into the impacts of welfare-to-work on children’s lives.
4.1 Life in ‘Risk Society’

Sociologists have noted a general institutional trend towards *individualisation*, whereby individuals are increasingly required to ‘reinvent themselves’ and bear the responsibility for circumstances that are often out of their control: for example, unemployment in an increasingly casualised and insecure labour market or being a sole-parent in a society where family breakdown and divorce are now common. Most notably, sociologist Ulrich Beck (1992) has coined the term ‘risk society’ to epitomise the insecurity and individualised responsibility for risk that is a feature of late modernity. This has been recognised to be problematic for groups such as sole-parents, especially in a context where many of the traditional expectations around the gendered division of labour and a male-breadwinner family model remain intact. Similar tensions exist for children. In many areas of society they are increasingly feeling the effects of individualisation: for example, children’s rights and views are progressively being acknowledged in matters of custody after divorce; in education they are required to shape their learning towards future career pathways from an increasingly early age and to engage in adult worlds of work and care (Wyness, 2012). However, as is argued in the previous chapter, in other institutional areas such as the welfare state children are normatively imagined within a traditional dichotomy of dependency and risk with the responsibility for their support considered firmly within the private domain of their families. In Australia, despite the normative expectations of children as objects of investment, protection, and risk (Redmond, 2010) there appears to be a lack of acknowledgement of how the shift to individualised institutions might be impacting in their lives or how this may create conflicts or contradictions. Wyness (2012, p. 107) argues that the idea that childhood
is in crisis is now a dominant theme in modern Western societies as our notions of
‘what childhood means as a phase of the life cycle are threatened by the weakening of
structures that both care for and control children’. He gives examples of the family,
welfare state, and schools as sites of this structural weakening. The following section
examines some of these notions and what they may mean for research about
children’s lives.

4.2 The ‘child’ in sociology
As recently as the 1970’s mainstream sociological studies of childhood were very
limited (Corsaro, 2011; Qvortrup, 2005). It has been noted that this contributed to
children being marginalised both as a result of their subordinate position in society,
and also by the lack of theoretical conceptualisation of childhood in contemporary
society (Qvortrup, 1993). Wyness (2012, p. 58) proposes that this absence of research
‘was due to children’s lack of social ontology; their assumed lack of rationality and
social competence’. Children are rarely viewed for what they are in the present—with
ongoing lives, needs, and desires—by rather as what they will become: ‘future adults
with a place in the social order and contributions to make to it’ (Corsaro, 2011; Prout,
2000).

By the final decades of the twentieth century society had begun to place ‘the child’
and ‘children's interests’ at the forefront of legal, welfare, medical, and educational
policy and practice. The International Year of the Child was observed in 1979, and in
1989 the United Nations declared the Convention for the Rights of Children
(UNCRC) (UNICEF, 2005). There also emerged at this time a new paradigm for the
study of children: a sociology of childhood (James & Prout, 1997). This paradigm
posited the concept of childhood itself as a social construction, the study of which ensured the ‘double hermeneutic of the social sciences’ (Giddens, 1967) was acutely present: in other words, the very act of declaring it also acts in the processes of reconstructing childhood in society. This approach recognises childhood as just one variable of social analysis and children as actors in the construction of their own lives, the lives of those around them and the societies they inhabit. Most importantly it acknowledges the need for the study of children's social relationships and cultures from their own perspective and the imperative to allow children a direct voice and participation in the production of research data about their lives (James & Prout, 1997, pp. 1-8). Frønes (2005, p. 267) describes the concept ‘childhood’ as a framework that structures the factual life of children: ‘a cultural realm with rights and entitlements and the role and image distinguishing children from adults’. In studying childhood as a social category, sociology underscores the role and societal position of children. Corsaro (2011, p. 8) posits that this awakening about children and childhood concerns occurred partly as a result of consideration by sociologists of other subordinate groups such as women and minorities. The work of feminist scholars may have indirectly drawn attention to children, but as Thorne (1987) notes in calling for a ‘re-visioning of children’, they were slow to note their marginalisation in sociology.

In seeking to develop a new sociological approach, two competing but coinciding tropes of childhood have emerged over time: one posits childhood as ‘subjected to authority, dependent, dispossessed and without rights’; a socially constructed period in children's lives; and a deterministic structural form in which children are passive incumbents of their childhood (Corsaro, 2011, p. 9; Mayall, 2002). The other sees
children as taking part in ‘socially necessary activities: contributing towards the accumulation of knowledge and labour power; permanently part of social renewal and from an early age an integral part of social organisation’; and active social agents who creatively produce their own unique children’s cultures (Corsaro, 2011, p. 4; Mayall, 2002, p. 142). While this thesis is sensitive to the ways that structural oppression shapes children’s lives, it has also sought to draw on the latter framework to highlight children’s capacity for agency, even in the face of imposed policies and material hardship.

Many scholars (Corsaro, 2011; James et al., 1998; James & Prout, 1997; Mayall, 2002) see new conceptions of the child in sociology emerging in late modernity: socialised, socially constructed and social actors in their own right. James and Prout (1997, p. 7) perceive childhood is conceptualised as an ‘actively negotiated set of social relationships within which the early years of human life are constituted’. The immaturity of the child is acknowledged as biological fact; however, the ways that this is understood and given meaning is seen to be contingent on culture. In conceptualising ‘the socially constructed child’ it is recognised that our understandings about children and childhood ‘depend on the predispositions of a consciousness constituted in relation to our social, political, historical, and moral context’ (James et al., 1998: 26-7). This implies therefore, multiple conceptions of childhood–multiple realities: a plurality of diverse constructions. Childhoods are variable and intentional: there is no universal ‘child’ with which to engage. Some argue however, that this approach can risk forsaking the embodied material child (Gittens, 1998; James et al., 1998; Turmel, 2008; Wyness, 2012). Whilst ‘childhood’ may be conceptually imagined with competing discourses it is lived and experienced
by real children with specific and particular needs. In this study the ‘child’ is conceptualised based on what could be regarded as normative Western understandings about age and dependency for example, however the qualitative research seeks to uncover the reality of the diverse lived experiences of each child.

Through child-centred research children’s worlds are witnessed as real places and provinces of meaning not poor imitations or inadequate precursors to the adult world (James et al., 1998, p. 28). This positions children in an intrinsic cohort with rights and claims equal to and in competition with that of adults and sets up a re-evaluation of the stratification system and power relations between adults and children. Mayall (1994) refers to ‘children’s childhoods’ where children’s difference and their relative autonomy are celebrated. For child-focussed researchers this means not imposing their own constructs and transformations on children’s actions and taking their accounts and explanations at face value (James et al., 1998: 29). Frønes (2005, p. 270) adds that phenomenological approaches to research with child actors seeking to understand the subjective construction of meaning will also assist in theorising the dynamics of structure and agency in their lives. This consideration was paramount when designing the research methods for this study.

Mayall (2002, p. 29) theorises child/adult relationships that are constructed through exploitation and designation in contradistinction to an ‘other’: the adult (relational sociology). She identifies a ‘cohort’ effect that understands social policy is a result of relations between cohorts of adults and cohorts of children. These are often founded on adult’s agenda for children based on cultural norms about home, family and schooling–adult designed structures for children’s lives–and reflect cohort
identities, goals and ideologies (Mayall, 2002, p. 30). This understanding could be applied to the welfare-to-work policy as a cohort of children bear the consequences of policy designed with adult outcomes in mind. This can create tensions as adults still have responsibility for children and their own notions about what is best for them. When considering social policy an approach that accounts for the power relations between generational cohorts will place children’s needs and rights alongside those of adults and not relegate them or overlook them in favour of adult-centric approaches (Wintersberger, 2005).

The politicisation of childhood in line with previously established agenda concerning unequal and structurally discriminatory society is seen by some scholars to constitute childhood as a minority group (James et al., 1998, p. 30; Mayall, 2002, pp. 20-22). This understanding has parallels with women’s studies and the feminist agenda and serves to challenge the existing power relations between adults and children. It is an approach that conveys notions of powerlessness and victimhood and in doing so converts understandings of ‘natural’ inequality into cultural inequality: race, gender, sexuality, age, physical and mental ability, and now childhood. James and colleagues (1998, p. 31) argue that whilst this approach is strong in its commitment to children’s interests and purposes and highlights the imbalances in adult-child relationships that are important, it does run the risk of transforming a group ‘of-itself’ into a group ‘for-itself’. They therefore perceive that as ‘childhood’ becomes a minority group with demands to be heard the ‘fractured and faceted diversity’ (e.g. class, gender, age, ethnicity) within the group itself can be overlooked. This is always a risk when policy adopts universal approaches based on generalised assumptions about a
‘problem group’ without accounting for differing socio-cultural influences or particular biographical experiences within the group.

4.3 Social structures and children’s agency

Given the tensions between differing conceptualisations of childhood discussed in the previous section, it becomes important to investigate not only the diversity of children’s lives but also the impacts of social-structural influences on their agency. James and colleagues (1998, p. 32) argue that children’s subjectivity is determined by their society and thus is instanced by phenomenon. The child is understood in relation to the integrative, inter-related and functional constraints of the structural arrangements within the overall society. In developing the concept of self-socialisation, Heinz (2002, p. 42) points to the linking of social structure, life-course and subjective interpretations of lived experiences and events. He perceives that the construction of the ‘self’ occurs within constraints and opportunities determined by the unequal access to social resources, education, employment and social networks. For the children in this study that includes food insecurity, housing insecurity, disrupted schooling, loss of peer networks, stigma and social exclusion. In exploring the changing nature of socialisation in contemporary societies, Heinz (2002, p. 43) suggests that individualisation results in socialisation becoming more self-initiated than reproductive. ‘It shifts from parental instruction to individual construction, from internalised social control to self-initiated learning and development’ (Heinz, 2002, p. 42). Giddens (1984, p. 25) argues that social structures can be both ‘constraining and enabling’ and that individuals use their agency to interpret and shape their realities as they simultaneously are shaped by the structures around them. Even when structures
do not obviously restrict or coerce individuals, they often have a strong influence on fundamental values, beliefs and preferences (Giddens, 1984, p. 15; Howard, 2007, p. 7). Frønes (2005, p. 270) however, warns that conceptualisations of children that are too structurally inclined miss the role of children as actors and ‘lack the capacity to grasp the dynamics of social change and the mechanisms of differentiation’.

When thinking about these tensions between structure and agency for children, Corsaro (2011, p. 20) argues that ‘socialisation is not only a matter of adaptation and internalisation but also a process of appropriation, reinvention, and reproduction’. He postulates a theory of childhood that he terms interpretive reproduction. Central to this approach is an appreciation of the importance of collective, communal activity—how children negotiate, share, and create culture with adults and each other (Corsaro, 2011, p. 21). He perceives this as capturing both the creative and innovative aspects of children’s participation in society and the ways in which they actively contribute to cultural reproduction and change. Corsaro (2011, pp. 20-26) sees children’s participation in cultural routines as key in that they provide children with security and a shared understanding of belonging. At the same time, he argues these routines are then empowered and provide the framework for the production, presentation, and interpretation of socio-cultural knowledge.

In his major study *Childhood as a Social Phenomenon*, Qvortrup (1991, p. 31) develops three assumptions: childhood constitutes a particular structural form; childhood is exposed to the same societal forces as adulthood; and children are themselves co-constructors of childhood society. This infers three corresponding questions: how is childhood different from or related to other social groups; how is its
conception and nature changed in different cultures and times; and how do children affect societal and policy responses and how are they affected by them? The central interest of this thesis is the way in which children’s lives are impacted by the changes in welfare-to-work policy for sole-parent families, but also how they in turn act to creatively adapt to their changing circumstances and what influence their actions might have on the structures around them. This approach signified the need for a conceptual framework for this thesis that allowed for the effects of broad social and economic change but also to the more nuanced factors of timing, social support networks and individual agency. The following sections detail this framework beginning with the wider social and institutional changes that necessitate the self-transformation of individuals through complex processes that induce individualisation (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002).

4.4 Individualisation

In contemporary Western society the individual is widely seen as the fundamental agent of human action and the ultimate target of governance (Howard, 2007, p. 1). Processes of globalisation, detraditionalisation and individualisation are perceived to be ‘liquefying’ the traditional constraints that once bound people to certain existences around class, family, religion, nations, occupations, and gender and to be freeing up many areas of life to personal choice (Bauman, 2000; Beck, 1992; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1991). Whilst early sociologists (Durkheim, 1975) had observed the breaking down of the religious and mythological constraints in modern industrial societies, the latter part of the last century has been characterised by what Beck described as ‘…the turmoil of world-risk society [where] …people are expected
to live their lives with the most diverse and contradictory transnational and personal identities and risks’ (Beck: 2000, 169). The implications for society and individuals and the accelerated pace at which this change is occurring into the new millennia has been described as the ‘runaway world’ (Giddens, 2002) where:

…the choosing, deciding, shaping human being who aspires to be the author of his or her own life, the creator of an individual identity, is the central character of our time (Beck, 2000, p. 165).

What has also been recognised is that individualisation is essentially social and is driven by ‘collective processes that involve new forms of socialisation, regulation, and resource allocation, all of which promote particular kinds of individuality’ (Howard, 2007, p. 1). Beck (2002) suggests that:

…individuals are not so much compelled as peremptorily invited to constitute themselves as individuals: to plan, understand, design themselves and act as individuals (Beck, 2002, p. 3-4).

As such, the challenge for contemporary social scientists is to understand how individual agency and action can be reconciled with the complex interdependencies of the human experience and how the processes associated with individualisation, often less than transparent, impact on individual lives. This thesis seeks to peer through this opacity to grasp a sense of the nature and consequences of these processes in the lives of children.

4.4.1 Individualisation and childhood

The processes of individualisation can be seen to impact directly and indirectly in children’s lives and occur in a number of areas both within the family and other social
institutions to create what Wyness (2012, p. 56) calls the ‘child of late modernity. This is characterised by increased family diversity and exposure to social risks, children taking greater levels of involvement in decisions about their lives, and exposure to the forces of globalisation, consumerism and mass media (Wyness, 2012, pp. 61-73). Children are also impacted indirectly as the changing roles and social position of women mean that increasingly their mothers are juggling work, family, and caring roles and children are required to take on greater responsibility for self-care and the care of others (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, pp. 55-56; Ridge, 2007). Children are increasingly in paid childcare outside of the home when mothers are working and often even when they are not (Brennan, 1996; Campo, 2009). For children in sole-parent families in particular, managing the work-home interface becomes a family affair in which all family members are involved: the ‘family-work project’ where ‘work and care are two sides of the same coin’ (Millar & Ridge, 2008, p. 109). The weakening and pluralisation of traditional norms and mores where the precepts of religion, class, or culture are less rigid opens up a multitude of options as individuals look for meaning, belonging, and direction. This also impacts on children as choices become freer around gender roles, dress, and recreational activities. The individual is presented with a seemingly unlimited range of options from which to invent and reinvent themselves. The Internet and social media provide the opportunity to present a range of multiple simultaneous identities unlimited by time or space and to engage socially outside of the family and peers. The commodification of childhood through mass media and marketing, where childhood is constructed, gendered, dressed and equipped along social norms, creates spaces of inclusion and exclusion for children where the ‘freedom to choose’ is limited to a range of socially
acceptable options (Miles, 2000; Wyness, 2012, p. 69). The marketisation, standardisation, and vocationalisation of education means children are increasingly making choices about their education based on future study, vocation, and career possibilities in what Bousfield and Ragusa (2013) describe as the ‘adultification of childhood’ through education. Children are being given increased involvement in discussion and decision-making about their own lives, for example, in matters of custody after family breakdown (Scott, 2004; Wyness, 2012), and they are found to play important roles as contributors to family and ‘real’ economies through their formal and informal work (Zelizer, 1985). There is a growing academic consensus that the lived reality of Western childhood somehow differs considerably from its historical-cultural construction as a time free from adult responsibilities and behaviours (Burton, 2007; Elkind, 1981; Palmer, 2007).

Whilst these examples indicate a general trend towards a more autonomous ‘individualised child’ this appears to stand in contradiction to what has been described as the normatively conceived ‘priceless’ child: a dependent recipient of state security and a consumer of education; protected from adult worlds where ‘childhood [is] quarantined as a space regulated by affection and education rather than work or profit’ (Redmond, 2010, p. 474; Zelizer, 1985, p. 209). Redmond (2010, p. 479) posits that within the institutional rhetoric of Australian welfare-to-work policy reform, children remain embodied in this ‘priceless’ model. He argues that this creates a contradiction between how children are imagined in the policy ideal and the reality of children’s agency as individualised actors that potentially exposes them to increased risk of disadvantage in later life. This suggests the need for more knowledge about how institutions and individuals interact with each other, what Beck (1992, pp. 131-132)
termed ‘the institution-dependent control structure of individual situations’, and how for children whose families rely on income support this interaction potentially creates a very different experience for them than for their more fortunate peers.

4.4.2 Institutional Individualism and the individualisation of risk

In conceptualising individualisation as being about more than just liberating individuals from historically established forms of behaviour and a diminishing of the power of tradition to determine and justify actions, Beck (2000, 166) points to the paradoxical nature of individualised freedoms where individuals are compelled by institutions to self-organisation and self-thematisation. He sees individuals becoming increasingly dependent on the labour market, whilst education, consumption, and welfare regimes hold greater significance for the outcomes of individuals (Beck, 1992, pp. 131-132). This is arguably also the case for children.

As was previously noted, despite a general trend towards the individualising of childhood, children are largely regarded as being protected from the more precarious adult worlds of work, care, and the economy. However, for poor children in sole-parent families who are dependent on income support this protection is tested as they often have no choice but to perform as reflexive agents: taking on paid work; managing family resources; mediating their own preferences; and undertaking care of others and self-caring roles in order to accommodate the paid employment of their mothers (Blaxland, 2009). As such, children are required to take on individualised behaviours to compensate for the fact that institutions, such as the welfare state and the labour market, still operate with traditional assumptions about the gendered division of labour and based on a male breadwinner family model. As Ridge (2007)
found, children being ‘activated’ in to adult roles of work and care can often come at considerable personal cost: for example, by compromising their educational outcomes. Although participation in paid work is also common for children in more affluent families, Redmond (2010, p. 479) argues that they have more choice and control over the management of the work-life balance than children in poorer families. Hence, poor children are at greater risk of compromising their ‘pricelessness’, making them less likely to conform to the ideal expectations of policy and more likely to bear the burden of risks and structural constraints to their agency as adults.

In this way the processes of institutional individualism also shift the responsibility to the individual for the consequences of institutional change that are outside of individual control, such as the labour market and the welfare state: the ‘individualisation of social risk’ (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p. 39). Failures become a reflection of personal inadequacies rather than collective experiences of class and social crises are perceived as individual and only very indirectly in their social dimension (Beck, 2000, 167). For example, the crises of unemployment can be placed as a burden on the shoulders of the individual who is unemployed, rather than being seen as a product of changing economic or labour market forces. Whilst individuals may have more freedom to make decisions about their lives, these are ‘precarious freedoms’ that come with risk and uncertainty. The increasingly insecure nature of the contemporary labour market and the importance of education in securing employment, alongside the decrease in traditional family and community bonds, mean that for some this freedom can lead to greater opportunity and success and for others
to disadvantage and failure. ‘Living our own life’ also entails being responsible for personal misfortunes and unanticipated events. Bauman (2001) describes this vividly:

> In our society of individuals all the messes into which one can get are assumed to be self-made and all the hot water into which one can fall is proclaimed to have been boiled by the hapless failures who have fallen into it (Bauman, 2001, p. 9).

The increasing risk and uncertainty inherent in the shift to a highly individualised personhood, necessitates a ‘reflexive’ or ‘do-it-yourself’ biography (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p. 3; Giddens, 1991, p. 75). Faced with a plurality of uncertain life-course options, Giddens (1991, p. 28) argues that individuals develop a ‘calculative attitude’ to potential actions. Perhaps for some there is an element of calculation, but Beck’s notion that ‘individuals must produce, stage, and cobble together their biographies themselves’ (Beck, 1994, p. 13), or Hoggett’s (2001) concept of ‘non-reflexive agency’ may be closer to the uncertain reality for many. As is discussed further in the following section, the children in poor families often have little choice but to do what they can just to get by.

Bauman (2001, p. 7) argues that the process of individualisation also affects the narratives that inform our biographies both by ‘setting the range of choices and separating realistic choices from pipe-dreams…life stories must confine themselves to to-ing and fro-ing among the options on offer’. He contends that ‘lived lives and lives told are closely interconnected’ and that the structures, and ‘regimes of representation in a culture’ play both a reflexive and constitutive role. As such, the capacity of an individual to calculatively plan and make choices will be limited by the possibilities they can imagine for themselves and will still be very much based on
their family and social milieu: what Bourdieu (1984) terms *habitus* or Lash (1994, pp. 135-155) describes as ‘aesthetic reflexivity’, orientations or predispositions. However, *habitus*, taste, or social milieu cannot entirely determine the outcomes as this study reveals; as for several families despite their middle class values and preferences around education for example, the impacts of their current living conditions limited their range of options.

For children, early socialisation provides the blueprint for the development of identity and future life planning. Outcomes can be limited by their education, where they live, and their family’s cultural, social, and financial capital (Bourdieu & Passerson, 1977; Duncan et al., 1994; Duncan et al., 2007; Hilferty, Redmond, & Katz, 2009). Beck (2000, p. 167) adds further to this suggesting that social problems can become individual psychological dispositions: feelings of guilt, inadequacy, anxiety or conflict. As such individuals begin to perceive themselves as partly responsible for the conditions of their lives in a narrative of individualised failure, even though in many cases there are structural constraints that are often out of their control. The findings from this study add to our knowledge about how children interpret their circumstances and correspondingly adapt their expectations and future planning. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) argue that choices may become limited and standardised as individuals are increasingly dependent on secondary institutions such as the labour market and the welfare state and institutional guidelines that are largely ambivalent about the risky nature of an individualised society. Individual choice becomes ‘precarious freedom’ in a world of volatile labour markets and ‘activation’ style welfare policy; ‘it is in the bureaucratic and institutional jungle of modernity that

Women in particular have been effected by these processes of ‘liberation’ from gendered structures and futures and now find it easier to free themselves from unhappy family situations; however, it is a conditional freedom that comes with both risks and opportunities (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). It breaks one of the key ‘axes of power’ in the traditional nuclear family:

However, the other axis of power, the generational boundary between parent and child, is held firm, if not strengthened, by the shift towards greater adult choice. Whereas women as well as men can now take on the mantel of ‘economic man’, there is no new conceptual space for children (Wyness, 2012, p. 58).

Children remain, in Beck’s words, ‘the last irrevocable un-exchangeable primary relationship’ (Beck, 1992, p. 118). Wyness argues that ‘despite the logic of individualisation that opens up space for individual action, contemporary social theory ignores the position of children’ (Wyness, 2012, p. 58).

This section has provided an explanation of how the social and economic processes that combine to produce individualisation can be understood in the lives of children and as such provide a sense of the macro-influences and the broader contextual framework for this study. In seeking to develop a better understanding about children and their agency in an individualised world and the implications this holds for policy design, the following section details the value in adopting a life-course approach (Elder, 2009) as a tool to analyse and understand the research data.
4.5 The Life-course Perspective

A life-course perspective implies a ‘consciousness and sensitivity to the bond between social change and the life-course of individuals’ and an understanding that many of the generalised predictions regarding the life-course and the ‘markers’ of life are subject to cultural and historical change (Bowman et al., 2013; Elder, 2009). Whilst the life-course is not a theory in itself, it does provide a general orientation in respect to areas of family change and specifically the relationships between particular facets (Aldous, 1990, 571). In this investigation into the impacts of welfare policy on children, adopting a ‘life-course’ orientation provided a useful lens through which to analyse and code the data and to consider the questions posed by the thesis, in particular where they related to the interdependent lives of families.

The early study of families and how they change was tied to policy issues around poverty. After World War II, Duvall and Hill (1948) drew on the notion of changes in family composition to elaborate a nine-stage family life cycle. Dewilde (2003, p. 113) argues that the family cycle approach adopts normative assumptions largely conceived in the ‘golden age of marriage’ and ‘the baby boom era’. With a focus on single-bread winner families with two intact parents that were the norm for the era, the life cycle study ‘reflected a public preoccupation with family living and child-bearing in nuclear families that has not been observed since’ (Aldous 1990: 572). Family-cycle typologies implicitly assume a linear trajectory, but today more people pass through phases of the family cycle several times including multiple marriages, returning to education, and moving in and out of the family home. Even families that fall under the same category (e.g. sole-parent families) are likely to have very
different histories and as such, studies and policy that rely on life-cycle typologies will fall short in accounting for internal differences (Dewilde, 2003, p. 131).

The life-course perspective on the other hand allows for macro-level influences such as globalisation, consumerism, technology, environmental and policy shifts, but also the micro impacts of changing family structures, early socialisation, and cultural practices. The social milieu of individuals, their disposable resources, biography and personal character traits are also of importance (Elder, 1977). Whilst it acknowledges a ‘cohort effect’ in which a specific group are exposed to similar cultural and economic trends (a ‘period effect’), the life-course perspective also integrates social structures and individual agency and allows for the influences of ‘linked lives’ in the realms of family, work and education in the continuity or disruption of the life journey (Elder & Giele, 1998). As an analysis that links the consequences of early life transitions to later life events, a life-course perspective also has an eye to how early life events and choices can have implications even into old age (Elder, 1994, p. 5). Elder and Giele (1994; 1998, p. 8) identify four key factors that shape the life-course that are particularly useful in thinking about researching children’s lives: historical times; social ties to others or ‘linked lives’; the timings of lives; and human agency.

4.5.1 Historical times

Implicit in the concept of historical times lies an understanding that individuals are exposed to different constraints and options as a result of historical times and events, specific social and policy conditions, and the socially constructed meanings attached to the normative timing and trajectories of lives (Amato, 1993, pp. 5-6; Elder, 1994,
Growing awareness of the link between human lives and the historical times has underscored the multiple levels, social embeddedness, and dynamic features of the life-course (Elder, 1994, p. 5).

Wars, depressions and dramatic economic change have been identified as significant (Elder, 1974; Hogan, 1981; Schoon, 2006) but arguably major shifts in social welfare policy produce similar impacts. Recent shifts in welfare-to-work policy in Australia clearly represent such an historical marker. Elder and colleagues (1993) found in research with children in the US, that short-term fluctuations of the economy were among the most important social changes along with increases in mass media and changes to education. He argues that the implications for individuals are contingent on the severity of the change process and what people themselves bring to that process (Elder, 1994, p. 6). In his seminal work The Children of the Great Depression for example, Elder (1974) found that children from the same birth cohort–exposed to the same ‘period effect’–experienced very different outcomes as a result of their various family situations.

4.5.2 The timing of lives

The life-course perspective also adds to the understandings of temporal change within families: the effects of chronological age and the time lines of individuals and their interactions within families and other settings. By linking individual lifetime, social/family time, and historical time it can reveal how varying events and their timing in the lives of individuals affect families in particular historical contexts. The individual lifetime relates to the chronological age and place within the family and the meanings, expectations, and vulnerabilities that can be associated with certain ages.
This includes social norms and age-graded hierarchies around education, work, and care (Riley, Johnson, & Foner, 1972). Family event sequences and timings and transitions around marriage, parenting, and leaving home are examples of social time (Elder, 1994, p. 6). Age norms can change when social and economic conditions change: for example, the age norms around school leaving has changed significantly in Australia in the past thirty years (Vickers, 2009), and the expectations around education for children in middle-class families varies to that of working-class families (Germov, 2004, p. 252). Taking a life-course perspective provides a useful framework when exploring the disjunctions between expectations and institutional constraints: in this study welfare policy based on normative assumptions about children’s ages, stages and sequences, and the diverse and unpredictable nature of lived lives such as health and mental health issues and changes to family structure.

4.5.3 Linked Lives

The interdependent nature of the life-course is particularly relevant for the study of children both in terms of the interlocking of their transitions and trajectories with others (e.g. parents, siblings, grandparents, friends) and the linking of their early lives and later life events (Elder, 2009, pp. 99-101). ‘Because lives are linked interdependently, transitions in one person’s life often entail transitions for other people as well’ (Elder, 2009, p. 13). For children, changes to their mothers’ working arrangements also impacts on them but it may also impact on others. For example, when grandparents are called upon to provide informal care and support for children whilst their parents work (Jenkins, 2010). Communal relationships are indispensable to maintaining an individual’s personal capabilities and the life-course becomes a process of ‘individual welfare production’ supported and accompanied by others.
‘Human lives are embedded in social relationships’ that result in social regulation and support (Huinink, 2009, pp. 304-305). In this study understanding how ‘these processes are expressed across the life cycle of socialisation, behavioural exchange and generational succession’ (Elder, 1994, p. 5) provides useful insights and knowledge about the implications of welfare policy change on the linked lives of family and others and the role they play in mediating the outcomes for children.

Life-course approaches to empirical research such as Elder’s *Children of the Great Depression* (1974), have been used to explore intergenerational, historic, and cohort differences in children’s ability to adapt to risk and the impacts of early life-course disruptions on future life chances (see also Schoon, 2006). Other studies (Mayer, 2009) found that many of the impacts on children’s future lives were mediated through changing family experiences, altered family relationships, changing divisions of labour and increased social strain. Likewise, it could be expected that the agency and adaptability of children in this research will be impacted by the multiple transitions, disruptions, and challenges in their lives as a result of policy, societal, and family change.

**4.5.4 Human Agency and Adaptation**

The concept of human agency is another central theme of the life-course perspective where the role played by individual actors is considered key. Heinz and colleagues (1998) argue that it is within the limitations of their environments that individuals plan, make choices from a range of options and as such construct both their own life-course and the life-course of others. Giddens (1984) identifies three types of reflexive agency: unconscious motives or habits, that we do every day with no thought or
conscious motive that he perceives to have limited power to change structure except within the confines of our own home/family; practical consciousness or actions/routines that are directed by motive and it is these that he sees as having the most power to change structures; and discursive consciousness or actions directed by knowledge. Lash (1994, pp. 135-155) argues rather for ‘predispositions’ or ‘orientations’ in what he terms ‘a sociology of unthought’: an ‘aesthetic reflexivity’ that produces mimetic rather than cognitive responses. He likens this to Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus* and ‘taste categories’ that he contends have ‘little to do with the world of structure’. Hoggett (2001, p. 37) argues that a more robust model of ‘agency must also confront the subject’s refusal of agency or the assertion of forms of agency that are destructive towards self and other’. He further identifies what he terms ‘non-reflexive’ types of agency where individuals act on impulse or lose the ability to make sense of their actions as a result of oppression or disempowerment (Hoggett, 2001, p. 48).

Lister (2004, p. 124) posits that the stigma and ‘othering’ that accompanies poverty can impact on agency by reducing ‘the poor’ to passive objects: helpless victims, work averse, welfare dependents. Arguably children have also been regarded, even by researchers, as passive, subordinate, irrational, and incomplete: as adults ‘becoming’ (Qvortrup, 1994; Wyness, 2012). In developing a model to understand how marginalised individuals employ agency and how agency is constrained by poverty, Lister identifies four forms of agency, that sit within two axes: ‘everyday-strategic’ and ‘personal-political/citizenship’ (see Figure 4.1). *Everyday-strategic* refers to the actions an individual undertakes to get by from day-to-day including on one side, non-reflexive and impulsive actions. On the other side sit the reflexive and
more strategic aspects of agency employed by individuals to improve their lives over the longer term. The *personal-political* axis includes those actions aimed at improving one’s own situation at one pole or to bring about broader societal change at the other (2004, pp. 129-130). The four forms of agency—*getting by, getting (back) at, getting organised,* and *getting out*—provided a useful model to organise an analysis of how the children in this study exercised their agency.

*Getting by* sits within the *personal/everyday* quadrant as shown in Figure 4.1. It deals with the things individuals do to cope and keep going: to ‘get by’. Lister (2004, pp. 124-157) argues that because of their everyday nature these actions can often be taken for granted or not seen as expressions of agency. Hoggett (2001) would perhaps see these as sitting within the realm of ‘non-reflexive’ agency or Giddens (1984) as ‘unconscious motives’.

**FIGURE 4.1 FOUR TYPES OF AGENCY**
Titterton (1992, pp. 1, 19) emphasises the important role of ‘informal modes of coping and help-seeking … the creative and diverse ways people respond to their own problems’ and the ways in which people draw on a range of resources (personal, social, material, and time) to manage their lives. He further argues that rather than research focusing on the pathology and dysfunctionality of welfare subjects a more fruitful focus could lie in exploring resilience and adaptability and the resources that enable the poor to cope with difficult and stressful environments. However, the ways in which adaptations may also create future structural barriers across the individual’s life course is also important to consider.

Lister (2004, pp. 140-145) identifies getting (back) at as forms of individual resistance and expressions of anger, despair and other forms of destructive agency against themselves, their families, or even wider society. For children getting back can also be a response to feelings of powerlessness and as a challenge to boundaries and those with power over them. Getting out encompasses a range of ‘officially sanctioned responses to poverty’ such as education and employment. Lister (2004, p. 149) notes that whilst ‘individuals exercise their agency in negotiating these routes…the routes themselves are forged by structural and cultural factors that can assist or obstruct the exercise of that agency’. The ways in which structural and cultural contexts can shape the collective strategic agency of the poor falls into the getting organised quadrant. Discourses that stigmatise and ‘other’ groups such as sole-parents also serve to diminish their sense of political agency and capacity for activism.
The modes by which individuals express their agency links closely with the concept of adaptation. Elder (1974, pp. 10-12) defines the characteristics of adaptation as attentional capacities and methods of problem solving, resilience, flexibility, and resourcefulness. He perceives crisis and economic deprivation as key strategic points in which families and their multiple actors become ‘family economies’ in adapting to financial crisis (Elder, 1974, p. 9). Elder (1974, p. 11) posits that crisis can in itself lead to resilience and resourcefulness. In some circumstances, when actors are faced with a choice of lines of action it can lead to family adaptability and flexibility of commitment to physical living standards and role relationships. He further argues that the socialisation of children is altered through the parental adaptations to the anticipated future of their off-spring through education, social, and recreational activities, and even beliefs about future possibilities.

4.6 A conceptual model of childhood in late modernity

The heuristic diagram below (Figure 4.2) offers a model of the theoretical and conceptual ideas described in this chapter and that underpin this thesis. At a macro level the child at the centre of the model is seen to be impacted by a range structural and institutional changes that influence many aspects of social life in contemporary society: family, gender roles and institutions such as welfare and the labour market with increased individualised risk and responsibility. These are regarded as constituting specific historical times and socio-cultural conditions. At a micro-level these impact on and are mediated by the family’s access to social, cultural, and financial capital, the interdependence of linked lives of others, the timing of events and transitions in their lives and socialisation. Children can similarly be seen as
reflexive social actors, who contribute to the resources of their families, provide support for other family members and participate in and facilitate the adaptations of their families. These *adaptations* and their *agency* combine to produce a range of *life-course outcomes*, that are then experienced within the context of institutional structures. Individual agency is also seen as contributing to the reshaping and reproduction of social institutions.

Figure 4.2 A conceptual model of childhood in late modernity
4.7 Summary

This chapter began by presenting a sociological rationale for the decision to focus this study on children’s lives and to include them as active participants in the research. It posits children as creative agents who act in their own and others’ lives and are capable of making reasonable decisions in context. Since their voices are largely unheard in research in the field of social policy this thesis positions children and knowledge about their lives as central to developing a more child-oriented welfare perspective (Fernqvist, 2011). This also points to a need to better understand how childhood is constructed in socially and politically contingent ways. It highlights the need for research to inform policy that is sensitive to the diversity that exists within the social group ‘children’.

The chapter then built a layered conceptual framework for understanding children’s lives in the context of welfare-to-work. It identified the long-term social changes that have led to greater freedoms but also greater risks for individuals and the extent to which these can render individuals increasingly reliant on education, the labour market and welfare. We live in an institutionally individualised society, however many of our social and cultural norms remain strong (e.g. the gendered division of labour) and this has created tensions and contradictions for sole-parents under welfare-to-work policy that are also experienced by their children. Adopting a life-course perspective that is sensitive to normative assumptions about age and the sequences of life events, the linked lives of children and others, the impact of historical and cultural times, the significance of the timing of events and transitions, and the role of human agency provides a strong conceptual framework upon which to
build this qualitative study. The life-course perspective brings together the macro influences of social and structural change, particularly around family, welfare, and work, alongside the micro dimensions of interdependent relationships and individual agency. As such, it affords a fitting lens for the analysis of the data and to organise the qualitative findings from this study as revealed in Chapters Seven through to Ten.

The following methodology chapter presents the details of the research design and the tools employed to conduct this qualitative study with sole-mothers and their children.
5. Methodology

Capturing children’s knowledge about their lives through research is integral to our understanding of the social order and what can be done to improve the social conditions of childhood (Mayall, 2008). Glauser (1997, p. 145) argues that policy makers often intervene in the lives of children on the basis of unclear and arbitrary knowledge about the reality of their lives. By placing children’s knowledge alongside that of their parents, this research adds to the literature about children’s lives and informs the design and implementation of a more child-oriented approach (Fernqvist, 2011) to Australian welfare policy: one that is more sensitive to its impacts on children. It also adds to the body of knowledge about conducting social research with children in the hope of encouraging others to follow.

The voices and experiences of children have been largely neglected in social research in Australia to date, not least because of the perceived methodological and ethical challenges (Morris et al., 2012). In this chapter the methodology employed for this conceptually grounded qualitative investigation into how sole-mothers and their children experience, interpret, and act to influence the circumstances of their lives is described. It deals with a number of issues pertinent to research with children including the challenges of designing research that is open enough to allow children to express their own views in their own ways. It begins by detailing the research paradigm that draws on critical realism (Bhaskar, 1979), based on an understanding that whilst individuals interpret and give meaning to their lives, these lives are lived within the reality of particular social and structural contexts. The research design employed to draw out this dyadic relationship and the recruiting and sampling
processes are described, followed by an outline of the research context. The particular ethical challenges of conducting research with children are then examined and the multiple research tools employed for this study are detailed, beginning with the structured background questionnaires employed with the mothers. The narrative interviews with the mothers to collect rich qualitative data about their lived experiences and the meanings they attached to them and the participatory research and conversations with their children are then described. The processes for coding and data analysis are detailed and the chapter concludes by discussing the limitations of the study.

5.1 Research Paradigm

This section begins by outlining the relational approach of critical realism (Bhaskar, 1979) that draws on both positivist and interpretive traditions to gain a better understanding of the lived experience of the families in this study. It then details the rationale for including children’s voices alongside that of their parents and the value of employing a grounded theory approach to the research.

5.1.1 Critical Realism: an ontological and epistemological position

Given this study’s interest in understanding the lived experiences of sole-mothers and their children, how they interpret those experiences through a phenomenological analysis of meaning, but also how these experiences are mediated by the social and structural forces of their everyday lives, an approach underpinned by the principles of critical realism (Bhaskar, 1979) was indicated. In observing the tensions between the positivist (objective, naturalistic) and hermeneutic (interpretive understanding) traditions in the social sciences, Bhaskar (2015, p. 18) proposed a relational approach
between the two. Critical realism holds that whilst there is a ‘real’ world in which we act and interact that can be studied scientifically, individuals and groups also create meaning from their worlds. It ‘reflects an ontological realism, whilst simultaneously accepting a form of epistemological constructivism and relativity’ (Altheide & Johnson, 1994, p. 582). This approach seems fitting for this study that sought to illuminate the relationships between the socio-structural forces in children’s lives and how they experience and interpret them.

As such the research design for this study employed multiple methods of data collection (Table 5.1). Firstly, it gathered demographic background data by way of a structured questionnaire with the mothers to reveal the contextual and lived realities of the families and how when there is multi-faceted disadvantage, factors can intersect and become cumulative: in this study for example, family characteristics, housing, maternal education, employment, financial resources and social support networks.

All of the data presented in this thesis has been anonymised.

**TABLE 5.1 DATA COLLECTION METHODS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Collection Method</th>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Structured Questionnaires</td>
<td>Mothers</td>
<td>Background and demographic data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrative Interviews</td>
<td>Mothers</td>
<td>Deep rich qualitative phenomenological data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participatory Activities and</td>
<td>Children 8-17 years old</td>
<td>Data about lived experiences and meanings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conversations</td>
<td></td>
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This contextual data informed the narrative interviews with the mothers and participatory research and conversations with their children that sought to reveal the
meanings and explanations they attached to their lived experiences. Comparing the data from the mothers alongside their children’s provided an opportunity to validate the questionnaire data, to highlight similarities and contrast the differences in experience, interpretations and the meanings they attached to them (Altheide & Johnson, 1994, p. 582). Linking the socio-structural data to the interviews was not done in a systematic way although it did help in providing context and in guiding the interviewer’s follow-up and probing questions.

In adopting a phenomenological approach, the study sought to reach an empathetic understanding of the subjective meanings individuals attach to their social actions.

Phenomenologist, Alfred Schutz (1899-1959), argued:

‘the observational field has a specific meaning and relevance for beings living, acting and thinking within it…By a series of common-sense constructs they…pre-select and pre-interpret this world, which they experience as the reality of their daily lives’ (Schutz, 1972).

The guiding principles for the narrative interviews employed in this study was that ‘individuals collate biographical experiences into a coherent description of their life-course’ (Zinn, 2010, p. 34). The ‘everyday theories and world views’ of individuals are then present in the knowledge they use in everyday life, their biographical decision-making and in the narrative they present in an interview situation (Zinn, 2010, p. 7). Bauman (2001, p. 7) contends that in this form of self-socialisation, ‘lived lives and lives told are closely interconnected’ and that the structures, and ‘regimes of representation in a culture’ play both a reflexive and constitutive role. As such, an approach that assists in grasping a sense of the relationship between the
meanings and perspectives individuals attach to their lived experiences and the social contexts in which they are embedded also allows for an understanding of the conflicts and differences in meaning for actors within the same context or situation. This is important for research into policies that arguably respond to powerful discourses and ideologies (Duncan & Edwards, 1999; Marston, 2004, 2008). Understanding how welfare-to-work policies are experienced, interpreted and impact on the agency of individuals—their choices, expectations, and their actual and imagined possibilities for their future lives—also offers important insights.

5.1.2 Research with children and mothers

In adopting a research approach that made a space for children’s voices, it is understood that children, like adults, interpret their social reality and attach meaning to their own actions and the actions of others. How they make sense of what happens in their lives will, to a large extent, determine how they experience it: for example, financial constraints may be seen in a negative light as prohibitive, or in a positive way as an opportunity to learn fiscal constraint or to find innovative ways to manage with little. The positioning of parents’ and children’s experiences and interpretations side-by-side in this study reveals the similarities, ‘disjunctions’ and the relationships between how mothers and their children interpret their lives. The differences in how the observed lives of children are reported by adults and how children themselves experience and interpret them are also uncovered. This approach is important for understanding the impacts of welfare-to-work activation type policies that are based on an assumption that children’s lives will be improved when their parents work. Knowledge about whether children feel their lives are improved, in what ways and under what circumstances, and how they respond and adapt may provide valuable
insights for policymakers in this area. British sociologist, Berry Mayall (2008, pp. 107, 122) argues that capturing children’s knowledge about their lives is integral to our understanding of the social order and what can be done to improve the social conditions of childhood. She emphasises the term ‘knowledge’ as opposed to ‘opinions’ or ‘perspectives’, implying something that can be refined, built upon and revised to produce a body of understanding and as a basis for further policy-oriented work.

5.1.3 Building grounded theory

Since the knowledge about children’s experiences in this field is very limited, this study adopted a ‘grounded theory’ approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to develop conceptually relevant insights from the empirical data. A grounded theory approach implies that rather than testing the data against preconceived theoretical ideas and generalisations, the theory should be generated from and alongside the data itself in a recursive and iterative way (Stern & Porr, 2011, p. 43). Each part informs the other, in order to construct theories of the phenomenon under study. Grounded theory provides rigorous yet flexible guidelines that begin with openly exploring and analysing inductive data and leads to developing a theory grounded in the data (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2013).

This approach is particularly useful in relation to research with children where we are seeking to deepen our knowledge of how children’s lives may be the same or different from adults’ and the links between the two. Theory that is applicable to adults’ lives may not fit as comfortably with children. Charmaz (2011, p. 366) argues that theoretical generalisations run the risk of erasing difference and obscuring variation in
the data and from a constructivist perspective can be argued to be partial, situated, conditional, and inherently political. Whilst this research has been informed by existing sociological theory and concepts, the methodological approach explicitly seeks to use the analysis of early data and participatory research methods to add to and further define the existing and emerging conceptualisations, explanations, and scope of the issues. In doing so the research has sought to ground emerging mid-level theories within the lived experiences of mothers and children.

5.2 Research Design and Methods

In designing research methods for this study that were consistent with the research paradigm of critical realism, three key suppositions were made. Firstly, that following current theories of childhood, children are competent thinkers and communicators capable of contributing to our knowledge about their own and the adult world (Corsaro, 2011; James et al., 1998; Mayall, 2002; Prout, 2002). Second, that the home environment is a familiar everyday place and as such provides a research setting from which children and parents are best able to act as reliable informants about their own lives (this assumption was in fact challenged in the case of some parents and is discussed later in this section). Finally, that the participants should direct the focus of the interviews into the areas of most concern to them to allow their interpretations and sense-making to emerge (Flick, 2014; Punch, 2002, p. 18; Toerien, 2013). As such it was considered desirable to have open narrative and conversational style interviews that required the researcher to intervene as little as possible in defining which issues were and were not important. Although the focus is ‘talk-in-interaction’, a term used to denote language in use by two or more people
interacting with each other, it also includes non-vocal aspects (like head movements, eye gaze and gesture) as well as para-linguistic interactions that do not use speech (Toerien, 2013, p. 327). In undertaking research of this nature my position as a researcher, therefore, was a key consideration.

5.2.1 The Position of the Researcher

In conducting a qualitative study of this type it was recognised that my gender, age, life experiences, and subjective understandings about the field all played a role in the selection of the thesis topic and question, the research methods, and my approach to the participants and the interviews. This potentially impacted on how participants perceived me as a researcher, but also on the building of trust and an open relationship with the participants that was integral to this study. As such, a number of areas of possible bias were identified, allowing for critical self-reflection and examining of perspectives, logic and assumptions when conducting the research (Minichello, Aroni, Timewell, & Alexander, 2000, p. 181; Taylor & Bogdan, 1984).

Firstly, and most significantly, my own lived experience as a sole-parent and previously as a welfare recipient no doubt informed the choice of the research field and my understandings about the issues in this field. As such, the risk of ‘going native’ or becoming so involved with and sympathetic to the mothers that my objectivity was lost (O’Reilly, 2009, p. 87), was identified early as a potential issue and I took particular care during interviews to maintain a position of impartiality. Secondly, as a female, but in a position of comparative authority, it was possible that the mothers may have felt judged by me and as such self-edited their responses to fit an assumed expectation: a type of self-presentation in order to be perceived in a way
they thought was socially desirable (Minichello et al., 2000, pp. 148-149). Goffman (1959) describes how individuals shape impressions about themselves into socially acceptable forms by embellishing, excluding, and even inventing information. To negate these concerns, care was taken to reassure the participants that they were not being judged about any aspect of their lives and efforts to establish a good rapport early in the interviews helped in this. I tried as much as possible to avoid expressing views of a personal, political or moralising nature about the topic that may have influenced the participants, although they often sought reassurance or an indication of support for a particular view or empathy about a related experience during the interviews.

My own personal experiences could also be seen as relevant in the choice of research methods. My awareness of how policy change impacts on families and especially children, was informed by my own lived experiences as a sole-parent and also by over thirty years working as a teacher. As such, I had insight into areas of commonality with the participants and whilst this increased the possibility of ‘going native’, it also gave me a level expertise on the central issues and an empathetic understanding of the key issues that assisted in the establishment of open relationships of trust between myself, the mothers and their children. My gender and similar age to many of the parent participants contributed to this building of trust, as did the fact that I was a mother myself. In this way my position of relative power as an educated outsider was somewhat negated and assisted in assuring the quality of the research as discussed further in the following section (Minichello et al., 2000, p. 182).
5.2.2 Research Validity

When C. Wright Mills (2000, p. 224) urged researchers to ‘avoid any set of rigid procedures…use the sociological imagination [and] avoid the fetishism of method and technique’ he was arguing for a flexibility and creativity of thought that has left qualitative researchers in the social sciences ‘grappling with issues of truth, validity, verisimilitude…trustworthiness…and so on’ (Altheide & Johnson, 2011, p. 582; Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). Altheide and Johnson (2011) argue for an ‘understanding of evidence, or agreed-upon information that would serve as a foundation’ for dealing with these concerns.

Evidence and facts are similar but not identical… Evidence involves the assertion that some facts are relevant to an argument or claim about a relationship. Since a position in an argument is likely tied to an ideological or even an epistemological position, evidence is not completely bound by facts, but is more problematic and subject to disagreement. (Altheide & Johnson, 2011, p. 586)

As such, this study seeks to find not so much the ‘facts’ about these families’ lives but ‘evidence’ of how they are experienced within their socio-structural reality and through high quality qualitative research to uncover findings that are sufficiently authentic to inform and influence future policy decisions. In order to secure the quality of the study and the evidential nature of the data collected, some assurance processes were implemented. Firstly, the researcher avoided as much as possible asking leading questions of the participants, or making assumptions about their lives or what was important to them that may have led to invalid or provoked responses. This is consistent with a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), seeking to allow the important themes and concepts to emerge from the research rather than
shaping the research to verify pre-existing notions (Stern & Porr, 2011, p. 39).

Secondly, a recursive approach was employed during data analysis and in interviews to ask follow-up and probing questions in order to cross-check and validate responses, to obtain more information if needed and ensure the correct understanding by the researcher (Minichello et al., 2000, pp. 88-92). Thirdly, by utilising the multiple methods approach of placing structured questionnaires and narrative interviews with parents along-side the drawings, social maps and interviews with children, the collection of rich qualitative data ensured any discrepancies that were uncovered could be validated later. This allowed for important interpretative disjunctions to be revealed that add to our understanding of the differences between adult and child experiences and interpretations. Mitigating the power imbalances and building a rapport and trust between the researcher and participants and ensuring that they felt comfortable and safe further added to the quality of the research.

The recruiting and theoretical sampling criteria also added to the quality of the study providing a diversity of family characteristics and experiences. However, it is possible that a recruitment process that relied heavily on participants self-selecting may have attracted a particular type of participant: for example, their willingness to take part may indicate they had more individual agency or hold strong political or moral views they wanted to express. It is also likely that families who had been extremely marginalised (some participants related stories of knowing of homeless families living in cars and tents for example) were also excluded by this process. The Risk Assessment Protocol (detailed later in this chapter) employed to ensure children who were vulnerable and at high risk of further harm by participating in the study were excluded, also leaves open the question of whether by excluding ‘at risk’
children, we silence the very voices we most need to hear. This also highlights the need for researchers and ethics boards to work together to create safe spaces in research for vulnerable children to be heard (Morris et al., 2012, pp. 126-127). Understanding who decides to participate and who does not and why, are important factors for researchers to consider (Gobo, 2004, pp. 441-442). The recruiting for this study was undertaken on the basis of key characteristics that emerged from the literature and theoretical sampling strategies that are described in the following section.

5.2.3 Recruiting

Participants were recruited through advertisements (see Appendix 1) placed on women’s and sole-parent group websites, notice boards at community centres, support service providers, university campuses, and employment agencies within the Melbourne metropolitan area, in two major regional centres and a number of surrounding rural townships. The local newspaper in one regional centre ran a story about the research project with a call for volunteers that also led to a number of participants coming forward. Some 'snowball' sampling occurred with participants referring others. A number of potential participants made contact but once they were told about what was involved in the research they did not make further contact (they were not asked to provide reasons). Participants were given a $50 grocery voucher in return for their participation and several said that was partly why they volunteered to participate. Recruiting was slow and there were often long breaks between volunteers coming forward. This was advantageous in some ways as it allowed time for interviews to be transcribed and for early analysis and reflection of the research processes that informed future interviews and the theoretical sampling.
After making initial contact, usually by phone or email, it was necessary to establish that the family met the research criteria. There were many volunteers who were not included in the research as they fell outside of the criteria for a range of reasons; usually this was because, despite being sole-parents, they were not currently or had not been on NSA, or they lived outside of the geographical area defined by the study. The study was limited to Melbourne, regional centres and surrounding towns in the state of Victoria, as this offered a range of diverse place-based differences that had been identified as significant in the literature, but within a controlled area. The research was described in general terms and parents were asked if they felt that they and their child/ren would be willing to meet with me to either learn more about the research or to participate. To satisfy the ethical and humanitarian need to safeguard the well-being of the child participants, a risk assessment protocol (see Appendix 2) was established to assist in deciding whether it was acceptable to include an individual child in the research (Morris et al., 2012, pp. 131-132). This is detailed further in the Ethics section of this chapter.

Having completed this risk assessment with the mother—usually by phone or email—appointments were then made with families who met the criteria for a suitable time and place to meet for the research. In one case the participant was not at the agreed time and place for the interview and despite several attempts to contact them to reschedule they could not be contacted. One mother requested a meeting in a neutral public place prior to agreeing to participate. Following the initial meeting with me she then agreed to participate and to have me come to her home.
5.2.4 Sampling

It was originally planned to interview twenty-five families for this study, but recruiting participants was challenging and as already mentioned often slow. It cannot be overlooked that for sole-parent families who are grappling with the challenges of managing poverty, family, and work giving up their time for research, particularly if it also involves their children, with no apparent or immediate benefits to them or their family may be an imposition or seem to be of little significance. However, the eventual sample size of twenty families allowed for the collection of data across a diverse range of categories, reaping the deep, rich data required to achieve saturation. Saturation is considered to be achieved when theoretical sampling is guided by the search for variance in order to clarify, analyse, and reach a point whereby no additional data can be found that adds to the coding categories and provides purposive examples that represent specific conceptual issues (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Minichello et al., 2000, pp. 13-14). This study achieved a wide range of experiences and views across the spectrum of participant characteristics in the sample and delivered the deep, rich data required for saturation.

The twenty mothers participating in this study (see Table 5.2) were at the time of the interviews, or had previously been receiving NSA. The children in the research were aged between eight and seventeen years of age: eight being the age of the youngest child, as defined by the policy, for a parent to move from PPS to NSA or directly on to NSA if applying for income support for the first time. Some families had more than one child who participated in the study and other families had more than one child eligible to participate but not all had agreed to do so. Some mothers had other older adult children who did not participate in the study.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mother’s Name</th>
<th>Participant Children Name and Age</th>
<th>Non-participant Children Name and Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cheryl</td>
<td>Evie (9)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patricia</td>
<td>Seth (11)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kathy</td>
<td>Seamus (12)</td>
<td>Leo (16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrea</td>
<td>Melissa (12)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samantha</td>
<td>Lucas (8)</td>
<td>Charissa (19) not at home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eleanor</td>
<td>Mandy (14)</td>
<td>Sonia (16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janine</td>
<td>Kaylene (16)</td>
<td>Jack (15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giselle</td>
<td>Karrina (13)</td>
<td>Tamika (17) not at home Cheyenne (24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donna</td>
<td>Eliza (16)</td>
<td>Charlie (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brenda</td>
<td>Michelle (15)</td>
<td>Jodie (14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belinda</td>
<td>Georgia (12)</td>
<td>Sarah (21) not at home Zara (2) Granddaughter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evelyn</td>
<td>Patrick (12)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>Lucy (9)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chantelle</td>
<td>Ziah (11)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tess</td>
<td>Carlos (10)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlene</td>
<td>Zoe (10)</td>
<td>Tim (12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessica</td>
<td>Mathilda (8)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cathy</td>
<td>Ethan (11)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacqui</td>
<td>William (12)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marion</td>
<td>Karalee (14)</td>
<td>Mason (16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sarah (18)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Following the analysis and coding of early interview data and as particular themes and concepts were revealed, it was planned to recruit subsequent participants by way of *theoretical sampling* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This was intended to reflect a diversity of factors and family characteristics that had been identified from the literature as either significant determinants of outcomes for children or theoretically meaningful (Gobo, 2004, p. 446). These included characteristics such as age and number of children, pathways to becoming a single-parent, parents’ educational attainment, previous employment history, health and mental health, and geographic location. Attracting volunteers based on these characteristics proved difficult, however the factors mentioned above were nevertheless well represented in the sample (see Chapter Six) that ultimately provided a wide variance of family characteristics—or ‘social representativeness’ (Gobo, 2004, pp. 446-447). This allowed for some generalisations to be drawn from the data about the nature of the lived experience of children in sole-parent families and in particular, the impacts of the welfare-to-work policy.

In order to reflect an anticipated diversity of experiences resulting from geographical and place based differences and similarities that have been found to impact on the lived experiences of families and acted as a kind of sensitising concept (e.g. availability of work, access to education and to public transport, and support networks) data was collected from participant families living in different locations in Melbourne and across Victoria as shown in Chart 5.1.
Research (Birrell & Rapson, 2001; Birrell et al., 2002) has found there to be substantially higher per capita concentration of sole-parents in regional areas than in metropolitan areas and with differing support structures that makes the inclusion of participants from regional and rural Victoria in this study important.

5.3 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this research project was sought and granted from the University of Melbourne Human Research Ethics Committee (See Appendix 3). The key principles of the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (Merit and Integrity, Justice, Beneficence, and Respect) provided sound guidelines from which to approach the ethical considerations for this study (NHMRC, 2007). In conducting research with children who may already be experiencing disadvantage and
vulnerability in their lives, ethical concerns are paramount. The best interests of ‘the child’ must be utmost; that is to say, as is the case with all ethical research, a utilitarian argument that the research will benefit ‘all children’ could not be used as a way to justify ignoring an individual child’s wish not to participate. Nor is it ethical to expose a child who is already vulnerable to any additional risk through an investigation that carries no benefit for that child and interviews about painful subjects need to be performed in accordance with the principle of ‘least harm’ (Boyden & Ennew, 1997, pp. 43-44; Redmond, 2008). As has been mentioned earlier in this chapter, prior to including child participants in this study, a risk assessment protocol (see Appendix 2) was undertaken informed by the child’s parent. This risk protocol, was modelled on a similar strategy employed by Morris and colleagues (2012) in their research with children who were victims of family violence. It identified a number of areas of potential vulnerability for the children related to specific stress factors and events in the child’s life: these included recent family breakdown; ongoing parental conflict; major ongoing custody issues; family violence; recent major transitions or disruption; concerns around safety or security; and significant mental health concerns. Where a child was reported to be susceptible in more than one area they were deemed to be ‘at risk’ and would be excluded from the research. Although in this study no children were excluded based on this process, it nonetheless provides a useful tool for future studies of this kind.

When researching with children, care must be taken to avoid exploiting the power imbalance inherent in relationships between children and adults. This imbalance may be exaggerated by differences in class, gender, language and other factors (Boyden & Ennew, 1997, pp. 41-45). By taking the time prior to the interviews commencing in
order to build a rapport and a relationship of trust between myself, parents and the child, this imbalance was to some extent minimised. I was at all times alert for signs of withdrawal of consent, and also for signs of risk of harm to the child resulting from participation in the research. Questioning children may also have sensitised them to issues of which they were previously innocent, thereby exposing them to further risk. I was conscious that some of the children may have been bearing a heavy burden of feelings they could not usually express. Giving them an opportunity to tell about their lives may have opened floodgates of emotion (Boyden & Ennew, 1997, p. 44).

Although the parents were present or nearby during the interviews with the children, I was prepared to take responsibility for, and deal with this by assuring children that they could discontinue the research at any time if they wished and offering support and comfort where appropriate. This was also the case for the mothers, many of whom had feelings, concerns and pent-up emotions that came out during the interviews.

There was also the possibility that difficult situations would arise during the research that yielded information that placed me as researcher at risk. My emotional involvement with the participants, particularly when they were in very vulnerable circumstances, was a concern and it was important to have an opportunity to debrief following interviews. There was a level of emotional commitment in conducting this type of in-depth interviewing that made ‘leaving the field’ difficult (Minichello et al., 2000, p. 173). In a number of cases the participants sought ongoing contact with me through social media and email. I had provided the participants with contact details for ongoing support and counselling options and followed up to ensure their well-
being—usually by email. I also had the opportunity to debrief with a supervisor or a counsellor following interviews to manage this.

Internal confidentiality was also an issue for this study as parents were sharing knowledge about their children, and children were sharing knowledge about their parents. An agreement was made with the children and parents as part of the consent process that confidentiality would be kept unless the researcher felt that there was a threat to their safety or well-being by doing so: for example, if a mother or child’s health appeared at grievous risk or there was evidence of abuse (Boyden & Ennew, 1997, p. 43).

5.3.1 Consent, assent and dissent

Plain language statements (PLS) or information sheets that provided an overview of the research project, contact details for the associated researchers, a detailed description of what would be required of the participants and their rights in relation to participation, privacy and withdrawal were given to both the parent (Appendix 4) and the child (Appendix 5). Care was taken to ensure that the information was provided in language that was clear and easily understood and was read through with the participants for clarification. The child’s PLS was written in simpler language than the adult’s version and included an assent form. A separate consent form (Appendix 6) was given to the adults to consent to their own and their child’s participation. Both PLS sheets also provided contact information for counselling and support lines should they be required. Understanding the rights of participants around consent and dissent are important aspects of ethical research design with some specific issues needing to be considered when researching with children.
Consent is an area that is identified in the literature (Spriggs, 2010) as problematic with children. Consent for children cannot be seen in the same way as for adults (NHMRC, 2007). We should first be seeking ‘assent’ and providing for informed ‘dissent’ noting that ‘a child’s failure to protest should not be interpreted as consent or assent’. Although the term ‘assent’ is not used in the Australian National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research with Humans (1997) it is widely referred to in the research community in both the US and UK where it is defined as ‘affirmative agreement to participate’ (Spriggs, 2010, p. 19). It recognises the role for a child that lies between no involvement in discussions and the full decisional authority of the parent. Assent should not be confused with informed consent, or with autonomous decision-making. Assent is not authoritative, and in itself is not sufficient to authorise participation of children in research. Agreement to participate can come without understanding (for example, a child can agree to a blood test but not understand the implications of the procedure). To avoid this, the children in this study were given a separate PLS worded in such a way as to be clearly understood by them with information about the research project and their participation and rights. This was read out loud with them in the company of their parent and they were given the opportunity to ask any questions. There was no requirement for a signature, although in this study the children were offered the opportunity to co-sign with the researcher if they wished as an acknowledgement that they understood the information they had been given, agreed to participate and that their rights to confidentiality, anonymity, and to withdraw at any time had been explained and understood. This process was also intended to build trust and to give the children a greater sense of their own agency in relation to the research.
The underlying value of assent is respect for the welfare and interests of the child/participant but it can only be used in conjunction with full parental consent. Informed consent in this study was only be sought from the parent for their child, on the proviso that the child had already given their assent: parental consent should not over-ride the wishes of the child should they not agree to participate (Spriggs, 2010). In the spirit of these principles, after providing the PLS and answering any resulting questions, informed consent was sought from the parent participants for their own participation and for that of their children, if the child had also given their assent.

‘Dissent’ is a further aspect of assent giving the child, or indeed any research participant, the opportunity to say ‘no’ to research participation. It gives recognition to objections and to the desire to refuse to engage in or withdraw from research at any stage and no third party, including a child’s parent, should pressure them into giving assent or continuing against their wishes. The researcher must be aware at all times of explicit as well as implicit verbal and behavioural signs that may indicate a child’s unwillingness to continue: for example, yawning, distractedness or failure to respond (Bessell in Morris et al., 2012, pp. 131-132; Redmond, 2008, p. 19; Spriggs, 2010). In this spirit the children in this study were asked a number of times during the research if they wanted take a break or discontinue the research.

5.4 Conducting the research

Upon arriving at the arranged research location (in all but one case this was the participant’s home) the interviews began with introductions and informal familiarisation between the researcher and participants. This often involved being shown around the home, meeting family members and pets and general discussion
about the research and the background of the researcher. This also allowed time to establish a rapport between the interviewer and the participants. After this the research process was described in more detail and the consent requirements as detailed in the previous section were met. This process often took up to twenty minutes but the time spent in this helped in establishing a relationships of trust with the parents and children (Soldberg, 1996) and often revealed themes of interest that could be followed-up in the interviews.

5.4.1 Research with the Mother—the Structured Questionnaires

The research began with a structured questionnaire (Appendix 7) to collect demographic and background data from the parents about themselves, their children and their family history. I asked the questions from the written questionnaire and the responses were recorded in writing on the questionnaire sheet for each participant. The questions were closed in nature and only required short answers or yes/no responses, but with an opportunity to provide more detailed information if they wished. Despite the intended closed nature of the questions, it was found that completing the questionnaire often triggered deep-felt emotions and some participants went on to offer in-depth explanations in this part of the interview that flowed into the narrative interview that was to follow. After this happened the first time I decided that this section of the interview should also be audio recorded, although it was not initially planned to do so. In all subsequent interviews this section was recorded. The data collected from the questionnaires was used to define many of the characteristics that were important for the intended theoretical sampling. It also highlighted the intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) of a range of factors such as parent’s age, number of children, relationship breakdowns, health and mental health issues, educational
attainment, previous work history, relocation, home ownership, and access to support networks. These factors often intersect to create different outcomes for individuals within a specific social group such as sole-parents. In most cases children were not present for this section of the research.

5.4.2 Narrative Interviews

To facilitate the collection of deep rich qualitative data and allowing the participants to give accounts of their lives, narrative interviews were then conducted with the mother encouraging them to tell their stories and focus on the issues and events that they saw as important and relevant. In sociology the use of the narrative interview or life history has been related to the theory of symbolic interactionism. It perceives that along with case histories, and oral histories they are useful in providing the significant and concrete experiences of a person’s life, their definitions and ‘the sense of reality they hold about their worlds’ and the ambiguity and incongruity that can be revealed despite participants being in a similar social group (Altheide & Johnson, 2011, p. 586).

Following the method commonly used for this type of interview, the interviewee was asked by means of an initial opening question, to give a full extempore narration of events and experiences from their own lives: they were asked ‘to tell their story’. The story, or ‘main narrative’ was not interrupted by further questions but was encouraged by means of non-verbal and paralinguistic expressions of interest and attention, for example nodding (Rosenthal, 2004, p. 50 cited in Zinn, 2010 p. 35; Schutz, 1972 ). These narrative interviews were audio-recorded. I interrupted the interview as little as possible to avoid the influence of any preconceived understandings influencing the
participant’s narration or breaking their train of thought, thus, allowing the participant to structure the narration on their own terms (Zinn, 2010, p. 36). It was often necessary to allow long pauses while the participants collected their thoughts before continuing. Some participants began to cry and time was needed to offer comfort and to allow them to recover before continuing. Follow-up and probing questions to gain greater clarity or insight on the topics raised where then asked: for example, ‘you mentioned... can you tell me a bit more about that?’ As much as possible this was only done when there was a clear break in the participant’s narrative and more specific questions were only asked at the end of the interview (Minichello et al., 2000, pp. 109-110).

The data collected from the narrative interviews with parents provided rich qualitative knowledge about the recent lived experiences of the families and the ways that the mothers interpreted and gave meaning to those experiences for themselves and their children. It provided a background to the children’s lives, and the links between the parent’s and the child’s experiences and it also revealed disjunctions between how parents interpret their children’s lives and how children themselves experience and interpret them.

5.4.3 Child-centred participatory research

The research with the children in this study was conducted in keeping with the spirit of the UNCRC, where the core principles are provision, protection, and participation. (Davis & Hill, 2006; Lundy & McEvoy, 2012; Punch, 2002). In light of these considerations and in keeping with the need for a methodology consistent with an interpretive research tradition that allowed for a deep understanding of the perceptions
and constructed meanings of children, participatory methods of data collection were selected.

Participatory research techniques have been widely used in International Development research where the term ‘Participatory Rural Appraisal’ (PRA) is commonly used to describe research in the constructivist paradigm where the emphasis is on the visual representation of ideas (O’Kane, 2008). It is generally employed in rural communities where there are low levels of literacy and where the collection of data cannot rely on the reading and writing skills of the participants (Chambers, 1992; O’Kane, 2008). Although PRA has traditionally been used primarily with adults, it has also been successfully employed as a research method with children (James et al., 1998; O’Kane, 2008; Punch, 2002; Veale, 2005). It is particularly suited for children and young people as it takes account of the varying abilities, cultures, life experiences, and the preferences of the participants. It can include drawings, social mapping, flow diagrams, play, matrices, drama, stories and songs (Punch, 2002; Veale, 2005).

In conceptualising children as a vulnerable group, PRA techniques assist in transforming power relations between adult researchers and child-participants allowing the children to ‘set the agenda and describe their own reality’ (O’Kane, 2008, p. 132). It does not presume to impose preconceived adult interpretations, speculations or norms on the research and allows the child-participant to speak to their lived experiences and to have control over how their lives are portrayed to the world. It is ethical in that it does not edit, re-formulate or truncate children’s narratives to fit adult agendas (Prout, 2002, p. 264). It allows children to ‘define
themselves in collaboration with the researcher rather than being defined by adult interests, biases and agendas’ (Grover, 2004, p. 83). It facilitates the telling of ‘what it feels like to be a child’ in their particular circumstances and thereby enhances their status as individuals and their right to be heard (Grover, 2004, p. 83).

This study employed conversations with the child participants alongside the drawings and social mapping activities (a ‘draw and talk’ method) to allow for greater interpretation and understanding of the child’s meanings and to ask for further information. The children were offered two participatory techniques (detailed in the following section) providing them with a choice of research activities to choose from. In this way the participants selected the activities with which they felt most comfortable, the potential for the development of ideas was facilitated, and the formation of the child’s views assisted. The use of these activities was designed to assist children to explore and give meaning to various phenomena within their lives. They allowed for the diversity of cognitive developmental and social competences and experiences anticipated within the participant sample (O’Kane, 2008, p. 132). Equally, the children were given the option of not using the participatory activities, but rather to participate with me in informal conversations. This was the preferred choice of most of the children over about twelve years of age. In more than one family the older children participated in the interview with their mothers. In those cases, a degree of reflexivity and flexibility was required to adapt the approach to collecting the data to ensure the mothers and the children’s voices were both heard (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2013, p. 155). For example, I often needed to redirect the conversation away from the mother to ask the children how they felt about a particular issue or experience.
5.4.4 The research setting

The research context for this study was considered to be important; locating the research in a setting that allowed the participants (especially the children) to feel relaxed and comfortable. Conducting the interviews in the family home, usually around the kitchen table, gave the interviews a relaxed and conversational feel and helped put the participants at ease. This was not the case for all participants however, as some mothers expressed ‘embarrassment’ at the ‘untidy’ state of their home and one preferred to do their interviews at an alternate location, claiming she never had visitors to their home for that reason. In all other interviews, once the mothers had been reassured that they were not being judged for their housework or their living conditions, the interviews in the participant’s homes were relaxed and comfortable. Often tea or coffee was offered and accepted and time was allowed for casual conversation to get acquainted before beginning the research. This allowed for a three-way relationship of consent and trust to be established between myself, the mothers and their children. To begin with, parents often acted as ‘gatekeepers’ for their children and it was only through gaining their trust that they would become comfortable about granting me access to their children. Secondly, when children saw their parent engaging informally and openly with me it appeared to provide them with reassurance and in turn allowed for a more open and trusting relationship between myself and the children. The naturalistic setting of the family home and the relaxed openness it encouraged, could also be argued to have added rigour and trustworthiness to the research, more so perhaps than if the study had been conducted in unfamiliar or more institutional settings (Langston, Abbott, Lewis, & Kellet, 2004).
In most cases younger children were not present for the interview with the parent, or they were playing or occupied in another part of the house and would come and go throughout the interview. Some families with older children, however, displayed strong familial bonds that were demonstrated through their desire to participate in the interviews as a group. In some cases, this seemed to be as a form of mutual support or reassurance, but for others it conveyed what they expressed as a shared family experience and a willingness on the part of mothers to speak openly in front of older children. As the interview took place in the home there were often interruptions (phone calls, visitors, children coming and going), but this did not seem to impact on the parent’s willingness or ability to continue with the interviews. They would stop, deal with what was needed and return to where they left off, often sharing details about the nature of the interruption.

When researching with children, consideration of context becomes even more important than with adults. As discussed earlier, it is critical to conduct the research in a ‘naturalistic’ environment and one where children feel comfortable and safe. It is also important that it does not have strong connections with adult authority or institutional control but that, at the same time, does not invade a space that the child may see as private. In this study a communal space within the family home seemed to provide such a space with the exception already mentioned. The children were given the option of participating in the research either individually or with siblings and whether their parent was present or not during the research. The participatory research with the children was conducted either at the kitchen table or in the living room—often sitting on the floor. In most cases parents left the room but remained in or around the house, giving the child the freedom to speak without the parent
overhearing but with the security of knowing they were nearby. As much as possible
distractions such as television and electronic devices were turned off.

Consideration was also given to the time at which the research was conducted. Most
young children will have a shorter attention span than their older counterparts and
therefore research may need to be scheduled in shorter blocks. They may also be
tired if research is conducted after a long school day or be less likely to participate
freely if it encroaches on some other special time or activity with family, siblings or
friends (Boyden & Ennew, 1997; Langston et al., 2004). Weekends or school
holidays were therefore found to be most suitable for conducting the research with the
children.

5.5 Participatory Research Tools
Two participatory research activities—the ‘My Week’ circle and social maps—were
selected for the research with the children and they were able to use either, both or
neither as they wished. These tools were selected as a way to engage with children
about a range of aspects of their lives. The ‘My Week’ activity aimed to learn about
children’s daily and weekly activities and routines and the social maps showed the
places they went, the people they spent time with, and how they travelled. Both were
used in conjunction with conversations that were recorded. The conversations
allowed me to further explore a range of aspects of the children’s lives and opened up
many areas of interest without setting the agenda. Generally, the older children (over
twelve-years-old) preferred not to do the activities, choosing instead to participate in
an informal ‘guided’ conversation (this process is detailed further in this section).
However, I followed a similar approach to that used with the participatory tools by
asking them to speak about how they spent time in their week, the places they went to
and the people they spent time with, but avoiding direct questioning about the
research topic. Some older children preferred to join in with their mothers’ narrative
interviews, as detailed at the end of this section.

Prior to commencing the research, a number of ‘pilot’ research activities and
interviews were conducted for the purpose of identifying any problems with the
process, recording equipment, drawing tools and to time the research activity (De
Vaus, 2002, p. 160) This allowed for areas of ambiguity or lack clarity to be
identified, for rehearsing of the use of follow-up, probing, and specifying questions
(Kvale, 1996, pp. 99-104) and to adapt my responses to the participant’s answers. It
also allowed me to gain insights about the timing of interviews, the need for patience
in allowing participants time to think and respond before interrupting with further
questions, and to assess how the children responded to the activities, all of which was
useful for the later research. The two participatory activities offered were as follows.

5.5.1 The ‘My Week’ circle
The ‘My Week’ tool aimed to facilitate children in their thinking about the activities
and routines in their daily lives and how they spent their time engaging with these
activities. This gave me the opportunity to learn about the child’s life first-hand, to
ask about changes over time, or how they experienced certain activities or events. For
example, concerns about child-care, sleeping problems, time at home alone, changes
to recreational activities, meals and food insecurity were all issues that emerged from
this part of the study. The child was asked to consider a typical week in their lives
and to show/tell through the use of the tool with drawing or writing how they spent
their week. After explaining briefly, the purpose of the activity and showing them some examples, the child was given a sheet of paper with a circle drawn in the centre (Figure 5.1). They were also given a selection of drawing and writing implements: coloured pencils, lead pencils, coloured markers. They were asked to use the circle in whatever way they found most useful or meaningful to represent how they spent a typical week, with no way being right or wrong, better worse: in this way the specificity of the activity was deconstructed (James & Christensen, 2008, p. 158) and the child given the freedom to decide how to proceed.

As was anticipated, based on previous research using this tool (James & Christensen, 2008, p. 159), the children used the circle in a range of ways that included timelines, graphs, drawing frames, and for some not using it at all as they became more interested in the conversation than in the activity. Some completed the activity showing great detail while others only did small amounts. In order to achieve the depth of understanding this tool was used alongside the dialogue with the children (Nieuwenhuys 1996, p. 5; O’Kane, 2008, p. 132). Whilst this research was being conducted I sat with the child on the floor or at the table at their level–joining in as the ‘least-adult’ (Mayall, 2008); participating along-side the child, prompting the sharing of ideas, encouraging them in the activity and inviting them to provide further information or depth of meaning through conversation. These conversations were audio recorded having already sought the child’s permission to do so.
In the case of younger children, they had been given the opportunity to experiment with the recording device prior to the interview and listen to their own voice as it was played back. This aimed to help them to feel comfortable with this recording process. The ‘My Week’ activity took on average around thirty minutes to complete but some extended to up to forty-five minutes.

5.5.2 Me, my family and friends’- Social mapping

Social mapping techniques provided a useful way to explore the connections between places and people in the child’s life. For example, children showed how they travelled to school, trips away to spend time with non-custodial parents, other people in their family, support networks and housing moves. The accompanying conversations revealed much about how children experienced these issues, the meanings they attached to them and changes that had occurred over time. After describing this activity to the children, I also showed them an example of my own social map I had drawn earlier. Using a portable white board and coloured markers children were asked to create a mapping diagram to show the places and people in
their lives, modes of transport, and the extent and frequency of mobility (Boyden & Ennew, 1997, pp. 137-138). They were free to use as much detail and creative representation as they wished in constructing their social maps. Again, I participated actively with the child and engaged in conversation, that was recorded. This activity took approximately 30 - 45 minutes.

PLATE 5.2 ‘MY WEEK’ SETH (11 YEARS)

James and Christensen (2008, p. 160) contend that ‘these tools allowed children to participate in the research process by creating images for themselves that are about
themselves…and they work to mediate the communication between the researcher and the child'. They act to concretised abstract notions of relationships, time and space, they provide another medium of communication other than verbal, allowing children to offer commentary both on the product and the modes of producing it.

PLATE 5.3 SOCIAL MAP (Seth, 11 years)
After the research was completed, a photo was taken of the ‘My Week’ circle and the social map on the white board and in some cases of the child holding the board showing their social map. Thus, the child could keep the original of the ‘My Week’ circle and a digital copy of the social map was sent to them by email later. Digital copies of both were saved by the researcher for later analysis.

PLATE 5.4 SOCIAL MAP (SEAMUS, 12YRS)

5.5.3 Conversations with young people

The majority of the child participants over twelve-years-old chose not to participate in the activities described above. These young people were generally more reticent than their younger counterparts and engaging them in the research proved more difficult in
some cases. A similar approach was taken to that proposed for the participatory activities detailed above. As much as possible I avoided asking questions about specific issues, preferring to open up opportunities for the young people to speak about their lives and what was important and significant to them, much as the participatory activities had done for the younger children. By asking them to speak about their ‘week’ and how they spent their time, conversations were generated around what was important to them and how their days were impacted by changes in their parents’ lives. This allowed them to speak about their participation in work, study, recreational, and social activities and also things like sleeping habits, meals and food security. They were also asked to speak about their wider social networks: the people they spent time with, places they went and how they got there. Again this provided an opening for conversations about how they experienced these things, how they adapted to changes and also about their future aspirations. These conversations were recorded and later transcribed.

Some young people preferred to participate in the narrative interviews with their parents. This produced some interesting results. The mothers often began with a narrative about their lives, but would refer to their children, sometimes urging them to respond or offer their thoughts or feelings: ‘### had a particular experience’ or ‘isn’t that right ###?’. Whilst this highlighted the strength of the bonds between family members, it also limited the ability of some of the young people to speak for themselves as their mothers frequently interjected or responded before they had a chance to speak. While this was their choice, it does point to the importance of providing space within research for young people’s voices to be heard independently of their parents and the propensity for adult gate-keepers to speak on their behalf. It
also highlights the challenges of designing research for children across such a wide age range with differing preferences and capacities. Overall, my preparedness to adapt to these differences did allow the children to participate in ways that were most comfortable for them and resulted in useful insights and the collection of deep, rich data about their lives.

5.5.4 Data Collection, Analysis and Coding

The data collected from the child participants was in the form of diagrams and drawings constructed during the participatory research with the children and audio data of recorded conversations conducted while they were participating. For some older children who chose not to participate in the activities there was only recorded audio data. There was also a written questionnaire and recorded audio data of the narrative interviews conducted with the parents.

Audio data recorded from the interviews with the parents and the conversations with children were manually transcribed. The transcription, although time consuming, provided an opportunity for me to become more familiar with the data, to identify conceptually significant issues and themes for further examination, initial coding and to develop theory. The software programme Nvivo® was used for analysis and coding of the data. Initially an open coding process was used to find the central themes that emerged from the early data. The broad themes that had emerged from the literature such as social exclusion, individualisation and the life-course dimensions of timing, linked lives and agency also provided sensitising concepts for this initial analysis (See Table 5.3). The data was then coded for contextual themes such as housing and food insecurity. This initial process also allowed for the comparison of data and then for
TABLE 5.3 CODING THEMES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main Coding Themes</th>
<th>Mid-level Coding Themes</th>
<th>Minor Themes and Gerunds</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Linked lives</td>
<td>Mother-child</td>
<td>Mediating effects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Father-child</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Grandparents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other social support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency</td>
<td>Getting by</td>
<td>Socialisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Getting back</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Getting out</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Getting organised</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transitions</td>
<td>Work</td>
<td>Age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Housing</td>
<td>Place in Family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Family</td>
<td>Sequence of events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>School</td>
<td>Multiple events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Care</td>
<td>Timing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detraditionalisation</td>
<td>Family structure</td>
<td>‘Patchwork’ families</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gender roles</td>
<td>Family breakdown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Timing and Sequence</td>
<td>Community networks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individualisation</td>
<td>Reflexive biographies</td>
<td>Looking for work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Labour Market</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Risk/Responsibility</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social exclusion</td>
<td>Self-imposed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Peers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Activities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Schooling</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Context</td>
<td>Geographic location</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Transportation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Employment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Education/training</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcomes</td>
<td>Food insecurity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Housing insecurity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Financial Hardship</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Health</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mental Health</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Limited options</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Schooling</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Work</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy</td>
<td>Centrelink</td>
<td>Experiences with Staff Payments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Child Support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Governmentality</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions/interpretations</td>
<td>Stigma</td>
<td>Losing hope</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fairness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Aspiration</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘Othering’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Blame</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
the more focussed mid-level coding that revealed patterns, difference and further informed the theoretical sampling. The data was coded to reveal the separate experiences of children and mothers. A number of gerunds (noun forms of verbs) for example ‘losing hope’, ‘looking for work’, ‘getting-by’, were also used for coding to detect and focus on processes and action (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2013, p. 157)

The names of the mothers and children have been changed in the findings chapters that follow to protect their identity and children’s quotes are also identified with their ages. The place names of where the families lived have been de-identified.

5.6 Limitations of the study

In considering the limitations of this study a number of issues emerge as important. Firstly, the participants volunteered from advertisements on social media and community notice boards. Hence, it can be assumed that they may have already had a motivation for participating in the study that could imply a bias. For a couple of mothers this did appear to be the case as they expressed strong views about the impacts and fairness of the policy, but for others the interviews seemed to give them the opportunity to reflect and articulate things that previously they had thought little about. Some expressed relief and even a sense of validation at finally being able to speak to someone about their experiences. For the children this was less the case as most seemed unaware of what the research was about specifically—particularly younger children.

The small sample size of the study, with just twenty families, could also be regarded as a limitation. However, due to the qualitative nature of the study and the fact that the interviews were conducted with mothers and their children, this sample size was
judged as large enough to provide a sound theoretical spread across the key characteristics of geographical location, age of mothers and children, and mothers’ social and cultural capital.

One area where the sample was weak was in ethnic diversity with all mothers identifying as Australian of European decent with English as their first language. This may reflect the nature of the locations where the study was advertised, being more likely to be accessed by ‘white’-Australian adults but also the higher prevalence in that population of sole-parenthood. The ways in which ethnicity and socio-cultural factors impact on attitudes to and engagement with welfare is an area where more research would be beneficial.

The focus on sole-mothers in this study was not initially planned but no fathers volunteered to participate in the study. Again this may have been a result of the chosen advertising locations being more likely to be accessed by women. This resulted in the study taking on a gendered perspective with all of the participants being sole-mothers. Between eight and ten percent of sole-parents are fathers but their children are usually older and fathers are far less likely to be on income support (ABS, 2013c; AIFS, 2014). Whilst understanding the experiences of sole-fathers is an important area for research, the impacts and issues of welfare-to-work reform do appear to target and be most widely experienced by sole-mothers.

Another limitation to this study was that the data was collected at a single interview. Further longitudinal research with these families and most particularly the children to better understand changes over time and the life-course implications would be most
advantageous for policy-makers. It is my hope to pursue opportunities to expand this study as a longitudinal project in the future.

The ethical decision to avoid asking children leading questions or questions that were specifically related to the policy reform\(^6\) meant that the interviews with the children were not always as fruitful as hoped in terms of being applicable to this study. This was particularly the case with younger children who had often been protected by their mothers from the major impacts of the policy reforms or for whom living in poverty was the norm. Whilst the participatory research methods proved to be well received by the children—they were happy to talk about many aspects their lives and the study produced very deep, rich qualitative data—it was often not specifically relevant to the thesis questions. The challenge remains for researchers to continue to develop tools that are able to draw out children’s experiences without ‘putting words in their mouths’ or creating further vulnerability or risk, as understanding children’s perspectives is vital to designing policy that improves their lives.

To conclude, whilst there were undoubtedly some challenges in designing research of this nature with children, the quality of the data collected supports the value of such efforts for researchers as the following findings chapters’ reveal. This begins in Chapter Six with family background data that provides a sense of the context of the families’ lives and the structural factors and that are significant in mediating their lived experiences of welfare-to-work. The qualitative data drawn primarily from the narrative interviews with the mothers is presented in Chapter Seven and reveal the harsh impacts of the welfare-to-work policy on the families. Chapters Eight and Nine

\(^6\) This is not to suggest that it is not appropriate to ask children their views about policy per say, but for this study I was conscious of not wanting to ask leading questions or to make assumptions about what the issues were for them. As such it seemed more apt to avoid asking them directly about the policy.
also draw on these narrative interviews with the mothers, but include findings from
the conversations and drawings from the research with the children. They employ a
‘life-course perspective’ (Elder, 1974) to tease out the complexities of the
interdependent lives of families and the significance of the timing of events and
transitions. Chapter Ten draws on the data collected from the children and employs
Lister’s conceptual model of ‘four types of agency’ (Lister, 2004), revealing the
tensions and contradictions that exist between the socio-structural factors, normative
expectations and children’s roles as independent agents.
6. The Families

The following five chapters reveal the findings from the research with the twenty families in this study. In this first findings chapter the family background information collected from the structured questionnaires (Appendix 7) with the mothers is presented. This data provides a snapshot of the socio-structural factors that impact on their lives and act to mediate their experiences of the welfare-to-work policy. It also provides a context for the qualitative interview data that follows. It begins with details of their family structure and the mothers’ relationship histories. This is followed by data relating to the mothers’ educational attainment and employment history providing a sense of their cultural capital. The family housing and financial circumstances are revealed followed finally, by data relating to their family support networks, health and mental health issues. For many sole-parent families their experiences of welfare-to-work and their journey into poverty began with the breakdown of the traditional nuclear family; the families in this study are no exception.

6.1 Changing Family Structure

The families in this study reflect the diversity of family life in contemporary Western societies (see Table 6.1), as traditional nuclear family models coexist with various destandardised family structures (ABS, 2013b). Characterised by Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) as the ‘post-familial age’, sole-parents, same-sex couples, reconstituted and ‘patchwork families’, have become increasingly the norm particularly as family breakdown becomes more common. Sixteen of the mothers in
**TABLE 6.1 FAMILY STRUCTURE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mother's Age</th>
<th>Partner History</th>
<th>Time separated?</th>
<th>Children's ages and father</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cheryl 36</td>
<td>1. Divorced 2. Separated 3. Separated 4. Current partner</td>
<td>1. 11 years 2. 6 years 3. 2 months</td>
<td>2. Evie (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patricia 33</td>
<td>1. Divorced</td>
<td>1. 7 years</td>
<td>1. Seth (11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kathy 40+</td>
<td>1. Separated</td>
<td>1. 9 years</td>
<td>1. Leo (16) 1. Seamus (12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anthea 33</td>
<td>1. Never with father</td>
<td></td>
<td>1. Miranda (12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susanne 37</td>
<td>1. Separated</td>
<td>1. 4 years</td>
<td>1. Chrissie (19) ** ND 1. Seb (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eleanor 40</td>
<td>1. Divorced</td>
<td>1. 15 years</td>
<td>1. Sonia (16) 1. Mandy (14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janine 43</td>
<td>1. Divorced</td>
<td>1. 8 years</td>
<td>1. Jack (15) 1. Kayla (16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giselle 43</td>
<td>1. Divorced 2. Separated</td>
<td>1. 17 years 2. 10 years</td>
<td>1. Cheyenne (24) ** ND 1. Tamika (21) ** ND 2. Karina (13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donna 37</td>
<td>1. Separated 2. Separated</td>
<td>1. 7 years 2. 3 years</td>
<td>1. Eliza (16) 2. Charlie (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brenda 49</td>
<td>1. Divorced</td>
<td>1. 8 years</td>
<td>1. Sarah (21) **ND Zara (2) granddaughter 1. Jodie (17) 1. Michelle (15) **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belinda 39</td>
<td>1. Separated 2. Separated</td>
<td>1. 14 years 2. 10 years</td>
<td>1. Xavier (16) ** 2. Georgia (12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evelyn 49</td>
<td>1. Divorced</td>
<td>1. 12 years</td>
<td>1. Patrick (12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna 32</td>
<td>1. Separated</td>
<td>1. 2 years</td>
<td>1. Lucy (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chantelle 36</td>
<td>1. Divorced</td>
<td>1. 8 years</td>
<td>1. Ziah (11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tessa 31</td>
<td>1. Never with father</td>
<td></td>
<td>1. Carlos (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessica 29</td>
<td>1. Separated</td>
<td>1. 4 years</td>
<td>1. Mathilda (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cathy 28</td>
<td>1. Never with father</td>
<td></td>
<td>1. Ethan (11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacqui 35</td>
<td>1. Separated</td>
<td>1. 6 years</td>
<td>1. Will (12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marie 41</td>
<td>1. Divorced</td>
<td>1. 2 years</td>
<td>1. Amia (18) **ND 1. Karalee (16) 1. Mason (11)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Did not participate in the study, ND Non-dependent child**

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this study had become sole-parents as result of broken relationships or divorce (see Table 6.1). Several had been in defacto relationships. Two had had a number of partners and had children from more than one partner. Most had only one or two children who were still dependent, and three had older adult children that were no longer financially dependent or living at home. One mother (Brenda) also had a dependent grandchild as well as two older dependent children and an adult daughter, who from time to time moved back home to live with her mother and brought her boyfriend along with her.

The children in this study were aged from eight to seventeen-years-old as sole-parents are only moved on to NSA once the youngest child turns eight. The variations in family structure and the age of the family members reflects a diversity in social timing and the sequences of transitions that are discussed in more detail in later chapters. They also represent a significant contrast to normative stereotypes about young ‘single-mothers’ who are unwilling to work. Only two of the mothers in this study were under thirty-years-old and most had long employment histories as this next section reveals.

6.1 Mother’s education and employment histories

A mother’s cultural capital, particularly her educational attainment and previous employment history, has been identified in the literature as significant in determining outcomes for children, particularly around education (Zubrick et al., 2008). Whilst around half the mothers in this study had completed Year 12 and gone on to higher education (five had completed or were undertaking a Bachelor degree), the majority of the mothers had completed either Certificate or Diploma level courses in the
traditionally gendered areas of aged-care, child-care, cleaning and disability care. Around two-thirds of the participants had recently commenced courses in these fields in order to move into jobs they believed would be more compatible with their parenting commitments. Eleanor, who already had a Bachelor Degree, had undertaken additional short courses in hospitality in order to comply with the training requirements of the welfare-to-work policy. A number of the participants had also completed multiple Certificate and Diploma courses in different areas in efforts to improve their employability or to find work that was more compatible with their parenting responsibilities (See Chart 6.1).

CHART 6.1 MOTHER’S EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

The majority of the mothers worked in low paid care, hospitality or menial labour jobs. Table 6.2 shows that all but one of the mothers were either working or about to
# TABLE 6.2 MOTHER’S EMPLOYMENT HISTORY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mother’s Name</th>
<th>Previous employment types</th>
<th>Employment at time of interview</th>
<th>How long in this job?</th>
<th>If not working why not?</th>
<th>Volunteer work</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cheryl</td>
<td>Retail and Administration F/T Party plan P/T</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Made redundant Retraining</td>
<td>School</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patricia</td>
<td>Retail P/T</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Made redundant Looking for work</td>
<td>Charity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kathy</td>
<td>Cleaning Casual</td>
<td>Administrative 24 hours P/T</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>Sole-parent Action group</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anthea</td>
<td>Customer service F/T</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Not flexible, no financial benefit</td>
<td>School and dancing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susanne</td>
<td>Menial Labour P/T</td>
<td>Hospitality 20 hours P/T</td>
<td>New</td>
<td>Neighbourhood Centre</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eleanor</td>
<td>Professional F/T</td>
<td>Child care for cash Casual</td>
<td>6mths</td>
<td>School &amp; RDA</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janine</td>
<td>Personal Care, Hospitality, Retail P/T</td>
<td>Personal care 10-30 hours P/T</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>Umpire at netball, school</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giselle</td>
<td>Retail, Cleaning-Casual</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Cannot find job with suitable hours</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donna</td>
<td>Cleaning Casual</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Made redundant Looking for work</td>
<td>Community garden</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brenda</td>
<td>Teachers Aid 15 hours P/T</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belinda</td>
<td>Hospitality and childcare/cash</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Studying P/T School</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evelyn</td>
<td>Volunteer coordinator</td>
<td>Cleaning Casual 15 hours</td>
<td>3 months</td>
<td>Landcare</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>Hairdresser P/T</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Cannot find job No</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chantelle</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Studying F/T No</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tess</td>
<td>Hospitality Casual</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Cannot find work No</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlene</td>
<td>Disability Carer Casual</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Cannot manage with caring and health issues</td>
<td>School</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessica</td>
<td>Childcare 15-20 hours</td>
<td>6 months</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cathy</td>
<td>Aged care 15-20 hours</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacqui</td>
<td>Sales and Cleaning Casual</td>
<td>Cleaning- Casual 15 hours</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marle</td>
<td>Own business</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Studying F/T Bachelor of Arts</td>
<td>Community Boards</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

P/T- Part-time  F/T- Full-time
begin new jobs. Many reported having employment histories that in some cases stretched back to their teenage years. Three had recently been made redundant from what they had thought were secure positions, where they had worked for some time. All were either studying, actively seeking work or wanted to work at the time of the interviews. The majority of the mothers were involved in volunteering including in their children’s schools and sporting clubs, at neighbourhood centres, and community organisations. One mother, Kathy, had also started a support group for other sole-parents. None of the mothers in this study reported not wanting to work, but all said they wanted work that was flexible around their children’s needs and that did not leave them worse off financially.

6.3 Housing insecurity and financial strain

The most significant financial concerns for the families in this study were housing insecurity, food insecurity, and the cost of fuel and car maintenance. Seventeen of the twenty families lived in rental housing with fifteen living in private rentals. Only two had been able to secure public housing although several had been on waiting lists for many years (see Table 6.3). Several of their homes appeared to be in need of maintenance and mothers reported that managing maintenance or jobs such as mowing lawns was problematic because of they could not afford a lawn mower or fuel for it. Many spoke of their concern that they would end up homeless as they often fell behind in the rent and one family had been evicted twice for failing to pay rent. Three of the mothers had been able to purchase their homes with the proceeds of property settlements following their divorce, having previously been homeowners. In some respects, this offered more financial and housing security and they were able to
draw on what equity they had on their mortgage from time to time to pay unexpected bills, but it also meant they had the burden of ongoing maintenance and mortgage repayments. Others had had to sell their homes in divorce settlements and what

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mother's Name</th>
<th>Type of housing</th>
<th>How long in current home</th>
<th>Previous housing</th>
<th>Reason for move</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cheryl</td>
<td>Rental</td>
<td>14 months</td>
<td>Rental- 2 years</td>
<td>Landlord issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patricia</td>
<td>Mortgage</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>Rental - 18mths</td>
<td>Financial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kathy</td>
<td>Mortgage</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>Mortgage</td>
<td>Bad neighbourhood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anthea</td>
<td>Rental</td>
<td>3 months</td>
<td>Rental- 10 years</td>
<td>Distance to university, Security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susanne</td>
<td>Rental</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>Mortgage with previous partner</td>
<td>Divorce</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eleanor</td>
<td>Rental and small rural property</td>
<td>18 months</td>
<td>Rental- 6-12 months</td>
<td>Evicted/ behind in rent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janine</td>
<td>Mortgage</td>
<td>8 years</td>
<td>Mortgage with previous spouse</td>
<td>Did not move</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giselle</td>
<td>Rental</td>
<td>3 months</td>
<td>Rental- Lakes Entrance, Fremantle</td>
<td>To find work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donna</td>
<td>Rental</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>Rental</td>
<td>Unhappy with school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brenda</td>
<td>Rental</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>Rental</td>
<td>No data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belinda</td>
<td>Rental/family owned</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>Rental</td>
<td>To be near family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evelyn</td>
<td>Rental</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>Rental</td>
<td>No data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>Rental/shared</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>Rental- 4 years</td>
<td>Work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chantelle</td>
<td>Rental</td>
<td>6 months</td>
<td>Rental- 3 years</td>
<td>Study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tess</td>
<td>Public housing</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>Rental</td>
<td>Public housing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charleen</td>
<td>Rental</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>No data</td>
<td>No data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessica</td>
<td>Rental</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>Rental</td>
<td>Couldn’t afford</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cathy</td>
<td>Rental</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>Rental</td>
<td>Evicted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacqui</td>
<td>Rental</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>Rental in suburbs</td>
<td>Could not afford</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marie</td>
<td>Rental</td>
<td>11/2 years</td>
<td>Mortgage family home 10 years</td>
<td>Sold for settlement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
capital they had received from that was used for their children’s activities and day-to-day living expenses. Some families had moved in order to access more affordable housing, to be closer to family support, or to seek better employment or study opportunities.

When asked if they ever felt under financial pressure many of the mothers reported feeling under financial pressure often or all the time and for some it was the cause of anxiety and stress. Apart from housing and food insecurity the financial pressures reported were unexpected bills, car maintenance, utility and medical bills. A number of the mothers reported driving cars with tyres that needed replacement, were unserviced or in need of maintenance, or were unregistered (Chart 6.2). This was important as only four of the families had access to regular public transport and so relied heavily on their vehicles. It also meant they risked fines, having their vehicle deemed unroadworthy and of course, road accidents. Food security was also an issue for many families, particularly if the mother was not working and several mothers spoke about going without meals themselves so their children could eat and regularly having to resort to cheap staples like bread, potatoes and rice. The mothers were also asked about things they or their children went without; medical treatment, forgoing social activities, missing out on school excursions, and not having enough money for fuel or bus fares to get children to school were common responses.

More than half of the mothers had debts, mainly on credit cards, but some also spoke of owing large sums to doctors, sporting and recreational groups and in school fees. The worry of large utility bills was also an ongoing financial concern for these
families. Heating costs were problematic and many of the families had resorted to ‘living’ in one room of the house to limit energy costs.

CHART 6.2 GOING WITHOUT AND DEBT

Many families had been living on income support of one kind or another for several years: twenty-five percent for ten years or more (Chart 6.3). The financial impacts of the policy change added to the cumulative effects of their situations as they had nothing in reserve to fall back on and no capacity to borrow money in emergencies. Very few of the mothers received Child Support payments from the children’s fathers and for those who did, the majority felt it was an inadequate amount, too infrequent or both (Chart 6.4). Several mothers also thought that their former partners were able to manipulate the child-support system to minimise their payment obligations, particularly if they were self-employed, and that they were more generous to the children from newly formed relationships than to their children.
CHART 6.3 TIME ON INCOME SUPPORT

CHART 6.4 RECEIVING CHILD SUPPORT PAYMENTS
6.4 Social support networks and health issues

The presence of social support networks was a significant factor in mediating the impacts of financial disadvantage for the families in this study, even more so than the mother’s employment. The impact of these networks or ‘linked lives’ (Huinink, 2009), grandparents in particular, is revealed in more detail in Chapter Seven. Not all of the families had grandparents at hand, but when they did they often helped out financially and with emergency housing, transport, child care, meals, moral and emotional support, and family holidays. Grandfathers provided a male family figurehead and helped with practical things like maintenance. Grandmothers took children shopping and paid for extracurricular activities like dance classes. Some even paid for family holidays. Other social support networks were also important. Although very few families had contact with or support from other extended family members, neighbours and friends helped with child-care and transporting children to school and activities and also provided friendship and moral support. School communities provided scholarships or bursaries where children had been long standing students and church groups supported extracurricular activities. Many families reported that they also relied on support from local charities for emergency food relief. Some families had very little in the way of social support networks and this made their lives more difficult. When things were really tough they often had no one to turn to for help or support. Chart 6.5 shows the number of families that had accessed various types of support including financial assistance, child-care and food from a range of social support networks. Many of the mothers reported being very isolated and alone, stigmatised and having no one to turn to.
CHART 6.5 TYPES OF SUPPORT FROM OTHERS

CHART 6.6 PREVALENCE OF HEALTH AND BEHAVIOURAL ISSUES
More than half of the mothers self-reported suffering from poor health, particularly mental health issues with thirteen of the twenty experiencing depression or stress and anxiety related conditions (Chart 6.6). Many had multiple health issues. A number of the children also had diagnosed symptoms of stress and anxiety manifest as stomach pains, insomnia and also behavioural problems at school. The prevalence of poor health in these families and the ways in which children are directly sharing this burden appears to be a significant factor associated with welfare-to-work policy and an area where further study is warranted.

6.5 Summary

The data presented in this chapter was collected from the structured questionnaires with the mothers and gives an overview of the socio-structural factors influencing conditions for the families in this study. It provides a snapshot of the context of their lives and the cultural, economic and social capital through which their lives are mediated. It highlights how multiple factors including housing, health, social support, education, and previous work histories intersect and provide the lived realities from which families experience and adapt to the impacts of changes and events in their lives. Many of the children in this study were already experiencing social exclusion as they shared the burden of their families’ circumstances and the consequences of the changes to welfare policy. The following four chapters shine a light in greater detail on the ways that children’s lives are impacted by the welfare-to-work policy agenda. The findings draw on the rich narrative interviews with the mothers and the voices of their children to reveal the extent to which the welfare-to-
work policy, designed to ‘activate’ them into employment, also holds significant consequences for their children.

7. The lived experience of welfare

This chapter draws primarily from the narrative interviews with the mothers in seeking to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experience of the families in this study after they were moved on to Newstart Allowance (NSA) and how the children in particular are sharing the burden of the associated risks and responsibility. The data collected from the children also begins to be revealed in the later sections. NSA was originally an unemployment benefit programme intended for individuals without dependents. As such the benefits and the conditions under which they are paid are not designed with the needs of families in mind. The income support payment under NSA, for example, is significantly less than many of the parents in this study had previously received under the Parenting Pension Single (PPS), although it is slightly more than the payment for single childless recipients. The requirements for recipients to work are more stringent as are penalties for failure to comply, and income thresholds and tapering rates are lower which means that benefits are reduced more quickly when they do earn money. This study found that these changes under NSA were very problematic for sole-parents who were juggling the needs of their children and the requirement to find employment in an insecure labour market without the support of a bread-winner partner. This has arguably created future structural barriers for their children by intensifying the experience of poverty and restricting access to education and increasing social exclusion. The impacts on the children, many of
whom were already under significant duress as result of poverty and family breakdown, were found to be significant.

Most of the mothers in this study were moved over from the more generous PPS in early 2013 following policy reforms at the end of 2012 (detailed in Chapter Two) but others had moved directly on to NSA after losing their jobs at around the same time as the changes where implemented or when their youngest child turned eight-years-old.

This chapter firstly reveals the circumstances under which the mothers came to be receiving the NSA, and their direct experiences of the policy changes both in respect to their dealings with Centrelink and how they experienced the changes in their day to day lives. It then examines the gendered rationales that inform their decision-making about work, particularly in relation to their children. The final section details the experiences and hardships of living on NSA for the families in this study: having to go without; the uncertainty and precariousness of their lives; the impacts on their health, emotional well-being, social lives and relationships; and the range of choices available to them. The findings highlight the harsh reality of living with financial disadvantage and uncertainty and the stigma that is attached to it for mothers and their children.

7.1 Pathways to welfare-to-work

The previous chapter revealed that the families in this study reflect the ‘detraditionalisation’ of family structures and ‘patchwork biographies’ that have become more common in contemporary society as individuals move in and out of marriages and relationships, change employment, retrain and relocate more frequently
than was previously the norm (Zinn, 2008, p. 35). Patchwork biographies have become an increasingly common feature of modern working lives as a more flexible and insecure labour market necessitates individuals continually reinvent and improve themselves in order to find employment. However, as has already been noted in this thesis, this can also create increased risk and insecurity for individuals (Bauman, 2001; Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1994) and for some, like the sole-parent families in this study, an increased reliance on the welfare state.

Most of the mothers in this study had been sole-parents for some time, many as result of separation or divorce (see Table 6.1). In families with more than one child the children often had different fathers after a first relationship had ended and the mother had re-partnered. Belinda’s story was an example.

So fell pregnant at twenty-three…my partner was about seven years older than me and he wasn’t very excited and we’d actually broken up but we got back together because of the baby…but it just made things worse. So we ended up breaking up and moving apart and I actually had to go into a refuge situation which was horrifying…it was just shattering to go from happy families—or hopefully happy families into a refuge. Then there was court and all that stuff which was horrible. I went to the refuge because he had the ability to get quite violent, my parents didn’t want to have me there just in case he rang up and said—I’m going to set your house on fire, and so because of that reason I didn’t want to stay with anyone else either so, it was just an intermediate thing. So Xavier’s father committed suicide when he was two and I ended up moving here because my parents were here—they bought a house here. I…came back here met Georgia’s dad. Then I had Georgia and that was all fine but
same, same—we separated when Georgia was six-weeks-old and then I met Richard who I don’t have any children with. (Belinda)

This partnering and re-partnering was a common story for the families in this study and often came hand-in-hand with disruptions to other parts of their lives including to housing, education and employment and led to ongoing reliance on income support. Without the support of a breadwinner partner even the mothers who worked were still relying on some income support. Their employment opportunities were often restricted by the limitations of their education and the insecure nature of the labour market that many of the mothers felt did not adequately allow for their caring responsibilities. The lack of available employment was also an issue as Patricia explained.

I’ve applied for close to 130 jobs and out of that I’ve got three interviews...It’s just like you are hitting your head against a brick wall. I’ve been applying and applying and applying and its rejection, rejection, rejection (Patricia)

For Patricia and several others in this study, finding themselves reliant on income support came as quite a surprise as they had long employment biographies from their teenage years and had assumed that they would continue to have employment. She was one of two mothers that had been working almost full-time, had only recently been made redundant and was eager to return to the workforce. Most of the mothers were currently or had previously been working either casually or part-time supplemented by income support. Those that were working were mainly employed in low paid jobs in service or caring roles. Many of the mothers had had multiple jobs
across a range of occupations (see Table 6.3) but like Patricia, had noticed that it had become increasingly more difficult to find employment.

*I never thought I’d be in this situation, I never thought I’d end up being made redundant twice and living here in a derelict house and not having a job. I’ve worked since I could legally work, since fourteen, I went to work and I was always working even throughout my VCE and all the rest of it. Always worked so... and I always found it easy to get a job. And now, I really feel the difference. It’s just the competition despite what people say, [sarcastically] “no we prefer experience over knowledge”, a degree actually talks volumes, sorry, it does.* (Patricia)

*I was made redundant before Christmas, I have now taken up full-time study and I did try to do some party plan and that didn’t work and as of last week that’s no more. I had had my last job for 10 months, then previously I had been working in a furniture store. I had been in business with my ex in events management before that and also some work in advertising as a sales rep.* (Cheryl)

Brady (2007) argues that underlying welfare-to-work policy is the notion that individuals, when left to their own devices will not seek to improve their lives through education and employment. The findings from this study suggest that in fact, most of the mothers, although not always successful, were active and strategic in seeking to improve their lives through employment, study, volunteering and retraining despite their difficult financial circumstances (see Table 6.2).

Many of the mothers participated in volunteer work including supporting activities with their children at school or sports. This allowed them to be involved with their children’s lives or to meet other people creating a sense social inclusion and building support networks. Donna volunteered at a community garden and Janine umpired at
her daughter’s netball. Kathy had started a support group and social media site for other sole-parents. She had been active in the media \(^7\) with her boys immediately after the policy changes were implemented as a spokesperson for sole-parent families. This challenges policy assumptions (DEEWR, 2012) that paid employment is the primary pathway for social inclusion, as for many of the mothers their volunteer activities were more rewarding socially than their paid work. There were also fewer structural barriers to volunteering as it allowed them more flexibility than did their paid work and the chance to be involved with their children’s interests and needs. Through their volunteering many had also built networks of support that provided valuable social capital and in some cases, pathways to paid employment.

### 7.2 Structural barriers to work

Many of the mothers found that despite their best efforts there were still significant structural barriers to them finding employment: for example, lack of jobs in rural areas, limited job skills and the cost and availability of child-care. Some had adopted reflexive and strategic approaches, or what Giddens (1991) describes as ‘a calculative attitude’ to potential actions, for example by moving to live in different areas in the hopes of finding greater employment opportunities, cheaper housing and also to have the support of extended family for child-care. This, however, did not always have the desired outcomes as Giselle found.

> I thought there would be more jobs being a bigger town. There’s actually quite a few professional jobs out there but there’s not much for someone like me. (Giselle)

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\(^7\) The family appeared on The Project, a TV current affairs programme and in a major metropolitan newspaper.
Giselle had moved with her daughter away from family support to a larger regional centre in the hopes of finding more employment options. Her limited education and skills and the tight labour market left her in a worse situation where she not only had no work but no longer had the benefits of family support.

Patricia, who had moved to the outer suburbs of Melbourne in search of cheaper housing, believed that the reputation of the suburb where she now lived reflected badly on her and acted as additional barrier to her being offered work.

*I live too far from the city therefore I won’t be reliable worker, that’s just the assumption they make. So I had a really awesome role secured for myself in February where I’d be managing an online business, I was really excited about it and they were pretty much handing it to me and they had a weekend to think about it and the following Monday they said ‘no, we’re not interested because you live in S---- and it’s too far for us.’ I said, ‘well that’s discriminating against me’ and they said ‘you’re also a single-parent’ and I said, ‘well I was upfront about it and so I don’t see how you could have just changed your mind completely from a Friday where you said the jobs yours to a Monday where you are telling me no, get lost we don’t want you here’. (Patricia)

Patricia felt where she lived and being a sole-parent acted as a dual barrier to her securing employment. Warr (2005) similarly found that stigmatised or ‘discredited’ neighbourhoods can limit opportunities, engender social isolation and impact on the capacity of residents to access social capital.

For those living in regional and rural areas with higher unemployment, the lack of available work was a further structural barrier. Both Eleanor and Evelyn had tertiary qualifications that could get them well paid full-time jobs but they both felt they
would probably have to move to the city from the regional and rural towns where they lived and neither wanted to work full-time. Like many mothers they felt that being available for their children was a priority. Eleanor also spoke about the uncertainty of contract work now common in her profession and how this created greater risk for her family.

And we have been homeless a number of times because of it, because if I got short term employment, like I got a job at an engineering firm, they employed me for a day short of three months and sacked me. So they got all my intellectual property and then sacked me just before three months and Centrelink wouldn’t pay me properly. So I was on about $300 a fortnight, I think $300 one week and I think $100 the next. So we got kicked out of the house we were renting. Because I was only getting $400 a fortnight. (Eleanor)

The availability of care for children was a commonly reported barrier to employment for mothers and particularly for their adolescent children. After-school care options did not appeal to many children and this was particularly the case for the boys once they were over about ten-years-old. Mothers felt uncomfortable about even their older children being home alone for extended periods. This was the case for Evelyn and her son who lived in a rural town.

There wasn’t any after school care for a long time and then when they introduced it here he absolutely hated it. He was about ten—he was too old and everyone was young. It was always mad trying to come, because it only went to 6.00pm and when you are out of town and trying to get back here by 6.00 it was always a mad crisis to get home. That was really nerve-wracking for me because they charged such an enormous amount if you were late and there was no holiday care, I don’t think there
still is in this area so that’s all the things that when you are a single parent that are difficult. (Evelyn)

Living in rural or regional areas or in outer suburbs of Melbourne meant access to public transport was also an issue for families who were forced to rely heavily on their vehicles. The cost of maintaining a vehicle and fuel was a significant burden.

And I now have a car with bald tyres and brakes need changing and no insurance and I can’t do anything about that. I can put petrol in it every second week and that’s it. And if something breaks…I feel like we’re just in ahh… like I’m in limbo (Donna).

Transport–I got up two days ago and, thank god I’d been out looking for work on Tuesday I think it was, and it was Wednesday morning when I got up and my car wouldn’t start. And I just prayed that they wouldn’t ring me for a job interview and all day I tried and then I had to keep breathing and I could feel the anxiety building and I was on the brink of tears every time I started to think about it. I spent nearly a $1000 on it before I moved over here trying to fix this problem. I have mum’s car to get me to work when I was living with her in [small rural town] so if that dies I can’t afford to fix it until I get a job. So it is just this vicious circle that goes around and round and just keep trying not to think about it all week because it just upsets me. (Giselle)

This intersection between the availability of employment, access to public transport and the cost of maintaining a vehicle is an example of how multiple factors combined to create barriers to employment for the mothers.

Several of the mothers had adopted what Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) might describe as a ‘reflexive or do-it-yourself biography’ by undertaking further studies or
training in the hopes of moving into more secure and higher paying work. However, this did not always result in improvements to their job prospects as many had then struggled to find work that allowed them to meet their family responsibilities or to manage with the extra burden this created. Those that had found part-time or casual work found that their jobs were insecure; they worried about not getting enough hours and that they would be the first to lose hours, shifts or to be retrenched. They also worried that if they earned too much it would impact adversely on their NSA benefits. A number of mothers were studying or retraining, several in traditional ‘pink collar’ jobs such as child-care and aged care. They felt that these types of jobs would be flexible enough to fit in around their families’ needs. Cheryl and Janine both believed that by retraining in home or aged-care they were guaranteeing themselves a more secure employment future.

Very soon I can start looking for work because I am more than half way through the course and one of the requirements on the course is to do 120 hours placement, which is not for money. But if I get a job that will count towards my placement and so I just need to find someone who is willing to take me on before I complete the course… It just means duties would be limited and I am looking at doing home and community care, not aged care homes because I can’t work the shifts. (Cheryl)

I have a back log of assignments at the moment but great course and I am really enjoying it and I can see that there will be a lot of scope in the future to branch off in different directions for a career. I know that this [home-care] is an industry that can be icky to work in but there’s always demand, there’s always going to be work. So that gives me more security. (Janine)
Although retraining and up-skilling are features of welfare-to-work for those who are not working, most of the mothers in this study were doing so, not because they were compelled to by the policy, but because they believed that it would give them better and more flexible future employment options or more autonomy. Blaxland’s (2008) study found similarly that mothers’ evaluations about work and study included the importance of setting a good example for their children and the benefits for themselves in terms of their identity and self-esteem. At the time of the interview Susanne had only recently moved on the NSA when her son, Seb, had turned eight. She had lately completed a Diploma in Business Administration after starting out as a volunteer in the office at a local community centre. She was happy to be about to start a new job, but the only work she had been able to find in the regional town where she lived was casual work at a fast food outlet. Andrea had left a secure full-time job as a bank clerk in order to study a Bachelor of Sports Science. However, managing the interface between work and family is more challenging for sole-parents and there are a number of barriers that stand in the way of them doing so. Many, like Andrea, also found their circumstances very tiring and stressful and that there were repercussions for their health that had worsened since they had been moved on to NSA.

*I feel my marks last semester were nowhere near the standard that they normally were because there was just so much going on in my head and I couldn’t concentrate. It’s affected everything: I’ve put on weight, I don’t sleep sometimes and my sleeping is erratic, I’m a lot more highly strung than I used to be. I don’t think I am as patient as I used to be. It’s just not fair...the whole system is not fair.* (Andrea)
Andrea was not alone in feeling that changes to the policy were unfair and placed undue pressure on her. Many mothers felt the policy changes came at a time when they were already under stress having lost work, suffered relationship breakdown or were struggling to balance work, study and family demands. For many who had previously been on PPS, the changes were unexpected and coming just after Christmas as they did, compounded existing financial struggles.

7.3 Moving on to Newstart Allowance

The reduction in the benefits paid under the changes to welfare-to-work policy from 2013, left all of the families in this study financially worse off regardless of whether or not the mothers were working: some by more than $100 per week. Most had family budgets and financial commitments that had been put in place commensurate with their previous circumstances. The sudden change from PPS to NSA or from wages to NSA if they had lost their job, left many struggling and in debt very quickly. Mothers that had been moved from PPS to NSA felt that they had not been advised of the changes to the policy early enough and that at the time of the changes even Centrelink staff were ill-equipped to advise them about how they would be affected. Some felt they may have made different choices about work, housing, and consumption had they known about the cuts to the benefits earlier.

I’ve lost a lot—but no notice, not having any notice to prepare especially after Christmas. If they had given people a bit more notice than they did you could have budgeted a bit more. I might not have been so extravagant at Christmas time and things like that. By this time, I would have been able to save some again but this time it just hasn’t happened because there was just pretty much just an overnight
thing. We only got a couple of weeks’ notice. So, when I found out I rang mum in
tears. I said how am I going to cope? What am I going to do? (Cheryl)

I’ll start with when I was kicked off parenting payment single and put onto Newstart. There was no warning, there was no... I had no idea that I was going to drop income; I had even asked at Centrelink twice and was told that my income would be the same. (Jacqui)

The complexity of the policy, particularly around income thresholds, left many of the mothers unsure about whether they were any better off financially from working and made it difficult for them to budget from week to week.

I was worse off for working than if I wasn’t basically. The only way we could get through it was I had to go and put the girls on the Youth Allowance to which then came into my bank account so we had money, otherwise we had nothing. I had nothing to live off once I paid my rent. (Brenda)

Once the costs of work such as transport and child-care were taken into account, most like Brenda, thought they were not much better off, but that working was still worthwhile for other social reasons. Working out the benefits of work was also complicated by the potential loss of concessions and vouchers such as dental vouchers as Evelyn explains.

I must say I think I am pretty privileged to have any support at all really. I think it’s pretty amazing. Like Patrick gets a dental voucher every year, and that really helps, you know that sort of thing. It’s really good, and I got one for the first time ever. I don’t know what that’s going to do. But that sort of thing helps. There’s almost a point where if I earn a little bit more money and I don’t have any Centrelink then I
lose all those things and I would be worse off in some ways. I don’t know at what point; I haven’t worked it out. (Evelyn)

The complexity of the changes to the payments, supplements and conditions were problematic for many as they added to the uncertainty for families and made planning for the future more difficult. Changes to income thresholds, educational supplement and the Family Tax Benefit all added to the challenges. Some also felt that the changes had removed the incentives to work as the lower thresholds made working less financially beneficial when the added stress was taken into account.

I looked into work but what’s the point of running myself into the ground for no financial gain really. I mean this hasn’t made it appealing for parents to, who work part-time or want to work part-time, it’s not appealing. They may as well not work at all and just continue on what they’ve got. (Tessa)

For many of the mothers, having to comply with the bureaucratic requirements of Centrelink was challenging and stressful in itself. The threat of having benefits stopped if they failed to comply with the programme requirements or to submit the fortnightly reports and paperwork was a worry for many. Several of them spoke about how onerous the job-search and reporting process was and the difficulty they had in contacting Centrelink. When they called for advice or information they had to deal with impersonal automated phone menus and the very long wait times to be connected.

...when I heard about it [being moved to Newstart] I found it quite demoralizing cos it was; I was no longer considered a single mum. You are just hauled up even though

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8 A means tested income supplement paid to all low income families in Australia
you are working they still treat you like you are unemployed. I find that really hard.
It’s hard mentally to understand why they…and they keep randomly making
appointments when they know you’re working, so you always have to ring up and
change things. It’s like they haven’t got all the information in front of them. That’s
probably my main… I just remember being really demoralized that I was just work for
the dole, when I was at least recognized as a single parent. (Evelyn)

I’ve gone into my bank and I had no petrol to get to Melbourne to Albury. I hadn’t
been in to Sureway [employment agency]. I had just forgotten, something I had
overlooked so they cancelled my payment… it was so horrible and humiliating.
(Eleanor)

For some of the mothers, having to attend regular appointments at Centrelink or with
JSA was a demeaning experience that added to their feelings of inadequacy and
failure. In some cases, they found the staff patronising, unsympathetic and even rude.
The ongoing process of seeking employment and rejection was often stressful and
disappointing. Many felt that the market for jobs, especially during school hours, was
very competitive and that they did not have the qualifications to compete for the jobs
that were available.

Now it took me two years to find my last job that would work in around school hours.
There’s a lot of demand for jobs in school hours and I don’t have all the
qualifications, some mums have done courses, I don’t have all those qualifications to
get me on the short list. I can’t even consider applying for jobs that are outside of
school hours. (Cheryl)

Several mothers had been referred to jobs that they felt were not suitable and did not
account for their child-caring responsibilities: for example, late at night or long
distances away. Some also felt that there was a stigma attached to being a sole-parent that impacted on how they were treated by staff at JSA and also by prospective employers.

_They have been very difficult. It depends who you go and speak to. If you find a nice officer its good and you try to get with them, but others are just plain nasty. You women between thirty and fifty tend to be very nasty. It depends very much who you get._ (Marion)

_It messed me up terribly. I did want to go and face them and speak to them at the hearing but they only did telephone ones and of course I got emotional on the telephone and couldn’t put my case forward properly._ (Anna)

Eleanor adopted a strategy of resistance after a succession of negative experiences at JSA. She felt that living in a regional area, where anonymity was harder to maintain, her status as a professional would be compromised if potential employers or past colleagues knew an agency was referring her for jobs. She explains:

_It’s just doing my own application, I put in such a big effort– you know I’d get my letter right, get my outfit right–and it’s just very disheartening when you don’t get a job. And I just didn’t want them to see that humiliation I guess. I’d rather deal with that myself. And I didn’t want to give them my resume as a highly qualified person and have them sending me for stupid jobs. It’s embarrassing when you have a great qualification and you have put time in for it and you can’t get a nice highly qualified job. There are jobs I’ve had where I’ve done well. I worked as a town planner…for eighteen months and they kept me on casual and then just put me off. So all those things are humiliating and I don’t want to go and advertise it. Also just having my resume up there on …the Sureway [employment agency] intranet- and me not having
control over where it is or who sees it. I know professional people around town and I
don’t want people to know that I am struggling to find a job. I don’t know it’s a bit of
an indignity. This current one, the first time I went in I spoke with this disability
officer and she was so lovely, and I thought if they treat the disabled people so lovely
and supportive and that, I’ll just go along with it and so I have this attitude that ‘I’ve
got nothing, I don’t know anything, help me find a job’. So, that’s what I am doing at
the moment. (Eleanor)

Eleanor’s response highlights the complexity of this issue and suggests that for many
women economic imperatives are not the only considerations influencing their
decisions about work. There appear to be a number of underlying factors that
influence their decision-making including recognition, stigma, autonomy and their
right to make choices about their own lives. Many of these factors have strongly
gendered rationales as is revealed in this next section.

7.4 ‘Gendered- moral rationalities’

For the mothers in this study the choices about work were also informed by a range of
issues that went beyond the financial benefits. These included concerns about being
available to care for their children, the stress that balancing work and caring for their
children placed on them, their own autonomy and choice about the type of work they
did, and the pathways to work that were best for them and their children. Likewise,
Duncan and Edwards (1999) observed that for many mothers, contrary to normative
assumptions, decisions about employment were not based primarily on economic
rationalities but on ‘gendered moral rationalities’ that were diverse and changing over
time. Many in this research for example, expressed concerns about what would
happen if their children were unwell or during holidays if they were working, and
even for older children, mothers felt that it was important that they not be left alone for extended periods of time. Susanne, who had only just found a job, was concerned about what would happen if her son got sick and she couldn’t go to work.

*I will have to ask people I will be worried that it is an issue because you are asking them to look after a sick child and therefore risking them getting sick. You don’t want to do that to them. They have their own lives and may not be able to afford to get sick themselves.* (Susanne)

Giselle had been told by JSA that she needed to take a job on a shift from 8.00pm-3.00am. She was very worried about leaving her thirteen-year-old daughter at home alone at night and how this would affect her. Her concerns were heightened due to previous experiences with her older daughter.

*She’d sent me for a job where the hours were from eight at night until three in the morning, knowing full well...What I am meant to do with my daughter! Leave her alone until three in the morning? My eldest child left home at fourteen, never to return, ended up on the streets, on drugs, so I’m very reluctant about not being home for my daughter when she gets home from school. Because I need to know what she’s doing and where she’s doing it and it’s not fair for the government to say well it’s more important that you work. Then they have to throw money at the kids later when they are in rehab or they are in hospital or in gaol because of things that have started because there was no family unit at home.* (Giselle)

This lack of sensitivity in the policy and by those whose role it is to implement it to the needs of families was a feature of many of the mother’s stories and created tension between the requirements of the policy and the rationales they applied to their decision-making around their work and families. Many of the mothers believed they
were already actively seeking to improve their lives and future employment opportunities and resented being ‘told’ what to do by workers at JSA whose motives they felt were not in their or their families’ best interests.

...they are super annoying because when I was made redundant I went in there I had a plan for what I was going to do. I am studying aged care; I am studying for a career change; I am studying to work in an industry where older people are accepted and where I can work around my daughter. So I’ve gone in and I’ve known what I’ve been wanting to do but they keep pushing me to get a job because they want their funding. And they keep making me go to appointments and appointments during class time. (Cheryl)

Mothers’ decision-making often had longer term goals rather than just short term employment objectives. Even though their income was barely improved by work, they still saw that there were benefits to them in working, such as gaining experience and the social interaction it provided. For those that had struggled to find work, finally having any job was seen as a step forward. Others saw that whilst choices around retraining and study may have left them temporarily worse off financially, there were potentially long term benefits. These included improved future earning potential, flexibility of work hours, and being more available to their children that they saw as more important than getting work in the short term. Several, as Cheryl explains below, felt that they were not adequately supported by JSA in what they regarded as strategic pathways to employment. They felt that the system provided incentives for a JSA to push them into any job rather than helping them to get a job that they wanted and that accounted for their families’ needs.
I was put into priority ‘Category 1’ which means ‘get me a job straight away’- so they put me into a group that was supposed to be about breaking down barriers to getting employment and I had to go every week for three hours and it was demoralising…I used to come away in tears because I was just being preached at constantly– common sense things about how to get a job but not taking into consideration circumstances like Christmas time. I felt that a few of the other people in that group were being bullied too, I already had a plan in place, I was already looking around for courses and applying for courses. They didn’t help me with any funding for the course either. I still owe for my course. Obviously they didn’t want me to go and do a course they wanted me to go and get a job. I’ve had to go to a meeting every week and then it became every second week but I was being harassed to get a job. (Cheryl)

Some mothers had struggled along on NSA and supplemented it with some cash income working informally in child-care or cleaning so as to be able to give more of their time to their children. This was not only about providing care but also about being available to provide support, advice, transport to recreational activities, and to continue to be an active part of their children’s lives, particularly as they got older. Their choices were also influenced by health and mental health, the ages of their children and the stages they were at in their schooling. Many saw themselves as the best judge of their families’ needs at any given time and preferred to moderate their work around those needs regardless of the financial challenges this brought.

But I personally…I believe in the right to choose, but really honestly I believe that if you can parent your children on very little money, it’s in society’s best interests, if that’s what you want to do then you can and you stay home with them until they move out. Cos there are so many children that are dropped off somewhere else and first
thing in the morning and all they’ve got from their mum is the rush of getting
everything together and in the car and the anxiety that goes with that. The pick-up,
and mums got to do supermarket, and home and washing and this is why children
aren’t read stories anymore, because it’s the last thing in the world when you are just
about to get your kid in bed is read a story. You should see how excited children are
to have story books these days... it’s amazing. So I think that it should be an option
that if you want to stay home with your kids and raise them so other people don’t
have to do. I think the value of parenting has been lost in consuming. All about the
car, the house, the holiday, the TV, what the Jones have got- it’s a form of sickness.
(Belinda)

Several mothers spoke about feeling that their right to decide to about the balance
between paid work and the care and needs of their children had been taken from them
and that the value of the caring work they did was not recognised or valued. Others,
as expressed by Belinda above, felt that by making the decision to prioritise time with
their children ahead of work, they had stronger relationships with their children and
were better able to secure their futures. They believed that as such they were
providing a valuable service to society: one that was neither recognised nor valued.
Eleanor held very traditional and gendered views about the value of mothering and
also spoke about how she felt mothers who are supported by a male-breadwinner have
more choices around work and care than sole-mothers, such as herself, who are less
well off or on welfare.

I really enjoyed being a stay at home parent, especially among the school crowd,
because they are well-to-do families and their mums don’t have to work and they
have lovely lives. My girls got to socialise, my house was tidy and you know, you
could take more pride in your home and start cooking more. Just being there in the
afternoons when they got home from school, I really liked that—I still do. (Eleanor)

The mothers who had previously worked for many years felt the changes to the policy
to be particularly ‘unfair’ on them. They felt they were in circumstances that were
largely out of their control, and saw themselves as hard-working contributors to
society who wanted to work, but on their own terms. There was a strong sense of
‘othering’ in this group who felt they were being punished by a policy that should
have been targeting others who were ‘less deserving’.

I think it is totally unfair, to just put blanket over the whole single parents, they
shouldn’t punish the ones who have been doing the right thing the whole time. I agree
that there are a lot of single parents that abuse the system in more ways than one that
have then punished the ones that are doing the right thing. (Andrea)

I’m not a bad citizen as a sole-parent but they treat you like one. I was a sole parent
that was trying so hard to work and to use that as a back-up. Whereas other peers
that I knew were grandfathered and they just sailed merrily along, and I was the one
penalised. (Eleanor)

The belief that the policy was inherently unfair was common: the mothers felt that
sole-parents had been targeted and that their circumstances were not fully understood
by the government or the general public. Whilst some mothers, like Donna,
expressed feelings of guilt, rejection, and inadequacy others, like Eleanor, clearly saw
themselves as deserving of far greater support.

I do feel kind of like…it’s probably just that I suppose I tend to or am susceptible to
depression, but I am not motivated by it [the policy change]. It feels like society
hates us, or wants us not to exist. I feel like we’ve been chucked on the rubbish heap and everyone’s OK with that. (Donna)

I am lucky in that this is the way I have always known it, but for some women it is a big change when they find themselves having to run a household on their own so I feel sorry for them. Whereas I am a country girl, I’ve always been independent, I have a trailer, I can tow a caravan around the state for a holiday, whereas some of these women I think, imagine if they didn’t have their male support they would be lost. I feel like in some ways I am better off than them because I have strength - not strong strength but personal strength. (Eleanor)

Eleanor’s case provides a good example of the complexity and tension between the policy and the rationales employed by the mothers in this study when making decisions about welfare and work. She found the demands of being on NSA and her reliance on income support challenged her sense of herself as a strong, independent, single woman and her rights, as she saw it, to choose to prioritise her children’s needs over paid work. She wanted to maintain her professional integrity and autonomy in her work choices but she also felt strongly that she had the right not to work in favour of providing care for her children if she chose to do so. This expression of rights and autonomy was not uncommon in this study, however, it was more prevalent among the better educated mothers who were also more likely to highlight the importance of the role of parents in supporting their children’s education and participation in recreational activities. For a number of mothers these things remained a priority for their children, even if it meant significant sacrifices in other areas, as the next section reveals.
7.5 Experiences of poverty, social exclusion, and stigma

The lived experiences of poverty, for example, food insecurity, housing insecurity, going without health care, anxiety and depression, were all too obvious for the families in this study and were a direct and indirect consequence of their status as sole-parents, pre-existing and cumulative disadvantage and the changes to the welfare-to-work policy. Whilst many had managed to adapt in creative ways, the challenges remained and the uncertainty of knowing if there would be money for food, if the car would breakdown, or an unexpected bill would arrive placed visible strain on the mothers. This was evident as they spoke about these things during their interviews. Most were resolute and open when speaking about these matters, but many broke into tears during the interviews when they spoke about the pressure they felt and particularly the impacts their circumstances had on their children. Many expressed feelings of shame and inadequacy. The day after our interview Donna sent me an email vividly describing these feelings.

*I apologise for being pretty down about the whole thing yesterday, I think having to talk about it, and lay it all out in front of someone may have been harder than I expected. There's is a lot of shame attached to some of the things I am telling you, and some things, of course, that I wouldn't want to say in front of the kids.* (Donna)

A key issue raised by all of the mothers was the impact of the reduction in the amount of the benefit and the lowering of the income threshold. For many this reduced their weekly income by between fifty and one hundred dollars depending on the number of children they had and how many hours they worked. For many this meant the difference between having enough to get by and being able to put a little aside for an unexpected bill or emergency, and falling short every week with no reserves at all.
Many were unsure about how the changes to the policy would impact on their income support payments and how much they would lose if they worked; this made budgeting very difficult.

*In terms of the recent Newstart change that’s really been a smack in the face. The moment I worked a little bit over my fifteen-hour quota I was cut right back in terms of payments so you felt like you were still going backwards even when you are working. So there was no buffer whatever, there’s no opportunity to save. I’ve got all my utility bills at the moment, I can’t afford to pay them so I’ll be contacting the whoever I’m meant to contact in terms of getting a hardship form and filling that out and getting that sent out. It’s close to $500 now. Do I pay the electricity bill or do I pay the car rego for the next 6 months? So it’s got to that point which is pretty sad.*

(Chantelle)

The observed condition of some of the families’ homes suggested long-term financial disadvantage. Some of the homes were very run down, poorly maintained and cold; what little furniture they had was old and damaged and they had very little in the way of other household items. Some families also had a noticeable look of pallor that was observable in both the mothers and the children\(^9\). For these families the recent experiences of moving on to NSA appeared to be added to several years of cumulative disadvantage. In some ways this seemed to minimise the significance of the impact of the policy reforms for them, as poverty and going without was not a new experience: but at the same time they had very little in reserve—physically, emotionally or financially.

\(^9\)These are purely subjective observations by the researcher at a single point in time, but suggested long term poverty, poor diet and ill-health.
Other families, where mothers had previously had work, were more accustomed to having more material resources and financial certainty. They often had more visible household items such as furniture and items like computers and iPads® and their homes generally appeared to be better maintained. The shock of suddenly finding themselves living with so little income was very hard for these families and many had slid very quickly into debt. They had previously had greater financial commitments and access to credit cards that others did not have. Ridge and Millar’s (2007; 2008) work in the UK found that families that transitioned in and out of welfare and work were the most vulnerable to debt and this was also the case for families in this study. For some families the impact of downward social mobility was very challenging. For Cheryl and Patricia who had previously worked almost full-time, the loss of income when they lost their jobs and moved on to NSA had a very significant impact. They had moved from being financially secure with some disposable income, to financial stress and debt in a very short-time. Cheryl also noted how it had impacted on what she could provide for her daughter.

So I couldn’t afford to pay bills, I couldn’t afford to...I still owe for Evie’s gymnastics from last year and I don’t know how I am going to pay that. My credit rating took a dump, I always had a perfect credit rating. Just means we are trying to hold our breath and stay above water- it’s going to take years to recover, so that limits my choices in the future and it limits what I can do for Evie in the future.

(Cheryl)

Eleanor’s family had also experienced significant downward mobility. Prior to becoming a sole-parent, Eleanor had been a stay-at-home mum with both her girls at a private school where they had enjoyed a lively social life with their peers. After her
divorce and property settlement she had substantial cash assets and was able to continue being a full-time mother without needing to work and had kept her girls in private schooling. These resources had depleted over time and she had taken on full-time contract work. She had found the nature of the work and the hours stressful and difficult to manage with her sole-parenting commitments (she was working away from home with communities in the aftermath of Victorian bush fires). At the completion of the contract she had found it difficult to find secure employment in or near her home town and the girls had had to leave their school as she had been unable to pay their fees. She had been on PPS for a time between short-term employment stretches and had recently been moved on to NSA. Since then they had twice experienced eviction and homelessness and had experienced regular food insecurity. Eleanor’s experience is an example of how social risks such family breakdown or being made redundant can quickly create downward mobility for sole-parent families regardless of their previous position in society (Beck, 2000, p. 4). The impacts of this will potentially be felt across the life-course for Eleanor and her children.

Several of the mothers spoke about how difficult it was to manage the maintenance of their homes, both financially and time-wise. Mowing lawns, repairs, and routine maintenance all posed problems. Children often helped with things like mowing but more substantial maintenance was often left undone. Patricia had bought an older weatherboard house on the outskirts of Melbourne with plans to renovate. She had begun this when she had work, but had been unable to continue it once she lost her job. The walls and ceilings were now unclad with exposed electrical wires and several internal doors were missing. This had put a lot of pressure on her and her son Seth (11yrs).
The house took its toll on me because I tried to fix it and every time I tried to take down a wall I’d find ten different things wrong with it and the financial bills just kept piling up further and further. So yeah, living here hasn’t been the greatest decision that I have made. In hindsight, because it is just taking its toll on my health. And it’s taking its toll on the little one as well because he sees me falling apart, yeah so we are hoping that we can leave this place, sell it and get someone else to move in to it and do a great job with it hopefully. Or just demolish it. Get rid of it because it is just a pain in my backside. (Patricia)

Housing affordability was a significant issue for many families. Several had been on the list for public housing for many years, some as long as fifteen years. For most the uncertainty and ever present anxiety about what the following week held and how they would afford it was an issue for mothers and children. Although the mothers said they tried to shield the children from the impacts and the worry, many of the children were also anxious about their financial circumstances. Children and mother’s worried about being able to afford fuel for the car, food and rent in particular.

It’s really annoying not having money because we don’t know what we are going to have for dinner each night and that sort of stuff. You can’t really plan ahead. You aren’t quite sure what’s going to happen. You don’t know if you are going to stay in a rental property or not because one time we fell behind with the rent and they said we had to go, so that’s what we did. We were temporarily homeless so we had to go to Nan’s. And then it happened again. (Karalee, 16)

Something can go wrong with the car, like you can’t save. I was, when I was receiving parenting payment I was able to save a little bit of money to put away for
something like that when its needed but this way it’s pretty much gone within 24-48 hours of everything because you know, budgeting massively— even more so than I was prior so you know all the bills come out and then the rent and there’s not really a lot left after that’s all been done. (Donna)

Many of the mothers and children had experienced poor health and mental health. Whilst poor health cannot be linked causally to the impacts of the policy, a high prevalence of depression and anxiety in mothers and children has been linked to families with low socio-economic status and should raise concern for a society with increasing rates of youth mental health and suicide (Beyond Blue, 2017). Regular or excessive use of alcohol, tobacco or other drugs by mothers or children was neither reported nor evident—in fact most mothers made a point of saying that they did not drink or smoke.

For most families in the study the changes to the policy and the concomitant reduction in benefits also meant giving up a range of social and recreational activities for parents and children. One of the main ways children have been found to be socially excluded is through their inability to participate in social and recreational activities that are normal for their age (Ridge, 2006). Many of the children in this study had to give up activities such as music lessons, swimming, gymnastics, dancing, and sports due to lack of financial resources. These activities are part of the lived experience of most Australian children and participation in extra-curricular activities provides a vital pathway to social inclusion, physical and mental well-being, and the building of social and cultural capital (Kay, Tidsall, Davis, & Prout, 2006). For some children these activities were a part of longer term vocational pathways that were then interrupted when their mothers were moved on to NSA. They reported not having
access to the internet, computers or mobile phones that are now a normal part of many young people’s social communications and their educational requirements. The children also had restricted options for social interactions outside of school as their limited financial means meant they were excluded from social activities that are usual for their peer groups such as going to movies, birthday parties or even having friends over to their homes. Several of the mothers spoke about their children missing out on these important social interactions.

_That’s what Karina said to me when I said why you haven’t had any friends come around so I can meet them? She said ‘I don’t want anyone to come here because we’ve got no food or drink to give them after school’. That really, really sucks. And people may think well it’s not that expensive to put some eggs and flour and that and make a cake- eggs are bloody expensive and it just all adds up and we just can’t afford to do it. She’s missing out really badly. (Giselle)_

Financial constraints also meant mothers had to make choices about when to use their car, minimising the number of journeys and outings. This was particularly an issue in rural and regional areas where public transport was very limited and it was often necessary to travel long distances to find work, but even in the city it was an issue for those living in the outer-suburbs.

_I am driving a car that needs new tyres and the rego is overdue. I haven’t had it serviced properly in years. I just pray I don’t get caught...what can I do...I have to get the kids to school? (Marie)_

_...like even to get to uni it costs a lot of money. I have to go on toll roads, I have to go parking and fuel costs- and that has to come before anything else. (Andrea)_
Older children in particular were also very aware of the pressure their needs placed on their family’s resources. Leo spoke of feeling guilty about his mother waiting in the car while he refereed at basketball because she could not afford the fuel to drive home and back again.

_I feel like I’ve always been supportive of my mum and helped her out with things but especially with these cuts she can’t…like she would drop me off to Youth or somewhere and she’ll stay there nearly the whole time through Youth and Youth is nearly 2-3 hours and she’ll just stay there the whole time like outside waiting in the car because she can’t afford the petrol home and back. And she does that on a weekly basis and I feel bad so, it’s just really hard._ (Leo, 16)

For older children, their family’s financial constraints meant learning to drive was an issue as the cost of fuel, lessons and access to a suitable vehicle provided barriers. For young people in Australia learning to drive is regarded as a ‘rite of passage’ offering independence and social opportunities; not being able to drive can also restrict employment prospects and limit social inclusion (BSL, 2016; Cusworth & Guy, 1996).

_You need a car to get a job, but you need a job to afford a car. They want you to have experience but you can’t get experience without a job. I have done voluntary work to try to get experience but there are just no jobs._ (Jodie, 17)

This stands as a perverse outcome of the intersection between social policies where welfare-to-work makes it more difficult for poor children to learn or earn and places structural barriers to their future outcomes (Redmond, 2010). Recent attempts at policy reforms by the Abbott and Turnbull Coalition governments seeking to increase
the waiting period before young people to access income support and increase the job seeking requirements (Thomas, 2016) will likely only serve to stigmatise and penalise young people who are unable to find employment.

The significance of stigma in maintaining inequality and actively constituting identity and social hierarchies is well understood (Beck, 2000: 167; Goffman, 1968) and was a pervasive theme of this study. Scholars have argued that discourse and language that accompanies stigma can become a form of ‘symbolic violence’ (Bourdieu, 1992; Marston, 2008). Many mothers spoke about the stigma they felt being a ‘single-mother’ and on welfare, especially following the policy changes.

If the governments, both Liberal and Labor, don’t change their view on single parents, it’s going to be very bleak for up and coming generations. The stigma that they have made us has been a kick in the teeth. I never realised how discriminated we were until all of this happened. Especially when you read the responses on you know, after A Current Affair, like you know you’ll say that you are working and they’ll just say “go get a job and get off the bong” and it’s just like, you have no idea! The governments done that by telling the public they’ve moved us on to Newstart to make us work, but most of us were working or studying. And the majority are working, there are more single parents working than what partnered are. (Kathy)

Some felt the stigma made it harder to make new friends and to find work and a number of mothers felt that the policy change also reflected wider social attitudes to sole-parents. A number of mothers spoke about how difficult social situations had become as they less often had the opportunity to go out socially.

I think the problem is that, and really for 15 years or more people have really changed or become really hard-hearted I think about helping people who aren’t in
great position, so I think that...we...we are struggling financially... I don’t well...we are also struggling socially I think. We don’t get to go out, get to do anything, he doesn’t get to play sports or any of that, but... um, I also feel like people hate us...hate me for being a single mum and it...I think that if something was going to change it needs to be an attitude change. Like, you know that people will stop feeling like...um, or... chucking you in a basket and saying that’s where you are and that’s where you will always be, not ‘you’re here right now, we’ll help you get up’ and you know, you just go on with being a useful person and instead it’s like we’re or I’m deemed useless. Put in the useless basket and there’s no way to get up out of it and there’s no... (Donna)

I just think people don’t care. The social thing is a surprise, I don’t think you realise just how much not having money affects your social life. There is no social life and then there are no social skills, you know then it just gets harder and harder. (Marie)

Stigma? Yes, very much so. I found a lot when the kids were at Primary school with things like the mother organized different things and that and I was never included in it because I was a single woman and nobody talked to you, you know, I had very little to with any of the mothers while the kids were at school. I wasn’t on any of the committees or anything like that because they just didn’t want to know you. And I mean you still get it now, like with work and that- people don’t involve you. Like when you’re doing things as groups and things like that you just don’t get invited and things like that. Its real...I don’t know. That’s why I have always kept to myself and just stuck to a few close friends and family because I know they don’t judge. People do judge single people. You know you see stuff on different social medias and things like that and sometimes single people are just treated like lepers basically. (Brenda)
Many of the children said that being in a sole parent family as such had no impact for them amongst their peers. They felt that being from a sole-parent family was not uncommon and was not something they spoke about with their friends. Kayla, however, spoke about her friends holding stereotypical views of sole-parent families and the limits that it might place on her future options.

...everyone thinks that because you have a single-parent you are only going to get to do ‘all of this’ whereas they might get to do ‘that’ because they have two parents. I’m like; I can do just as much as you can do if I want to do it. It’s got nothing to do with that. (Kayla, 16)

Whilst for the children there was not generally seen to be a stigma attached to being in a sole-parent family, being poor was more of an issue. Two of the children spoke about teachers at school being publicly insensitive to their financial situations in ways that were hurtful when they could not attend school excursions. Others spoke about feeling guilty or embarrassed about having to rely on their friends to lend them money or pulling out of social activities they could not afford to participate in. Jodie spoke about the stigma she felt when she went on to Youth Allowance.

Yes, but some people don’t see it that way. Like my boyfriend’s mother doesn’t see it that way. She doesn’t think I should be on it- because it is like a stigma that people that are on Centrelink are dead beats. It doesn’t worry me at all, because Centrelink is there if people need it and that’s the good thing about it. Like they only give the bare minimum to get you through, which I guess is good, but there isn’t any left over and it doesn’t help if there are kids (Jodie, 17).
Many of the mothers also believed that their children had been affected by stigma and spoke about this.

> Does it impact on the girls? Of course it does. There were incidents—different things that were said to them at school over the years like um... I know one of them was going on a school camp or something and one of them says ‘how can you do that? Your mother can’t afford that’. And this is like 9 and 10 year olds and where does that come from? Obviously the parents talking—that sort of thing. The kids very rarely got invited to any parties or things like that— they hardly every went to parties—stuff like that and it was all because I was a single parent well and truly. (Eleanor)

The stigma attached to welfare and poverty was similarly expressed by other mothers and gives a sense of the potential damage to their self-esteem, identity and agency (Lister, 2004: 118). The implications of this for children’s agency is discussed further in Chapter Ten.

### 7.6 Summary

This chapter has revealed the lived experiences of families when sole-mothers were moved on to the NSA under the welfare-to-work policy and the ways in which children are sharing the burden of these experiences. It has highlighted the challenges faced by the mothers in seeking and maintaining employment and suggests that contrary to normative tropes about single-mothers as welfare dependents who lack the desire to work, the mothers in this study were keen to work and were calculative and reflexive in taking steps to improve their employment possibilities through study and even moving to different fields of employment. The mothers in this study applied a range of rationales when making decisions about work. These centred primarily on
their children’s needs for quality care, time and support as much as on their financial
needs. This suggests a ‘mother-first’ approach over the normative ‘worker-first’
economic rationale and highlights the pressure on mothers to satisfy social
expectations that they be both ‘good-mothers’ and ‘good-workers’. However, the
challenges of balancing caring responsibilities, household and domestic labour and
paid employment provides a barrier to sole-mothers finding and keeping work. The
lack of work that allowed for what they felt were the needs of their families was also a
barrier to employment as were the prevailing insecure labour market conditions.
Where families lived also had an impact on this with fewer employment opportunities
in rural and regional areas. The findings indicate that a key flaw in the policy is that it
is not flexible enough to allow for families and their changing needs and
circumstances.

This research also points to the ways in which a range of socio-structural factors
intersect to determine how the impacts of the welfare-to-work policy changes are
experienced by families. The impact of the reduction in the amount of income
support on the financial security of families, and in particular on children, has clear
implications for the social inclusion agenda particularly around health, education,
housing and food security. The stigma that accompanies the experiences of being a
sole-parent and on welfare was also revealed and suggests a form of ‘symbolic
violence’ (Bourdieu, 1992) that can have lasting impacts on mothers and their
children. The research findings reflect a policy approach that in focusing on the
activation of parents into the labour market is largely blind to the impacts it has on the
interdependent lives of their children. The consequences of these are felt in the here
and now by children, particularly around education and recreational activities, but will also have implications for their futures.

The strong ties between the experiences of the mothers and their children and the ways that children are sharing the burden of their families’ circumstances has begun to emerge in this chapter. This highlights the need for a sensitivity to the interdependence of lives when designing social policy: for example, the links between parents, children and grandparents (Dewilde, 2003; Huinink, 2009). The following chapter builds on these findings with an analysis of the ways in which the interdependent relationships, or ‘linked lives’ of families and others can assist in securing well-being and providing support and safety nets, but sometimes also limiting the range of options and creating barriers to individual agency and welfare.
8. The ‘linked lives’ of families and others

This chapter presents the research findings that reveal the interdependence that exists and evolves between individuals within families and also the influence of others in their wider social networks. These social links can provide support, opportunity, and act as powerful mediators of risk; they can also be tools to obtain the support or accompaniment of others while pursuing individual wellbeing (Huinink, 2009, pp. 304-305). These links also tie individuals, and particularly children, to the less positive circumstances of other’s lives: in this study to that of their mothers in particular. As this research found, the welfare-to-work policy designed to activate sole-parents into paid work had implications for the interdependent lives of their children; implications that in many cases had spiralled them into poverty, food and housing insecurity, and social exclusion and will arguably result in a range of structural barriers across their life-course. It also found that alongside the strong ties between mothers and their children, the support from other ‘linked lives’ (Elder, 1974) was as important in determining the impact and outcomes of the welfare policy changes as other conditions and circumstances in their lives.

The chapter deals firstly with the nature of the links between mothers and their children. That children receive support from their parents is perhaps obvious, but what is less obvious is that this is a mutual relationship and parents also draw support in a range of ways from their children. The dyadic nature of these relationships between mothers and younger children was evident in this study, but was especially noticeable as children moved into their adolescent years and increasingly exercised their agency independently and within and outside of the family unit. The chapter
then reveals the findings that point to the links between children, mothers, and extended family members, particularly maternal grandparents. These links could be seen to mediate the outcomes for children and also had implications for the mothers, particularly for their decision making around work and study. The ways that other social relationships, especially with fathers, were often less supportive for the children in this study, and sometimes added strain and insecurity, is also revealed. Finally, in this chapter the communal relationships with friends, neighbours and community groups are shown as significant mediators of outcomes for children. The presence or, as was the case for some, absence of support from others emerged as a powerful theme in the narrative interviews with the mothers and the conversations with their children and points to the need for greater sensitivity to these relationships in the design of welfare policies that impact on families.

8.1 The ‘linked lives’ of mothers’ and their children

The close interdependent relationship between mothers and their children was expressed frequently in the interviews with the mothers and in the research with their children. It was primarily expressed in terms of a closeness or friendship and for some families it was also displayed through close physical contact during interviews\(^\text{10}\). There was a sense that the mothers felt they were ‘under attack’ from wider society as individuals and as a family, particularly since the recent policy changes, and that this had served to strengthen the bond they felt as a family. Some, like Belinda, even used ‘team’ analogies such as ‘on the same side’ to describe the closeness and mutual support they shared with their children.

\(^{10}\) Mothers and children often sat closely together during the interviews; for example, hugging and holding hands.
They really are my favourite people to hang out with and umm... I value their opinions and their input and their understanding. I’ve really treated them somewhat as equals and my best friends, which might not be very politically correct but it’s the way it is and we love each other. It’s like we are on the same side. (Belinda)

Many of the children also spoke about their close relationship with their mothers and like Belinda’s daughter, Georgia, felt that this was even closer than experienced by her peers because of their circumstances.

*Mum and I are very close. Some of my friends aren’t as close to their mums as I am. I’m not sure why, maybe it’s because they don’t get as much attention.* (Georgia, 13)

Mandy and Sonia expressed similar feelings.

*Mandy: Every day she will have something...she looks forward to us coming home. She loves not working because then she can be here to say hello to us when we come home from school.*

*Sonia: We are kind of friends–we have a friendship between us. It’s not like ‘oh, you are a parent’, you know? We are very close to each other, being all girls we can talk to her.* (Mandy, 16 and Sonia, 14)

Several mothers spoke about how important they believed their parenting role was to them and their children.

*I believe it’s the most challenging rewarding work there is. I don’t regret a second of it and wouldn’t change anything. Children are forever whereas other people, they come and go. Your kids are always going to be your children so if you get it right with all its ups and downs you will have your people forever.* (Belinda)
A number of the children also said having their mother available as a support, particularly after school to review their day, assist with homework, and to take them to various recreational and social activities was also very important to them. Some, like Georgia, felt that if their mother worked more they would miss out on socialising with friends.

*It’s not a bad thing when she is working, but I would probably prefer it if she wasn’t working because I would get to spend more time. I probably wouldn’t get to do everything I get to do socially-wise and like ...I’d just go to my dad’s more and stuff and it might make it less close. Even if she did have more money, it probably wouldn’t be worth it.* (Georgia, 12)

Whilst it was acknowledged that mother’s work could provide financial benefits to the family it was seen by some children as detrimental to family time. Those whose mothers were working longer hours missed having that time and support.

*We understand I guess. It took me a bit to get used to because I was so used to mum being there, you know...’mum can you take me here, mum I’ve got to do this’ and this she was like–’I’m working, can you go with Jodie or someone else?’...it was just different to get used to because you are so used to doing everything with her.* (Kayla, 16)

Children’s needs and desire for their mother’s time and support has implications for policy, particularly when the children are already vulnerable. The closeness, friendship and practical support of mothers for their children was important to many of the families as most of them did not have support networks such as extended family or even close friends that they could turn to. Several families, like Cheryl’s, had recently moved and lost previously existing social networks.
Because we have had to move too we don’t have the benefit of networks established in playgroup and mother’s group and prep in this area. I don’t have family support, I don’t have anyone who will step in and help (Cheryl).

For those who did have friends or neighbours, they expressed feeling uncomfortable about asking for help too regularly. For some the stigma of being a sole-parent also provided a barrier to building support networks as they felt judged and excluded by others they believed were suspicious of their motives. They also felt that this impacted on their children.

I think I’m amazed at the hostility in the community to single mums, even amongst family and friends. And the stigma of being a single mum makes it harder to find employment too. It makes it hard with sporting groups. Evie plays netball and everyone’s got a mum and a dad there except Evie—he’s just got me. And there’s a stigma and people don’t want to talk or don’t want to get involved or...I don’t know if they are afraid you are going to race off with their husband or you’re going to ask them to do a whole lot of babysitting... (Cheryl)

...we are also struggling socially I think. We don’t get to go out, get to do anything. He [Charlie, 8] doesn’t get to play sports or any of that, but ummm... I also feel like people hate us...hate me for being a single mum and it...I think that if something was going to change it needs to be an attitude change. Like, you know that people will stop feeling like...um, or... chucking you in a basket and saying that’s where you are and that’s where you will always be, not ‘you’re here right now, we’ll help you get up’ and you know, you just go on with being a useful person and instead it’s like we’re or I’m deemed useless. Put in the useless basket and there’s no way to get up out of it (Donna).
Whether this was real or imagined their anxiety about being judged combined with their financial limitations curbed the social interactions of many of the mothers and as a consequence, their children. Several mothers said they felt their children where more inhibited socially because of this. The limited financial resources and social networks of many of the families meant they spent most of their free time at home together. Whilst familial bonds are a feature of normal family structures, for the families in this study the lack support from and interaction with wider social networks and in many cases also extended family, appeared to strengthen these familial bonds. In some instances, these also appeared to act as mutual support for mothers and children as each sought to soften the impact of the changes to their lives as a result of the welfare-to-work policy and their financial circumstances. But, the impacts were clearly felt by both mothers and children as the following section reveals.

8.2 The impacts of mothers’ welfare-to-work transitions on the lives of children

In the previous chapter the ‘gendered moral rationalities’ that the mothers in this study employed when making choices about the balance between work and their caring responsibilities highlighted the extent to which meeting the caring needs of their children often took priority, even over economic considerations. This section reveals some of the ways that the interdependent lives of children are impacted by their mother’s choices and as a consequence of the changes to the welfare-to-work policy.

Policy that targets sole-parents clearly has implications for the linked lives of their children. The changes that saw sole- mothers moved on to NSA also meant sudden and tangible disruptions in many areas of their children’s lives. For many of the
children these disruptions occurred concomitant with upheaval in other areas of their lives such as family breakdown and other changes to their family structures and socio-economic circumstances. In his seminal work ‘Children of the Great Depression’ Elder (1974) argues that:

Socio economic change in families is a strategic point at which to investigate the dynamics of generational change… and the… restructuring of the child’s world-in relation to others, and in tasks within the household and extra familial settings (Elder, 1974, p. 7).

For the children in this study, the socio-economic changes that occurred when their mothers were moved on to NSA meant that this restructuring took place across a number of fronts and was often immediate and severe. These included changes in relationships and roles, housing and schools, and loss of family, friends and support. The mothers reported suffering stress, depression and related poor health outcomes that also had impacts on children. Several of the children themselves suffered from anxiety and poor health as they lived with increased uncertainty and insecurity. They went without meals, missed out on social and educational activities, became homeless and had disruptions to their schooling. Children spoke of ongoing uncertainty about what the next day or week may bring.

Yes, it’s really annoying not having money because we don’t know what we are going to have for dinner each night and that sort of stuff. You can’t really plan ahead—you aren’t really sure what’s going to happen. (Sonia, 16)

You don’t know if you are going to stay in a rental property or not because one time we fell behind with rent and they said we had to go...so we did. We were temporarily
homeless. And then it happened again. When you move house it sort of messes up everything, because you get used to everything and you know where everything is and then while school’s going you move house and you lose your homework and that kind of thing and you don’t know where you are going to live. You go to school and come home and it’s like - all this again. (Mandy, 14)

Like we struggle...like we think...we should buy whatever for dinner, but a lot lately we have been having crumbed fish or just some processes stuff but before the changes we had...we ate more healthy[sic]. (Leo, 15)

Many of the children also reported having to go without things such as school books, shoes and clothing, but also lunch-box treats or birthday gifts and other material items that would be considered normal for children of their age. Their financial circumstances also restricted their social lives.

Sometimes a group from school would go to see a movie, or obviously just wander down the street and just window shopping and that kind of stuff, but we can’t do that if we don’t have the money. There’s no point in going to a movie if you can’t afford to get into it. (Sonia, 16)

For some families, their limited financial means also restricted their access to health care. Donna’s son Charlie (8) went without seeing a doctor.

I suppose the other thing in the course of trying to care for Charlie, I had to see a Paediatrician that cost $244 which I couldn’t pay. Even though I get the money back from Medicare I can’t...I have to have the money first, so I have to pay which in the end deterred us from going that way. (Donna)
For other families the cost of health care had left them with large debt. The inability to afford health care emerged as a significant issue for several families and is another area where children are directly bearing the burden of their family’s socio-economic circumstances.

Several of the families had recently moved so as the mothers could find work or to find more affordable housing. For the children these relocations meant moving away from existing support networks, peer groups and family, changing schools, and restricted access to, or having to give up, recreational activities.

_I looked at S---- and moved here unfortunately, and I say unfortunately because we are far away from everything. I don’t really know many people here- the people keep to themselves. You are either a local or you are an outsider. I don’t really have any support here whatsoever…a lot of people I know live in the city, all of the events are in the city. If there are any free activities or anything we could do that’s fun we’ve got to make our way to the city._ (Paula)

_When we left…we home schooled for the last term of the year. So it really messed up our year- it messed up our schooling pretty much. So after that we had to do distance education because we were so broke we had to go to our family farm to stay there. We did some ‘extreme budgeting’ as we call it. We had chickens so we had lots of eggs- and things that we cut out. We call it the cabin but it is pretty much a shed. And meanwhile we were having issues with money, we were all kind of stressed out and it was a two room ‘house’ and it was hard living together and we couldn’t afford to go to town._ (Sonia, 16 & Mandy, 14)

These moves seemed to create greater disruption for older children who were often more settled in their peer groups or had extra-curricular activities or particular study
areas that they hoped to pursue as careers. Music was Mandy’s passion and she had previously learnt to play the harp and singing; she hoped to continue with this at university. She had to discontinue her lessons in both when they moved to the ‘cabin’ on their small rural property after they were evicted from their home in the regional city where they lived. For Mandy’s sister, Sonia, it meant fewer subject choices at school and the loss of social relationships.

So the most annoying thing about distance ed [education] was that we couldn’t do our favourite subjects–drama and music. I lost contact with most of my friends too.

(Sonia, 16)

For adolescents, the loss of friends and vital peer relationships can result in social exclusion; the impacts to their education can lead to further disadvantage across their life-course.

Another implication of the changes to policy for the dyadic relationship between mothers and their children was that many children not only had to give up things but also take on new roles within their families. Many supported their mother’s work and their families financially by taking on more responsibility themselves, supporting the ‘family work project’ (Millar & Ridge, 2008). This included changing their normal routines and behaviours, curbing their own needs and wants, self-care and care of siblings, becoming counsellors and emotional supports for their mothers, and taking on a greater share of the domestic labour. Several of the older children had also taken on paid employment.

I’ve been doing it [working] for just over a year now, but like if it gets us by and helps out, like if we have that money to do that then we can use it later on to do
something else, we just have that extra bit for something else later on. Plus, all the things she [mother] used to do for us when we were younger, like you know she might have missed out on something for her so that we could do something...and even paying the car loan, who cares. She had to get that car for me to drive anyway, I don’t care. (Kayla, 16)

Kayla was happy that she could help her family out and make life a little easier for her mother. But this came at a cost as she explains. Kayla spoke about how she struggled when she was often at work until after 1.30 am.

It’s so hard, oh my gosh…I cut back on sport this year, I went from playing sport everyday but Sunday to three days a week, and it killed me. I am like ‘what am I doing?’ But then you know I have work and I have sport and I have school ...And my friends, I don’t really have a social life. And then like the last three weeks of last term I was so sick. I was going in for my exams and I was like ‘I can’t walk’. It’s like next year I start Year 12 and I already do one year 12 class now and I look at the year 12’s and I don’t know how I am going to do that. I worry about that all the time. I am like how am I going to get through year 12. I’ve considered not doing it and going to TAFE [Technical and Further Education] and starting something else. So I have to do Year 12 but then I wonder how I am going to do year 12 with everything else I’m doing to fit in at home. So you know, it just gets so busy and exams coming up, and I don’t want to do any of it anymore. (Kayla, 16)

Redmond (2010) argues that whilst the activation’ of young people into paid employment may have some short-term financial benefits for families, if it impacts detrimentally on their education, recreation or social relationships, it can also be acting to create structural barriers for them in the future. This has particularly been
found to be the case for young people in low socio-economic groups who often have less control over their hours and working conditions (Zelizer, 1985).

Several older children in this study had also moved onto Youth Allowance\textsuperscript{11} in order to improve their families’ financial circumstances.

\textit{Jodie}: Well I mostly remember when mum had to go off it [PPS] and she had to get Youth Allowance for both of us and we didn’t get any of it, well we did get some of it, but there was a lot less money to go around.

\textit{Interviewer}: How did you feel about going on to Youth Allowance?

\textit{Jodie}: I didn’t mind it because Mum needed the money. I’m on it for myself now. I don’t like being on Centrelink but at the moment I don’t have a choice. (Jodie, 17)

Youth Allowance can be paid directly to the child or to the mother and reduces the amount of the NSA benefit that is paid to the parent. Whilst it does result in a negligible increase to the household income overall, it also engages children with the welfare system from an early age and further ties them to the ebbs and flows of policy change. The role of children as active agents in contributing to and managing their families’ financial circumstances is discussed in greater detail in Chapter Nine.

Children also took on roles as counsellors and emotional supports for their mothers. They spoke of their concern for their mothers being tired, stressed and working too hard, but also of feeling stress and anxiety themselves. They worried about their mothers and some spoke of needing to provide emotional support.

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\textsuperscript{11} Youth Allowance is a means tested income support for low income young people over sixteen years.
It kind of worries me how much stress she puts herself through. You don’t see it much but, when she’s stressed she tries to hide it. She says she works part-time but I feel that she works full-time. (Leo, 15)

Mum gets so stressed and mad at us some days because she is trying to work so hard that she’s worried that we will miss out on something. It’s like just hold on a minute! It’s like next year I start year 12 and I don’t know how I am going to do that. I worry about it all the time. (Kayla, 16)

It’s stressful because my mum used to drink wine and then I’d go to sleep thinking ‘oh, what’s she going to do?’ Because I would always hear her falling over in the night and I couldn’t sleep. She needs time to rest but not too much because then she goes, she starts thinking about the future and stuff like that…she gets stressed from it. That’s why she drank. (Seth, 11)

I kept on feeling a little scared because when she lost her job she didn’t have a lot of money and then she was struggling and how would we get things? And I kept on thinking bad things and that. (Emily, 9)

I feel a little bit sad because I can feel what she can. (Evie, 9)

The stress children felt was also manifest in physical symptoms with several suffering from insomnia, stomach upsets, chest pains and constipation. Some of the mothers also spoke about the negative impacts their circumstances were having on their children’s mental health.

It was really hard on Pat being by himself...I think it influenced his behaviour; he started high school and he changed from someone who wanted to do it to someone who really felt isolated. I think it had an impact so I have taken on a cleaning job so
I can be here all the time. He looks like he has depression and some sort of anxiety and possibly some other issues. (Evelyn)

The other day she just...I picked her up from school...she rang me...because she had a panic attack. She thought it was a panic attack but she didn’t know what it was- in class. So I went to pick her up. She had a rush of blood to the head and felt like she was going to black out and her heart was racing and she broke out in a sweat. 10 minutes later it had sort of passed, but she wanted me to come and pick her up. When I bought her home I said to her ‘are you happy at the school here?’ and she said ‘I like the teachers the girls are ok. I just want to get out of here. I just want to get to New York.’ Her dream is to go to uni and then to New York.’ And that made me so sad you know. When you say get out of here do you mean me, or this house or the town or your life or what? I wanted to be sure where she was coming from with that. She said- just here, I just want to get away to New York. I’m not sure even she could verbalise what she wants to get away from. But it’s this crappy life- where everything is no- there’s no yeses. (Giselle)

Giselle summed up what many mothers felt about how the policy changes were impacting on the linked lives of their children. Significantly, the families where stress was most commonly reported by the children, were the ones that had very little in the way of other social support networks, such as extended family. Where these support networks were present they seemed to go some way towards mitigating the impacts of the policy changes on children’s lives, especially when support came from maternal grandparents who also acted as moral support and counsellors for the mothers.
8.3 The important role of grandparents

The families in this study that had the additional support of others, especially when it was maternal grandparents, fared significantly better across a range of areas. Support received from grandparents included childcare, meals, financial support and loans, acting as guarantors for leases, providing transport, emergency housing, and funding recreational activities for children and family holidays. The support of grandparents also provided a safety net that allowed the mothers to feel more secure about taking risks such as pursuing further study, moving house, or taking on jobs outside of school hours. There was also a sense from the interviews that when families had close support from grandparents they were embedded within an extended family unit that allowed them to feel less isolated. They benefited from practical, emotional, moral and financial support.

*I’m lucky because my grandparents buy me clothes and stuff... they take me to dancing. If they weren’t helping I would miss out on a lot especially dancing and going out to places. I wouldn’t be able to get anything.* (Miranda, 12)

Belinda was fortunate to live in a home she rented from her father at a very generous rate and this gave her security of tenure even when things were tight financially.

*I ended up moving here because my parents were here- they bought this house here and because it was their house the single parent pension was enough. I actually have my dad covering the earnings I was getting while I am studying until I go into the industry.* (Belinda)

*It’s affecting my parents as well because it’s got to the point where I was almost ready to give up studying. I am lucky to have my parents support ’cos if my parents...*
didn’t help out financially with Miranda’s activities there is no way I would be able
to study. Mum actually works for a school so school holidays have been...if she
didn’t work in a school then I would have been stuffed. My dad went guarantor to get
the house with his financials. (Anthea)

The impacts this has on the lives of the grandparents and on their life-course was
acknowledged by a number of the mothers. Andrea spoke often in her interview
about this support and the cost to her parents.

It’s not just affected me, it’s affecting my parents as well ...And so my parents are
helping out where they can to keep Matilda- mainly with Matilda’s activities so
Matilda doesn’t miss out, otherwise she would miss out and that’s not fair. So I am
just fortunate that my parents are in that position that they can help. (Andrea)

These findings suggest that the impacts of welfare-to-work policy are
intergenerational and are changing the life-course of the linked lives of grandparents
as well as children. This is an important finding that emerges from this study and an
area where further research is warranted. Brenda’s story further highlights these
intergenerational issues and the complexity that can occur as a result of non-
traditional family structures without the support of a male bread-winner. Having
previously been on NSA with her own three children, Brenda had recently taken on
primary care of her two-year-old grand-daughter, Zara, after mental health issues had
left her mother (Brenda’s eldest daughter) unable to care for her. This meant Brenda
was taken off NSA and moved back on to the more generous PPS until Zara turned
eight. Brenda was very anxious about the prospect of eventually going back on to
NSA, the impacts on her work choices and inevitably on her longer term prospects as
she now looked likely to have to support her grand-child until she, herself, was well
into her sixties. Brenda was also concerned about how this would impact on Zara’s future.

They weren’t happy to release Zara into her [daughter] care and asked would I take her. I said of course I would or she would have gone into foster care. I have my super, however long that will last for, but I’ll never own my own home again, which is OK. It doesn’t faze me. I do worry but I don’t know how to change it. Jobs are hard to get- better paid jobs are hard to get. I can’t afford to study- to get a degree or anything like that- it’s just too far out of my reach. I think I’ll set up a bank account for Zara so hopefully she won’t have to struggle when it comes time for her to make her way in this world. (Brenda)

Brenda’s case highlight’s the need for policy to be more sensitive to the complexity of family life and how policy impacts can be felt across multiple generations. The burden of care that will continue to be placed on Brenda for many years comes at considerable cost with clear implications for her own financial security in old-age. This suggests the need for greater age and generational sensitivity within the policy (see Purcal, Brennan, Cass, & Jenkins, 2014). It also hints at the gendered nature of this issue as sole-mothers also become sole-grandmothers. What was notable in Brenda’s story, as for many families in this study, was the absence of fathers in the lives of the children. In all but a few cases the fathers had very limited contact with their children as this next section reveals.

8.4 Fathers and their children

Although most of the children had some contact with their fathers, for the majority this was infrequent; in some cases, less than once a year. Whilst the relationship
between fathers and their children could be regarded as an example of ‘linked lives’, in very few cases was a father described by the mothers or the children as someone who ‘provided support’ or assisted the children in their ‘pursuit of well-being’ (Huinink, 2009). To the contrary, most children who did have ongoing contact with their fathers spoke about this relationship as challenging and even stressful. This highlights how for children in sole-parent families the burden of care is largely placed on the mother following family breakdown and that it is women and their children that bear the greatest risk as a consequence. It also suggests that managing the relationship with their fathers can become an additional burden for children through which the effects of poverty are mediated. Some children spoke about feeling that they needed to appease their fathers by going along with what they wanted to do or accommodating their father’s new relationships. For some the relationships with their father added to the complexity and challenges of their day-to-day lives as they juggled schooling, recreational activities, peer relationships and work. The study also revealed the sense of disappointment felt by children when their fathers did not provide the support they expected.

Evie’s social map (Plate 8.1) shows a carpark located half way between her mother’s home and her father’s home where she is ‘dropped off’. Evie referred to this as ‘the swapping place’. Whilst she was drawing her social map she spoke about her time with her father’s new wife and family.

*Interviewer: So how often do you go to your dads?*

*Evie: Every second fortnight, on Sunday.*

*Interviewer: Does he have a girlfriend or a wife?*

*Evie: Yeah Elena, wife. Yes, she’s on drugs.*
Interviewer: She’s on drugs?

Evie: Yes…. Elena’s on drugs. Cigarettes.

Interviewer: Does that bother you? Evie: Not really?

Interviewer: Do they have any kids?

Evie: Yes, I have two half-sisters—Monica and Jess. They are five and ten years older than me. My dad broke up when I was four years old and umm…I’m nine now…so that was five-six years ago. I like my dad and mum to be together but my dad wasn’t the nicest to mum, and so it is better that they aren’t together. So I sometimes I go to my dad’s, sometimes I can’t. I was meant to go on Mother’s Day but I stayed at mum’s. Interviewer: Why did you do that?

Evie: Because I wanted to spend Mother’s Day with mum.

Interviewer: Is it very far away to go to your dads?

Evie: Yes, about an hour. Interviewer: Does he pick you up?

Evie: No mum drives me and we have this swapping place. (Evie, 9)

PLATE 8.1 Evie’s Social Map
Although very few of the children seemed to have close relationships with their fathers or expressed regret at not spending more time with them, time spent with fathers was not always negative. For some younger children visits with their father was spoken of with a sense of adventure that in some cases involved travel including plane flights and experiences outside of their daily routine. It also offered a chance to participate in recreational activities that their mothers could not afford (some examples were tenpin bowling, swimming, movies and golf) and allowed contact with other paternal relatives that they did not normally see.

*Seth: I go to my dad’s but he is usually not there...at work. So I usually go to my grandma’s.*

*Interviewer: How is that? Is that good?*

*Seth: Yes, she’s really nice. He’s nice too, but he’s not there, but when he is he is really nice and I’ve got...he’s always on his phone and my phone, whenever I text message him he realises two minutes later...literally so he’s pretty...he’s always on his phone, I know he’s there, but he’s busy.*

*Interviewer: Has your dad remarried? Does he have other children?*

*Seth: Yes, he has: a step-brother and a wife. My step-brother, he looks like me so I guess he’s ok. He’s ah...I think he is three or four. His name is N###.*

*Interviewer: Do you get on well with him?*

*Seth: I don’t mind, he is not annoying, he’s annoying like all other brothers and little boys should be but he’s ok, I wouldn’t say that I was discriminating against him because he is my half-brother. Because I just think I should accept him into my family because he’s my half-brother. (Seth, 11)*
It is interesting to note that Seth’s paternal grandmother is called upon to provide child-care while his father is at work, highlighting again the intergenerational and gendered nature of the social risks and responsibilities associated with family breakdown. Seth’s paternal family is Muslim and wants him to be raised as a Muslim, but his mother is opposed to this. This has created ongoing conflict between his mother and father over custody, cultural matters and child support. Seth’s feelings about spending time with his father’s family are mixed.

*I have so much family in Sydney I’m not kidding. My grandma, my grandpa, my cousins, my two aunts, and my other uncle, and my dad and his wife Anna. So that’s really it. I think if I had to register everyone else, naturally an Arab like me they have a big family so I wouldn’t be able to list them. And they are creepy because they put bars on the windows, my grandma. Yes, they put bars on the windows, it looks like a prison. I suppose to protect from robbery, but I’m not sure if they have ever been robbed. It is a very unsafe area, my mum told me all about it, but my grandma denies it. But I know that it is very unsafe, I just feel it is unsafe. It doesn’t strike me as a safe area.* (Seth, 11)

Like Seth, a number of children had the challenges of assimilating with new step-mothers and often younger step-siblings. These new ‘patchwork families’ (Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) created conflict, competition for time and money from their fathers that was often directed to the children of their new relationships, and in some cases led to significant rupture in the relationship children had with their fathers. Some children reported feeling like they were not really part of their father’s new life and that they were responsible for maintaining the relationship.
Karalee: So it’s like I try to make the effort but he doesn’t always meet me half way. Like I’ve got to make all the effort or no effort, so it gets hard some weeks, but...

Interviewer: Has it always been like that or is it since you got older?

Karalee: When we were younger it used to be like when we first started going we followed them, so whatever they were doing we were just tagging along. There was never anything exciting to do so I think you know I just got sick of it. So why bother when I can stay with mum and she will do something that involves us instead of us just tagging along with something he wants to do, you know what I mean? (Karalee, 16)

For some of the older children, regular visits with their father was reported as a disruption to their normal lives and something that they resented. It meant taking time out from their usual routines, having to pack clothes and other belongings and spend time outside of their familiar comfort zones and personal spaces.

I find it stressful packing every week for the weekend after school–grabbing all my stuff and then going there and then having to because he lives far away and because I’ve still got to referee or whatever at the Rec centre. So dad will have to drive me all the way down so it’s really hard, like especially every second Thursday I’ve got to grab all my books and clothes for the next day and stuff and be able to organize myself in such a time space. When I’m there I feel relaxed but I also feel anxious I don’t know what it is, it feels like its home but it feels like it’s not. I feel there it is more like their house, but I’ve got this room which is mine sort of thing...I don’t know how to explain it. (Leo, 15)

Leo clearly felt like a bit of an outsider when visiting his father and his new family.

These findings highlight the fact that not all ‘linked lives’ are supportive and that in
some cases they can create additional strain and complexity in children’s lives. The data from this study suggests that following the breakdown of relationships it is the mothers that bear most of the ongoing burden of supporting their children both financially and through time and labour and that children also share that burden. Several of the children also spoke about the lack of financial support they received from their fathers. Leo felt this was a reflection of his father’s love for him and his brother.

Leo: I speak to him a lot about paying school fees because I go to a private school I feel like my dad should try and contribute, like I am his kid, I feel that he doesn’t love us because he’s not contributing, I feel like we just go there to make him look good. Like we are just an accessory. He doesn’t like paying for that accessory he just wants to have it given to him.

Interviewer: Why do you think he doesn’t pay?

Leo: I think he doesn’t pay because he has financial things for himself, like he has just built a new house, that’s one reason.

Interviewer: Do you think he can afford to pay?

Leo: I think he can afford to pay but I just think it’s him not wanting to because it’s giving money to her [mother]. (Leo, 16)

Sonia and Mandy also spoke about feeling disappointed with the lack of support they received from their father.

We just want dad to help out a little bit more. Maybe even $50 a week would mean the world. I think he has to pay about $30 a month. I don’t know. Anyway... but you just think ‘dad, couldn’t you help out a just little bit more than what you are doing’.
And she was trying to do what she used to do but she had no job and she was struggling with bills and that...and dad didn’t pay child support...he doesn’t pay the child support, he sometimes helps out with book club. (Evie, 9)

Very few of the mothers in this study reported receiving regular or reliable child support payments from the children’s fathers, but for those that did receive regular payments, they said even small amounts helped to mediate the impacts of the families’ financial disadvantage. Mothers reported using the child support payments to pay for the children to do extracurricular activities they could not afford otherwise, such as swimming lessons.

None of the children’s fathers provided any regular child-caring support that allowed mothers to work or study, nor did they play a role in supporting the day-to-day lives of their children by assisting with transport or participating in sporting or recreational activities. Unlike grandparents who, when they were involved, actively supported children’s daily lives, time spent with their fathers was largely time outside of the children’s regular routine and some children felt they were expected to accommodate or fit in with their father’s new lives.

Some children expressed disappointment that their fathers were not more involved in their lives. Sonia and Mandy spoke about this.

*Sonia:* And also with this thing we always wanted a dad living here. It was the one thing we both wanted was someone to lift us up on their shoulders.

*Mandy:* You would want a dad with two parents and you’d be in the middle jumping around and happy.
Sonia: You see that in pictures...

Mandy: In movies and you think oooh! If that happened to me...

Sonia: It's a bit annoying.

Mandy: You see little kids around with their parents and it's a bit like- envious!

Sonia: Green monster!

Mandy: He comes around about three times a year, maybe five times this year.

Mandy: He comes around Christmas and Soph’s birthday but he forgets my birthday every year- every time.

Sonia: He does remember it!

Mandy: It’s on Melbourne Cup Day, but he never comes here til Christmas and then he says happy birthday for a month ago and I go ‘you’re a bit late’.

Sonia: We are on good terms with dad but he could of helped a little bit more.

Mum still loves him. They are all still ‘lovey dovey’ and you go ‘mum, dad, no!’

We are happy to see him.

Interviewer: Does he live here locally?

Mandy: I don’t know- he lives in a caravan- he’s a drover, so he moves cattle round and is in all different places. He could be anywhere. He is usually around Parkes or somewhere in Queensland, that sort of thing, but I don’t know where he is. We have a photo and that is pretty much it. If he is somewhere near, we might go and see him or he might drop around. Not often. Sometimes he gives us a call and sometimes it makes us feel better which is nice. (Sonia, 16 & Mandy, 14)

These findings suggest that understanding more about children’s perspectives and experiences of custody arrangements after family breakdown and how those arrangements facilitate or impede the potential for supportive relationships between fathers and their children would be beneficial. The findings also suggest that
following family breakdown there is a gender bias that leads to an inequality of outcomes. In many cases this results in sole-mothers struggling on welfare and living in poverty with their children, whilst fathers appear to move forward more freely with their lives and their careers, often re-partnering, remarrying and having more children with their new partners. It would suggest that policy needs to be more sensitive to how, following family breakdown, this apparent gender bias impacts on sole-mothers and their capacity to move forward and engage in employment for example, and the ways in which children share this burden. Social relationships are clearly not always mutually beneficial, supportive or equal and in the case of broken families. Frequently it is women, and as a consequence their children, who are carrying the greatest burden and are exposed to greater risks of future disadvantage and social exclusion. For the children in this study who did not have support from grandparents or fathers, sometimes it was wider networks of friends and community that they turned to for extra support.

8.5 Support from friends, neighbours and community

Support from friends and community included emergency food relief, child-care, transport, moral support and money. Many families in this study had turned to charities for emergency food relief since being moved on to NSA. Some relied on neighbours and friends (usually other mothers who were often also sole-parents) for support. A number of the mothers felt that this was an imposition on others and that they did not like to rely on friends too much. These friends were often in similar socio-economic circumstances, as is frequently the case in disadvantaged neighbourhoods (Warr, 2005). Some also relied on friends for child-care and
transport before and after school, but were worried that if their children were unwell that this would place an added strain on others.

*I will be worried that it is an issue because you are asking them to look after a sick child...you don’t want to do that to them. They have their own lives and may not be able to afford to get sick.* (Susanne)

Some of the children also spoke about relying on friends for support: borrowing money to go to movies or to buy food, getting transport with them to sports or school and staying over at their friend’s places when they knew there was no food at home. But they also said that their friends did not really understand what it was like for them being poor and that they felt guilty for asking for support.

*I don’t really want to ask for money for things, like if my friends are going out or doing something. I can’t go or I say I am busy, ‘cos I don’t want to ask for money to go out. I sort of feel like I am relying on my friends, like they offer to pay for me and I feel really bad about that.* (Elizabeth, 16)

*My friends don’t really have a clue because they have all these big houses and I go to their place and I’m like woooow! Some of them can’t really imagine, they want to understand but they can’t imagine what it’s like.* (Mandy, 14)

The interplay between relationships of support and dependence between young people and how these relationships are changed by experiences of poverty and lead to social exclusion are important concerns that emerges from this study. As in similar studies by Skattebol et al. (2012) and Ridge (2002), sometimes this exclusion appeared to be self-imposed by children if they felt they could not participate equally with their peers. For the children in this study the impacts of the welfare-to-work policy placed
a strain on their friendships and also how they saw themselves in relation to their peers as Eliza explains:

I don’t really want to ask for money for things, like if my friends are going out or doing something, I say I can’t go, or I’m busy, because I don’t want to ask for the money to go out.

I sort of feel like all the time I am relying on my friends, like if they really want me to come they will offer to pay for me and I feel really bad about that…I don’t want to be taking money from my friends sort of… so I feel like always depending on them… it is still embarrassing though. (Eliza, 16)

Some families had received support from institutional networks such as churches, schools and sporting clubs that provided the means for children to continue in sport, recreational and cultural activities that they would have not been able to afford otherwise. For two families this included securing financial assistance (bursaries and scholarships) to keep their children in private schooling. Both of these mothers spoke about this in terms of the educational and social advantages they felt it provided for their children. When asked why she did not just move her boys to a State school, Kathy expressed that to change would be just another disruption to their lives. She also felt that there were social advantages from attending a private school.

How can I do that? They’ve been in the private school all their life. My sons been in counselling from Grade 1 because of the issues we have been dealing with. He’s in Year 10 now and you want me to change schools on him when he’s not coping with school even now? And my youngest one is home sick all the time I don’t know whether its stress as well after what we’ve gone through over the years and to change schools, and then to put them to a public school where there’s more influence to
drugs and alcohol, why would I want to do that? Don’t they want good kids? I don’t want to say my kids are better because they go to a private school, I don’t want to say that at all, but because my kids have been in that environment for so long, changing them, it would be a shock to their system. (Kathy)

Social support for schooling and extracurricular activities seemed to come as a result of mothers themselves having more social and cultural capital. Kathy and Eleanor were good examples of this. Both spoke about the benefits of education and recreational activities for their children and the potential for increased social mobility; hence, they were both active in pursuing support and assistance to sustain them.

Kathy and Eleanor were very critical of the welfare-to-work policy, what they felt to be its injustices and the impacts it was having on families, and this had been translated into forms of resistance. Kathy was a public spokesperson and campaigned through the media on behalf of sole-parents. She had also established a support group for those at risk of losing their homes. Eleanor had resisted the efforts of JSA’s to place her into jobs she did not want and had not disclosed her qualifications in order to, as she saw it, protect her professional reputation and her right to make her own choices about work and parenting. Both had pursued scholarships or funding for schooling, music lessons and sporting clubs for their children in order to minimise the impacts on their children’s opportunities.

They haven’t been impacted yet with their activities because the schools helped me financially and so have several other people donated food for us, but I’m thinking if things don’t change they might have to change in the coming year. So they are still able to do their after school activities, like they do basketball and their trainings on a week night. If I worked full-time they wouldn’t be able to do that. My youngest son
Continued involvement in these activities was also valued by the children and played a role in maintaining peer relationships. Support from friends and institutions acted as a valuable shield against the impacts of welfare-to-work policy on the lives of some of the children in this study. However, as Kathy pointed out, she only had the time to be able to take her boys to recreational activities because she wasn’t working full-time. This tension between time spent at work and time spent with her children was felt by many of the mothers in this study.

Not all were so fortunate and for many the policy shift that moved their mothers on to NSA resulted in significant changes to their lives around education and recreational activities. This seemed to be more the case when families did not have the support of wider community networks such as schools and church groups. These findings suggest that there may be some benefit in policy approaches that directly support children’s access to educational and recreational activities and highlights the important role played by others in mediating the impacts of welfare-to-work policy.

8.5 Summary

This chapter has shown how, as a result of the interdependent nature of individual lives, events and transitions in the life of one person in a family can have significant impacts on the lives of others. For the children in this study the transitions in their parent’s lives and the impacts of policy changes had also meant significant changes in their lives. Whilst the influence of interdependent relationships is active in all
families, for the children in this study who were already experiencing poverty and social exclusion, the ‘linked lives’ of others acted to mediate the impact of the policy and arguably as a result, the consequences for their future life-course outcomes. This needs to form part of any conceptual framework that informs policy affecting families. Changes to social and welfare policies that impact on mothers also have very real impacts on the lives of their children. The findings suggest that for the families in this study the support of others, and especially grandparents was as important in determining the significance of the impact of the welfare policy change as other structural conditions and circumstances in their lives. This support provided opportunities for children and acted as a powerful mediator of risks such as food and housing insecurity. The lack of support from fathers, both financially and in practical ways, is also a relevant issue for policy-makers as is the role children play in managing those relationships.

Huinink (2009, pp. 304-305) argues that ‘communal relationships are indispensable in maintaining an individual’s capabilities and the life-course becomes a process of individual welfare production supported and accompanied by others. The findings from this study suggests that not all communal relationships add to the maintenance of individual capabilities, particularly for children who often suffer as a result of decisions made by their parents. For some of the mothers in this study, having the support of others provided a safety-net that allowed them to take calculated risks like returning to study or moving house that had the potential to improve their lives over the longer term. Those without this support had more limited choices.
The ages of children were also found to be a significant factor in mediating the relationships of interdependent lives of the children in this study. Elder (1994) contends that many of children’s life-course outcomes are mediated through changing family experiences but also that the timing of these changes is critical to how transitions and events are experienced. The ages, stages, and needs of dependent children also impose limits on parents that can impede transitions to work or study. The following chapter places this temporal lens over the research findings to understand the significance of timing for the families in this study and its implications for future policy design.
9. Transitions, events and timing

The previous chapter showed how the interdependent relationships within families and with others can support but in some cases also hinder an individual’s well-being; in particular, how the changes and events in the lives of mothers can impact on their children. Elder (1977, p. 282) argues that the timing of an event or transition in an individual’s life may be as important as whether the event occurs at all. For the families in this study the timing of policy changes or a mother’s work transitions in relation to other events such as school holidays, health problems, family disruption, all appeared to be significant factors in mediating outcomes for children, as did the ages of the children when these events occur. This chapter reveals the significance of the timing of transitions and events in the interdependent lives of the families in this study.

Elder (1977, p. 279) posits four temporal concepts integral to understanding and determining the impacts of disruptions, crises and changes in lives over time: the impacts of historical change (historical and cultural time); the changing patterns of interdependence and synchronisation between the lives of family members (social time); the ages and stages of individuals at the time of change (chronological time); and the ordering and duration of events (sequences and ordering of events). This chapter organises the findings accordingly, revealing the importance of these temporal factors when considering the impacts of welfare-to-work policy in the lives of children. This study found that issues of timing played a significant part in how children were affected by the policy change and their mother’s welfare-to-work
transitions, suggesting a need for policy approaches that are more sensitive to these issues.

9.1 Historical Time

The first of the temporal dimensions of the life-course is historical time that relates to the meta-influences of time: for example, economic conditions, war or large environmental disasters. Arguably social and policy change such as the significant shifts to welfare policy approaches in Australia in recent years and labour market conditions are also historical influences and will have an impact on those living within its temporal and spatial influences.

Elder’s (1974) study of a cohort of children who grew up during the Great Depression in the US, found strong links between ‘the macroscopic events of economic decline and the micro world of children’ (Elder, 1994, p. 11). Whilst the scope of this study cannot determine whether the participants growing up under a similar social, economic and welfare policy context in Australia, could in the future be regarded as a ‘cohort’, the concept of historical time nonetheless appears relevant. The families in this study have found themselves dependent on the welfare state at a time when the policy position is increasingly moving away from ‘passive welfare’, a safety-net with no work obligation, to one of individual responsibility and activation (Marston, 2008, 2010). They have also been financially impacted by the reduction in the income support amount that occurred as a result of these changes. Hence, welfare-to-work can be regarded as constituting an historic shift in both social and economic terms as was explained in Chapter Two of this thesis.
As was also alluded to in Chapter Two, the welfare-to-work policy agenda is framed by an historically placed discourse that shapes not only the policy but also the language and ideologies that accompany it: for example, culturally informed attitudes and conceptions about childhood, sole-parents, gender, work and motherhood (Bacchi, 2005; Gardiner, 1999; Good-Gingrich, 2008; Marston, 2004). These arguably all have implications for the experiences of individuals. Donna was just one of the several of the mothers in this study who spoke about what they regarded as a clear and recent change in public attitudes and how it made them feel.

*I think the problem is that, and really for fifteen years or more people have really changed or become really hard-hearted I think about helping people who aren’t in a great position...I also feel like people hate us...hate me for being a single mum and it...I think that if something was going to change it needs to be an attitude change. Like, you know that people will stop feeling like...um, or... chucking you in a basket and saying that’s where you are and that’s where you will always be, not ‘you’re here right now, we’ll help you get up’ and you know, you just go on with being a useful person and instead it’s like we’re or I’m deemed useless. Put in the useless basket and there’s no way to get up out of it and there’s no...* (Donna)

Prevailing public attitudes towards sole-mothers also had impacts on their children. Several of the older children spoke about feeling stereo-typed because they were from a sole-parent family, particularly around future study and career options.

*And everyone thinks that because you have a single-parent family you are only going to get to do all of this [study choices] whereas they might get to do this [other choices] because they have got two parents.* (Kayla, 16)
Others spoke about having fewer options due to their family circumstances but also about giving up on career goals they really wanted in favour of what they saw as more achievable options. Bauman (2001, p. 7) argues that ‘lived lives and lives told are closely interconnected’ and that the structures, and ‘regimes of representation in a culture’ play both a reflexive and constitutive role. The older children in this study were aware of these regimes and the limitations they placed on them. They also understood that they were moving through education and into the labour market at a time when more than ever their educational achievement would, as Beck (1992, pp. 131-2) suggests, determine their success in an individualised labour market. Leo, as expressed below, was pragmatic about the options that were open to him and was aware, as were many of the children, that his choices may be limited by his economic circumstances (Redmond, 2008, p. 16).

Leo: I think it gives me less choices than what other people have because I can’t afford to go to university like that’s another thing I’ll be saving up for and it’s like in my mind just thinking that how am I going to afford it...it’s just really close as well I guess...

Interviewer: Do you think that will impact on your education?

Leo: Yes, I think it will.

Interviewer: Is going to uni something you would like to do?

Leo: I changed my mind a couple of times but I’m thinking at the moment electrical or plumbing or like or even a phys ed [Physical Education] teacher. (Leo, 15)
Within the current historical context of low economic growth and a shift away from traditional areas of employment in manufacturing, the ways in which policy acts to support or hinder important educational transitions for children can have lasting impacts over their life-course. Coupled with historically high levels of unemployment, particularly for inexperienced young people and low skilled workers, policy that acts to restrict access to tertiary and higher education for disadvantaged groups may, as Redmond (2010) suggests, create further structural barriers and thereby entrench disadvantage for children from poor sole-parent families.

In another dimension of historical time, recent decades have also seen cultural and social shifts in normative ideas about traditional gender roles. This has also impacted on policy, the domestic division of labour, and gender relations more broadly with expectations of a gender neutral adult-worker now the norm. The families in this study provide a snapshot of how traditional family bonds are weakening and individuals are increasingly left to their own devices to make what they can of their lives (Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). This becomes problematic for sole-mothers in particular, who are still largely responsible for the majority of the unpaid domestic and caring work, whilst being increasingly expected to participate in the labour market. Many mothers spoke about what they felt were unrealistic work expectations and the challenges of juggling work around their children’s needs.

*I have a JSA, they are super annoying because when I was made redundant I went in there I had a plan for what I was going to do. I am studying aged care, I am studying for a career change, I am studying to work in an industry where older people are accepted and where I can work around my daughter.* (Cheryl)
It meant I had to go and find work and I didn’t have any skills, any qualifications related to part-time or casual work that would fit in around Ziah so I was really at the bottom of the pile to find a job. I took a job with a furniture shop and I wasn’t a lot better off and it was minimum wages and it was whenever it suited them. There was no reliability. It really put us in a worse situation. (Chantelle)

This disconnect between what welfare-to-work policy and the labour market demand and what sole-mothers feel they are able to achieve around their caring responsibilities suggests that the historic shifts around family, gender and work have not been accompanied by the necessary structural changes to child-care and welfare: what Esping-Anderson (2009) has coined the ‘Incomplete Revolution’. This also highlights the social dimensions of time for the linked lives of families that are discussed in the following section.

9.2 Social Time

The interdependent nature of the linked lives of families revealed in the previous chapter also highlights the dimension of social time and the synchronisation of changes and events within the family unit. The temporal proximity and duration of events such as housing and food insecurity for example, and the cumulative nature of multiple events such as poor health, job loss and family relocation can all have implications. Elder (1994, p. 6): found that the timings of social events or transitions for one family member in relation to that of the linked lives of others are also important: for example, as was shown in the previous section, when a mother’s transitions under welfare-to-work coincide with important educational transitions for their children. Understanding how these factors intersect in children’s lives will offer some useful insights for policymakers. In this study three key issues arose with
respect to the social timing of transitions and events: firstly, the importance of the
timing of changes to a family’s financial circumstances as a result of employment
transitions and changes to income support. Secondly, the impacts of moving house
and housing insecurity within the context of schooling and other family changes.
Thirdly, the timing and changes to family structures, roles and relationships and how
this was experienced by children. The impacts on children by the proximity of these
events to policy changes was a key finding of this study.

9.2.1 Timing of changes to financial circumstances

The social timing of changes to a families’ financial situation as result of transitions
in employment and the shift in the welfare-to-work policy presented as a major
concern for the families in this study. For several of the families it was the coinciding
of the policy change, less than a month after Christmas, during the long summer
holidays, and just before the resumption of school for the New Year, with loss of
employment that had the most severe impacts and highlights the significance of the
timing of policy change in determining the outcomes for these families.

I’ve lost a lot–but no notice, not having any notice to prepare especially after
Christmas. If they had given people a bit more notice than they did you could have
budgeted a bit more. I might not have been so extravagant at Christmas time and
things like that. By this time, I would have been able to save some again but this
time it just hasn’t happened because there just pretty much just an overnight thing.
We only got a couple of weeks’ notice. So, when I found out I rang mum in tears. I
said how am I going to cope? (Cheryl)

Like Cheryl, several of the mothers in this study had experienced changes to their
work situation just prior to, or shortly after the changes to the welfare-to-work policy
were implemented, that had a cumulative effect. A number had lost their jobs, had their hours reduced or had to stop work due to ill health just prior to the Christmas break. This is a time when it is often more difficult to secure a new job with businesses closed over the holiday break and family expenses are often higher and finding child-care can be more problematic during school holidays.

Several mothers had committed to increased outgoings for cars, moving house, beginning renovations, or taking on higher rent to secure improved housing, not realising that they would soon be moved on to NSA and the lower income support. The sudden loss of income coinciding with these increased outgoings meant they fell quickly into debt, having limited or no savings in reserve.

*Well it was difficult timing wise for me, I had just bought a car last year, so I am paying that off when I had a job and a pension and didn’t know that the change was coming, and also moved house to a house which costs a little bit more and then lost my job and then put on Newstart so it’s really hard and sometimes we don’t have $20 to get us through the week.* (Donna)

Several had accrued substantial credit card debt at that time and the costs associated with Christmas celebrations and purchasing Christmas gifts for their children became a burden. Several mothers and children spoke about the challenges of school holidays when there is no money to participate in activities with friends or to do the sorts of holiday activities normally enjoyed by families. Many of the mothers felt they had not been given sufficient warning about the changes and what they would mean financially and that they would have made different choices about spending had they known.
I’ll start with when I was kicked off parenting payment single and put onto Newstart. There was no warning, there was no…I had no idea that I was going to drop income; I had even asked at Centrelink twice and was told that my income would be the same. (Jacqui)

…the advice I got from Centrelink was look for a cheaper housing. I’d already signed a lease just that minute and you know, thought I had a job and have a car to pay off and umm. That can’t all be changed as quickly as they changed everything for us. (Marie)

This highlights what Elder (1994, p. 6) describes as ‘the personal implications of temporal intersections between events in an individual’s life and historical changes’, as exemplified by this policy shift. The cumulative effects of unexpected events at a time of the year when financial circumstances are already more challenging for families with limited capacity to absorb financial changes, had implications for the children as well.

For many of the children, the timing of the policy shift and the sudden change to their financial circumstances meant a particularly difficult Christmas and holiday period with ‘going without’ being a feature. Christmas gift giving and celebrations were limited and many spent their days at home and unable to do the things that Australian children would usually enjoy at this time: going to the swimming pool, family holidays or having friends over to play. It also meant they began the new school year having to go without items like school shoes, uniforms and school books and discontinue recreational activities in which they had previously participated.
Over the holidays he would have like to have gone swimming every day but that ended up being once a week or once a fortnight instead of as often as he would like. So…he’s not a happy boy. (Tessa)

…but now since I like need new shoes, mum can’t really do that like, I wait until I really, really need it. I don’t really care but I just got a book I needed a school book, I needed a book for school and I only just got it since mum couldn’t really afford it. (Seamus, 12)

Seamus had become accustomed to going without things that would be considered normal for his peers. Like many of the children in this study, the impacts of the policy came on top of many years of poverty and disadvantage and he had modified his expectations and consumption practices accordingly.

Whilst transitions in and out of employment and other life events are unpredictable, the significance of the timing of events highlights the need for policy makers to consider this when planning the implementation of policy change and how it will impact more on families over holiday periods in particular. Policy that has greater sensitivity to the effects of the timing of changes such as the time of the year or the proximity to other transitions or events for families could potentially reduce the negative impacts for children. The most common experiences of social change for the children in this study came as a result of housing insecurity.

9.2.2 The social impacts of moving house

Moving house and housing insecurity are recognised as the most disruptive life events for children (Kirkman, Keys, Bodzak, & Turner, 2010). The most significant disruption in relation to social time for the families in this study occurred as a result
of housing insecurity. The family home provides security, privacy, control, choice
and a sense of belonging and is therefore ‘linked to social capital concerns, such as
feelings of connection with, or alienation from, community and place’ (Holdsworth,
2011, p. 60). For the majority of families in this study the social, emotional, and
spatial disruption of having to move house was an event many of the children had
experienced on more than one occasion and often with little notice and not by choice.
The impact of these changes varied depending on the ages of the children. For
younger children like Seth, the effects were expressed as sadness around the loss of
familiar environments, personal possessions and shared memories and experiences.

_I would have loved to have stayed in Newport, there’s a really good place there that
sells cinnamon bagels that are really nice...So we moved here where it is a bit quiet
because we are at the back of a main road but it’s not very, its quiet here but the
neighbours don’t make it easier for us because sometimes we hear music which is
very loud._ (Seth, 11)

These sudden moves became more problematic for children once they were in
secondary schooling, as in many cases moving house also meant changing schools
and the social implications became more acute. Sudden moves in the middle of a
school year also disrupted the continuity of their studies as schools offered different
subjects or they were at different stages of the curriculum to their previous school. It
disrupted established peer relationships resulting in some children experiencing
isolation, exclusion and anxiety that also impacted on their schooling. The changes
often resulted in altered living conditions with some moving to more cramped
quarters that tested family relationships and limited privacy. Having to move
suddenly as a result of eviction or family breakdown had significantly greater impact
than planned moves and created ongoing anxiety for children about their future
housing security. Moving house for younger children was not as problematic in terms
of schooling but moves to new and unknown neighbourhoods meant some children
felt less safe, more isolated, had changed caring arrangements, missed out on
recreational activities, and were more reliant on their mothers or others for transport.
Many of the children in this study spoke about the experience of moving and feeling
dissatisfied with their homes and living arrangements.

*When we first moved here I really hated it. We had lived in our old house since I was
a baby. It felt like it wasn’t like really our home. Mum has tried to make it like…
more like ours, with all our things, but it’s not the same. It’s hard to get used to.*
(Karalee, 14)

*Alright now I will do [draw] my house here, got to make it look very crude, because it
is very crude.* (Carlos, 10)

*We call it the ‘cabin’ but it is pretty much a shed…And meanwhile we were having
issues with money, we were all kind of stressed out and it was a two room house and
it was hard living together. And we couldn’t afford to go to town every day.* (Sonia,
16)

Several families had decided to move as a result of financial hardship, to live in
‘better’ areas, or to find employment. Two of the families had moved as a result of
family breakdown, having to leave their long term family home and move to insecure
rental housing at the same time as the changes to their family structure and their
financial circumstances. Andrea and Miranda had moved because of a falling out
between Miranda and her father and the perceived need to put distance between them.
Others moved in order to be closer to family support networks that could then help
with child-care, transport and even meals and financial support. Being evicted for failure to pay the rent was not uncommon and housing insecurity and the prospect of being homeless was something that a number of the mothers and children said they worried about often.

*I know there are people out living in tents in the bush. I was afraid that might happen, I guess who knows. I am glad we moved before, it happened, I was really not happy in that other house so it is nice to have already got here even though it does cost a bit more it is worth it.* (Donna)

*You don’t know if you are going to stay in a rental property or not because one time we fell behind with the rent and they said we had to go, so that’s what we did. We were temporarily homeless so we had to go to Nan’s. And then it happened again. And when you move houses it sort of messes up everything, because you get used to everything and you know where everything is and then while schools going you move house and you lose your homework and that kind of thing and you don’t know where you are going to live. You go to school and come home and it’s like— all this again. It’s annoying.* (Mandy, 14)

*Seamus: Well my brother and I and my mum get stressed a lot.*

*Interviewer: What makes you feel stressed?*

*Seamus: I am worried that mum might lose the house.* (Seamus, 12)

Like Seamus, if children had not experienced homelessness themselves, in some cases they knew of others who had, and the prospect of ending up homeless loomed large for them. A number of the children spoke about their dissatisfaction with their current housing arrangements, their desire to live in ‘nicer’ homes, and also about their experiences of homelessness.
Housing insecurity and having to move house was a significant issue for the children in this study, creating sudden and unplanned disruption, uncertainty and anxiety for many of them, particularly if it occurred at inopportune times during the school year or coincided with other significant social changes in their lives. This in turn created disruption to education, important peer relationships and extra-curricular activities, and resulted in experiences of social exclusion. It highlights the need for policy approaches that create greater certainty for families around housing security and affordability and that triggers interventions or safety-nets before families face eviction and homelessness. For most of the children in this study, housing changes came hand in hand with other social changes to family structure. The need to navigate these changes to their family structure emerged as another significant issue for the children in this study.

9.2.3 Changing family structure

For many of the children in this study the most important social change they had experienced was to their family with changes to their interdependent relationships, roles and family structures. These changes to their family structure added further to the cumulative nature of multiple life events in children’s lives; as such they need to be considered when designing welfare policy that relates to children. Changes to their financial circumstances, housing insecurity, reduced social opportunities and challenging family relationships came hand in hand for many of the children in this study and in many cases provided the context and catalyst for their family’s downward mobility and their reliance on income support.
Consistent with national statistics that find that 64 percent of sole-parent families in Australia result from divorce or separation (ABS, 2012) most of the families in this study had experienced family breakdown with the majority of mothers in this study having been divorced or separated at least once (see Chapter Six for details). Whilst a number of the children had maintained some form of contact with their fathers, as has already been discussed in Chapter Six, this varied greatly in frequency and nature, and several of the children had voluntarily broken ties with their fathers. Very few children spent time with their fathers more than once or twice a year during school holidays. When they did, this often meant negotiating changing roles and expectations within their father’s ‘patchwork’ and reconstituted families (Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) and it was this aspect of social and family change that seemed to present the most challenges, particularly for older children. Kayla spoke about not wanting her father to partner her at her school Debutante Ball and dealing with the repercussions. She also related the difficulties she had in managing the expectations on her to build a relationship with her new baby step-sister at what was a very busy time in her own life.

_I thought like…I actually don’t want my dad to do that dance but if I don’t let my dad do that dance, then like a) all hells going to break loose and I am going to be the worst daughter in the world and b) what will everybody think if mum does the dance?_ 

_But then you know I have work and I have sport and I have school and then when Carly was born, like my dad and his wife said to us, on the first day in hospital when she was born, ‘you want to be making the effort to get to know her, if you want this relationship with her you need to make it work’. It’s like, well, trying to work with them, I understand they have a baby, they are both working, they have their life, but,_
trying to fit 5 minutes in to see her with everything else I’m doing it gets really hard.

(Kayla, 16)

The re-partnering of fathers was a common theme in this study. The re-partnering of mothers was less common but came with its own complexities for children. Sonia and Mandy spoke about the prospect of their mother re-partnering and how they longed for the ideal of having an intact nuclear family as well as what their own experiences had taught them about their own partnering choices in the future.

*Mandy: Mum says she doesn’t want to get a boyfriend until we leave school in case it doesn’t end well. Because some people have had bad step fathers who don’t treat their kids well. She said ‘I don’t want to put you in that situation’.*

When we leave school she might meet someone new, and Sonia will be off at uni hopefully because that’s her best interests. I might stay home and just get a job local and just do a TAFE course because I want to be a policeman. Hopefully, I might meet someone but I don’t want to rely on them because if they do leave then, if I rely on them they could take everything and I’d be...

*Sonia: we are financially more aware of things. And also we know what husband to choose. M: yes, we know exactly who to marry.*

*Interviewer: Tell me about that?*

*Mandy: Well I will make sure my husband looks after me and doesn’t beat me.*

*Interviewer: How are you going to know that?*

*Mandy: Well we know because we have experienced it and have been the children of it. Not that mum intentionally did it and I don’t hate her for it, I love her because she has tried so hard not to let that affect her. But I reckon I wouldn’t want to make my kids live the way we do.* (Sonia, 16 and Mandy, 14)
These comments are very telling in a number of ways. Firstly, the girls feel that it is for their sake that their mother has not sought to re-partner. They also express a distrust of men and although they did not say so, the fact that they explicitly want a ‘husband who…doesn’t beat [them]’ suggests they may have had some experience of one who does. The following section also provides some insights into the complexity of the feelings for children who do not blame their mothers for their circumstances but are resentful of nonetheless.

Only two of the mothers in this study had had other partners since separating from their children’s father. For Evie, whose mother had transitioned through a number of relationships, the most recent ‘boyfriend’, Mick, represented the prospect of improved financial security and someone who might take her and her mother to enjoy things that were usual for families such as going on holidays.

*Evie: When are we going to Queensland mum?*

*Cheryl: next school holidays*

*Evie: We are going on a plane and I don’t want to.*

*Interviewer: Why not?*

*Evie: I don’t know why, I’m really scared of rides and that.*

*Cheryl: Mick is taking us to meet his family.*

*Evie: When he [Mick] comes down again we are going to do some stuff, like going the zoo, doing some roller-skating and netball training and he will come and watch me at netball. (Evie, 9)*

Seth felt his mother’s former boyfriend was bad for her and put pressure on her ability to cope with stress.
Seth: That’s why she drank. She did that while a part of Steve. He stopped, he left her. She was unhappy with him; I think she left him. I don’t know how it was.

Interviewer: Did you like him?

Seth: I thought he was OK. He was nice, which is what matters. (Seth, 11)

The transitions in family structure and relationships can place additional strain on children’s lives although most children in this study seemed resigned to the challenges they faced. For older children it appeared to be more problematic as it disrupted their normal daily routines and placed an added burden on them to navigate a range of complex roles and relationships. Although most of the mothers in this study had not sought new relationships; for those who did the transitions were often complex for the children, further adding to the changes they were required to navigate. The ways in which the financial pressures and stigma attached to being a sole-parent may motivate mothers to re-partner and the implications this has for their children was an issue raised by several mothers. Giselle spoke about this and her concern that some mothers also chose to stay in relationships as a result of the policy changes:

I don’t like the idea of forming a relationship just to feel financially secure. I have got girlfriends who have done that. For maybe two of them it’s been successful and they are happy. The others it didn’t work out and they ended up worse than they started because then you have to split everything. That doesn’t appeal to me. I think even if I was to find a partner I would still be quite independent but that could be just ‘cos I have been on my own for a long time. I like the idea as I get older of knowing I can look after myself solely. It’s lovely if someone comes along, that’s well and great but I hate the idea of ‘I’ve got to find someone otherwise I’ll be living in a tent’.
People are terrified and they are falling into...and that’s another thing that this is doing, because they are struggling so much they are falling into relationships that aren’t good for them or their children, sometimes putting their children in danger because they feel like if they haven’t got that second income they can’t survive. Bad enough to know that there are women in your neighbourhood staying an abusive relationship because they are afraid to leave but there’s more of them staying now because of the financial side is just too much. Where before it was just the emotional cutting of the ties and that sort of thing now you are adding the finance to it as well. It’s another reason to stay and that’s scary. It’s scary to think people are staying in relationships that are unhealthy and are putting themselves and children at risk simply because they’ve talked to people they know or Centrelink or they’ve been down and enquired and the numbers are just not adding up for them.

Giselle’s concerns that women may be staying in difficult or even violent relationships because the financial implications of being on NSA act as a deterrent to them leaving, is a significant issue where further research and policy discussion is needed.

Changes to family and work situations, housing location, and income also led to other social changes in caring arrangements with children often spending less time with their mothers and more time in before and after school care, with neighbours, friends or family members, or sometimes at home alone. Changing care arrangements as a result of mother’s employment is not unusual even for intact families; however, for the children in this study and their mothers it appeared to add uncertainty and stress to their lives particularly if they did not have extended family support as a back-up. The interdependence of familial social relationships and the intersections between the care
of children and mothers’ work were common themes in this study. The availability of reliable and affordable child-care was problematic for many families and was a barrier to mothers working and a factor in how children experienced their mothers being at work. Brenda spoke about this:

Yes, but it doesn’t allow for the fact that childcare is expensive and I know for a fact that a lot of kids just go home by themselves and that, so you’ve got these Primary School age children fending for themselves for 2-3 hours after school, what sort of trouble does that lead too? Kids running the streets and whatever. Because you couldn’t afford childcare as a single parent there’s just no way- it’s too expensive. It’s $86 a day child care. And you’ve got to pay that out before you get your rebate. So working parents struggle to do it- I know that from parents I’ve worked with. A lot of pull their kids out of care because they can’t afford it so, and they sure want parents at home. But as a single parent you don’t have that option. I mean that’s what they don’t get- forcing people on to Newstart when your child is eight- they are still babies at eight. Kids can’t look after themselves at 8 years old. (Brenda)

Many mothers felt uncomfortable about their children being at home alone, even when they were older, but often had no reliable child-care provisions for them while they worked.

Like, I honestly think parents sometimes get to the point where ‘oh, they are old enough now to look after themselves, they will be alright home on their own’. Well no they’re not. Cos’ even though they might be alright you don’t know who they are with. You know. They might not be going to burn the house down but… The risks are different, but they are still there. (Janine)
Many children spent time at home alone when their mothers were at work, particularly if they were sick or on school holidays. Some relied on neighbours and whilst this was not reported as being a negative experience, some children spoke about being a burden or appeared to have only a very slight relationship with their carers. Very few of the children in this study spoke of their child-care experiences in a positive light except when it was with close family or friends.

It has already been mentioned in this chapter that child-care was more of an issue when children were older (in upper primary and secondary school) and before and after-school care was less appealing to children or not available. The cost of child-care was also an issue raised by many mothers.

_There wasn’t any after school care for a long time and then when they introduced it here he absolutely hated it. He was about ten- he was too old and everyone was young. It was always mad trying to come, because it only went to 6.00pm and when you are out of town and trying to get back here by 6.00 it was always a mad crisis to get home. That was really nerve-wracking for me because they charged such an enormous amount if you were late and there was no holiday care, I don’t think there still is in this area so that’s all the things that when you are a single parent that are difficult._ (Evie)

Attending before and after-school care was particularly problematic for boys in the final years of primary school who reported bullying, boredom and stigma. For Seth, however, before school care meant getting a better meal than they would have at home.
Seth: I liked before school care but I didn’t like after school care. Because before school care had better food mainly and it was shorter.

Interviewer: Did you have breakfast there?

Seth: Yeah, I could have breakfast, and the breakfast was nicer than here sometimes. I had like corn flakes and I think one day of the year they actually had pancakes.

They people there are nice and the kids, some of the kids there are nice. Yeah, when she worked she used to take me to the after-school care but there was very bad boy there named Nathaniel, and one of the people used to work there, that was their son so they were afraid to get rid of them, the new people. So I stopped doing it and started walking home and so I walk home if mum has a job or something like that.

But it was too much money and I could just walk home.

Interviewer: So you’d just come home even if mum was at work?

Seth: Yeah, and if she’s not at the gate I just go home. (Seth, 11)

For families like Seth’s living in the outer suburbs of Melbourne, long commutes to and from work meant children were in before and after school care and mothers were often late to collect them due to work, traffic or transport delays. This made the mothers anxious for their children, resulted in additional fees, and on occasion children having to leave care and go home alone. It also created what was expressed as an obligation to staff that had to stay behind if they were late. Several mothers reported some regret at having to leave their children in after-school care but felt they had no choice.

My after school care teacher was pretty good so she normally tries to charge me the minimal amount sometimes I’d be able to get my neighbour to pick him up.

Occasionally another girl I would leave him with if she was here not at work, she started dong fulltime hours, she started working 8.00 to 5.00 as of this year so she
could no longer provide that anymore. It was just pretty much hoping and stressing and hoping I’d make it home by the 6.30 deadline. Occasionally I didn’t, most of the time I did. (Patricia)

I’m not sure, he kinda doesn’t have a choice. It is going to be a bit harsher now. Once I would have worried about...like he’s been bullied a bit at school and I think what if those boys are in after-school care as well. It’s a much more condensed group. Because at school they’re not in his class. It worries me what if they end up going to after school care then. (Susanne)

For many families the challenges of finding secure and affordable care arrangements for children was a barrier to the mothers’ ability to find and maintain employment.

When considered in the context of the life-course and social timing the lack of child-care provision for younger children and appropriate support for older children appears as a mediating factor for how children and their mothers experienced welfare-to-work. When combined with other factors such as housing and food insecurity, stress, limited social support and changes to financial and family circumstances this lack of child-care provision represents a significant barrier for sole-mothers seeking to work and their children’s well-being when they do so. For the children in this study these social changes often occurred concomitantly with other changes and events and suggest the need for greater sensitivity to the timing of social change and its cumulative impacts on children’s lives. This also highlights how the ages of children and the age of their siblings appears to be a further dimension of time that are relevant to this investigation.
9.3 The timing of lives: age and sequence of events

The age of children and the sequence of events emerged as further mediating factors from the data. Basing policy on normative assumptions about these issues, that can vary greatly from family to family, was found to be problematic for the families in this study as the following sections reveal.

9.3.1 Chronological age

The social meanings attached to chronological age present as important to this study as they bring ‘temporal, age-graded perspectives to social roles and events’ (Elder, 1994, p. 6). When social policy adopts these perspectives and determines policy based on them—in the case of welfare-to-work, by altering the mother’s eligibility for a particular type of welfare support based on her youngest child’s age—it warrants particular attention. This study found that the ages of children made a significant difference to how they experienced the impact of the policy and also to how the families adapted to those impacts. The previous section revealed how age was a factor in relation to child-care but there were other areas where a child’s age was also a factor. Although the policy change is triggered once the youngest child in the family turns eight-years-old, perhaps surprisingly, in this study it was older children (from around twelve-years-old) who were often more adversely impacted by the changes. The place in the family and the presence of older siblings was also a significant factor in outcomes, as was the number of children in the family.

As has already been discussed in Chapter Six, for younger children, the indirect impacts of financial disadvantage seemed less of an issue than it was for older children. Although they went without consumer goods and recreational activities and
experienced food insecurity as much as older children, they seemed less conscious of any social implications attached to this and did not speak about stigma or the unfairness attached to their situation as did older children. It also appeared that there was less impact and disruption around schooling for younger children. In some cases, they seemed to be very preoccupied with the price of items as if cost and the household budget was something often discussed. The need to save, strategise, and economise were clearly things even the youngest children in this study were used to thinking about in a way that seemed uncharacteristic for children so young. Seb spoke excitedly about wishing he had an unending shopping voucher, but others expressed a similar yearning to have more money to buy things they wanted.

...it would be so cool if I got a $25 voucher free ... it never got spent and you just had to say you had a $25 voucher and it never got wasted. (Seb, 8)

For older children the impacts of financial disadvantage were more significant. It impacted on educational opportunities, peer group and extracurricular activities. Going without social activities that were common for their peers, such as going to a movie or birthday party, created social exclusion. In some cases, this was self-imposed to avoid the embarrassment of not being able to afford things. Some reported relying on friends to help pay for them to participate, but like Leo, also felt guilty about this.

I’ve got a lot of good friends but I feel like I am getting left out a bit and a lot of them, like most of them, they’ve all got both parents and it’s just like they’ve both got that financial part to take part so they don’t know what it’s like, and especially with these cuts there’s a lot more stress on the household. (Leo, 15)
For a number of the older children in this study, the policy changes occurred as they were entering their final years of secondary school and preparing for higher and tertiary education. Many of the mothers and the children felt that the stress it had created had an impact on their academic outcomes and as a result on their future employment prospects. Several children spoke about how important having their mothers at home after school to support them in their studies was to them and that this support was reduced when their mothers went to work. For many there was some tension between the financial benefits of their mother’s working and their desire for this support.

*Mandy: and if she was at jobs all the time then she wouldn’t be our parent*

*Sonia: she wouldn’t be there to help us*

*Interviewer: Some people might say that you guys are old enough now not to need your mum here all the time anyway. You are old enough to look after yourselves?*

*Sonia: No I don’t think we are.*

*Mandy: We need our mother, or a father. ‘Cos we need love. We are going through high school. We come home from school with assignments on your hands and they can help you do them and they can...I don’t know.*

*Sonia: Help you cope, comfort, love, a wise role model to help you through stuff. And she’s lived through teenage years so she knows more than we do.*

*Interviewer: Couldn’t she do those things and work?*

*Mandy: yes, but what if the only job she can find is 6 o’clock until 10 o’clock?*

(Mandy, 14 and Sonia, 16)

In another aspect of chronological age, the changes to a family’s financial circumstances as a result of the policy shift were also seen to place limits on older
children’s choices around education and training both in the present, by limiting the choice of subjects they could afford to study, and by limiting future study options. This had more effect on students who were weaker in academic studies and wanted to undertake skills based vocational educational training (VET) and trade-based courses that were often costlier than traditional academically based subjects. This appears to be a particularly perverse aspect of the policy’s impacts as it reduces the support and educational opportunities afforded to the young people in disadvantaged families who are arguably at greatest risk of unemployment in the future. Jack and his mum spoke about this:

*Janine: Jack is more hands on: a ‘let’s try this mum’ learner.*

*Jack’s choices this year, he was struggling in one particular subject. They said ‘ok, because it is an academic subject we need to think about reducing the academic load and increasing the hands on load for him so he can be successful’. They offered him— he’s currently doing a Year 11 auto class.*

*Jack: auto class and an engineering class and an engineering class.*

*Janine: They offered him a third Year 11 subject in woodwork and I had to knock it back because of the cost factor. Just because I just couldn’t afford it. The other killer is he is nearly 16 so EMA\(^{12}\) doesn’t pay; I’m not entitled to EMA anymore. So, choices, not being able to let him do a subject at school that I know he would do really well in…and that affects his whole future - that’s huge. A third VET subject would have given him way more options for next year.*

*Jack: It would have given me three certificates- three TAFE certificates.*

*Janine: … so it would have opened up a whole line of potential employment in the future that he is just not going to have now.* (Janine and Jack, 15)

\(^{12}\)Educational Maintenance Allowance was previously paid to income support recipients living in Victoria to assist with educational expenses.
This apparent intersection between welfare, education and training policies suggests that more work needs to be done to support the education of already disadvantaged and vulnerable children in sole-parent families. For the older children in this study the research also highlighted the barriers to accessing higher education faced by young people living in regional Australia more generally. The costs and uncertainty of moving away from home to undertake further study was a significant concern for many of the older children and their mothers.

I worry how I am gonna get myself through university... I don’t think I will have a job for a very long time because I have no experience, there’s just a ton of stuff weighing on me money wise because I don’t know where I am going to live, I don’t know how much to spend or if I will have any to spend, or how much Youth Allowance I will be able to get. It’s just kind of worries me a little bit. I don’t really know if I want to do it anymore, I’m kind of stuck.

Interviewer: What’s the big issue that’s holding you back? Jodie: Money....

Brenda: I just can’t afford to pay for her uni, I just can’t.

Jodie: I can’t afford to live out of home and pay for uni.

Brenda: She wants to go to W---- [nearby regional city], but it’s so expensive to live away. She would be paying more to live there than I pay here and that doesn’t include utilities.

(Brenda and Jodie, 17)

Many of the young people had taken on work to help support their families and to save for the future but they also recognised that this might also impact on their current schooling and as such their future choices. Several children spoke about the
challenges of juggling work and schooling and how they worried it might impact on their results. More about this is discussed in Chapter Ten.

The ways in which families adapted to their circumstances also appeared to differ depending on the ages of children. Mothers mostly tried to shelter younger children from the impacts of ‘going without’, by going without themselves or concealing from them the things they could not afford.

_There have been times when Charlie has been invited to a birthday party, but we couldn't afford a birthday present, so he didn't go. It's usually a case of me having to "forget" that it was on._ (Donna)

Although younger children were aware of the changes and particularly the stress this put on their mother, they were mostly passive in managing its impacts: they accepted the impacts rather than being in a position to do anything about it. Some children spoke about moderating their own needs and wants in order to take the pressure off their mothers, for example not asking for gifts for Christmas or birthdays.

_Evie: Yes, and like New year I tried help her–the only thing I wanted was when I went to my cousins I got some glow sticks for $2 and I didn't really want anything else and yeah…_

_Interviewer: So you tried to help mum by not wanting to have things is that what you mean?_  
_Evie: Yes, like umm... I didn't have a lot of friends at school or anything so I just went on my hammock and my IPad._ (Evie, 9)

In families with older children, the ways that they found strategies to manage financial adversity as a unit became clear with some children applying for welfare
support themselves, and others taking on paid work. The agency of children in managing the impacts of welfare-to-work on their families is discussed in detail in Chapter Ten.

The place of a child in the family and the age of other siblings were also found to be a factor. Older children helped with caring for younger children, assisted with household chores and contributed to the household budget by taking on paid employment themselves; however, this came with some sacrificing of time spent on study, sports and with friends and family. This also made it possible for mothers to work and in some cases to enjoy a social life.

*I’ve been doing it for just over a year now, but like if it gets us by and helps out like if we have that money to do that then we can use it later on to do something else, we just have that extra bit for something else later on. Like you know, it’s nice to be able to say, mum, we will take you to a movie, we will pay to go and see a movie just so we can go with the three of us, like that’s so good to do that.* (Kayla, 16)

As has already been discussed in this chapter, the impact of any change depends on where people are in their lives when change occurs. When events are ill-timed they can be particularly costly across an individual life-course (Elder, 1994, p. 6). For the young people in this study, age and timing emerge as important factors in how they experience the changes in their lives resulting from the policy shift and their mothers’ welfare-to-work transitions. It also effects how those changes might impact across their lives. Whilst normative assumptions about age would suggest a diminishing of the impacts of the policy as children get older, the findings from this study suggest that in some aspects the impacts are greater and with potentially more lasting effects.
for the older children. If their opportunities and choices in education are limited as they move into the later years of their secondary schooling and they are forced to take on work to support their families that is detrimental to their education and social inclusion, the implications will potentially be felt across their life-course.

9.3.2 Sequences and orderings of events

A further temporal feature of the life-course refers to the sequences of events and transitions: for example, the order in which life events such as marriage, child-birth, leaving home, or a first job takes place. When there is deviation from normative orderings, such as divorce and remarriage, or child-bearing before partnering, this often creates greater risk or disruption to trajectories across the life-course. Having children before marriage or partnering, re-partnering after child-birth, having children with more than one partner, and divorce are now all common non-standard life-course pathways that are represented in this study. These challenge the structures of modern industrial societies including the welfare state that is designed around the norm of a nuclear family with a male-breadwinner that traditionally allowed women to remain as primary carer of the children whilst supported by their wage-earning partner (Bowman et al., 2013). Sole-parents disrupt the normative model of passage from full-time primary carer to part-time or casual worker and carer that is common for coupled mothers in Australia (HILDA, 2013). The absence of a partner to provide parenting support and share the load of domestic care and labour adds further to this disruption. Many of the mothers who were working in this study spoke about the challenges of managing the multiple roles of waged-worker, mother and father. They felt that the welfare-to-work policy did not account for this burden.
I’m doing three jobs. I call it the quadruple shift. I’m being mum, I’m being dad, I’m being a worker and now I’m being a lobbyist trying to change these changes, and you know see ... you can just sort of have a walk down my house and see how messy it is and it just shows how much it is that I am not coping. I’ve had my Thursdays off for quite a while, for the last 7 years, it started on three days a week and then it went to four days a week and those days off, I call them my ‘dad days’ ‘cos there the days that I do maintenance around the house, and paint, I painted this house as well.

(Kathy)

When you don’t have a partner as well, you haven’t got the emotional support. While you’re cooking dinner they are helping with homework, you know. As a single mum you are doing the whole lot- you are doing everything. You’re mum, you’re dad, you’re a taxi, a teacher, a gardener, you’re a vet sometimes, an accountant when you have to deal with Centrelink and paperwork. It’s overwhelming. Sometimes too, even though they have help out there you don’t know where to ask or who to ask or.... (She breaks down crying) you feel humiliated. Sorry, I sometimes just can’t cope with it all and I am lonely. And something too, even I look down on myself sometimes. I just have to get in that positive frame of mind and stay there. (Susanne)

A number of the mothers were also undertaking further study or retraining.

Traditionally, study and training are undertaken and completed prior to commencing employment and to having a family. The need for adults to continue studying, retraining, and upgrading qualifications in order to secure employment are features of the ‘reflexive biography’ now required of individuals and an integral part of welfare-to-work policy. This places additional strain on sole-parent families who often only have one adult to share the caring responsibilities. For some of the mothers in this
study, it was only through the support of others such as grandparents that they were able to undertake study.

Children in sole-parent families are also more likely to have non-standard life-course pathways themselves. Early school leaving, early partnering and parenting, early engagement with the welfare state are all more common in children from sole-parent families (Wise, 2003). A number of the families in this study had older children who had left home early, and two had daughters who already had children of their own as young sole-mothers. For some families these early transitions out of home were unsuccessful with young people who were unable to find employment, or manage financially, becoming part of a growing phenomenon of ‘boomerang children’ (Wister, Mitchell, & Gee, 1997) moving back home and relying on their mothers. In more than one family in this study older children had moved back home along with their boyfriends, placing further strain on the families’ resources. Children had also taken on roles that were unusual for their age: dealing with complex adult responsibilities and concerns such as managing household budgets and negotiating the often challenging relationships between their parents.

The children in this study were also considering taking non-standard pathways to higher education that arguably makes for more complex, costly, and risky trajectories.

*I guess it does matter what money you’ve got, but, you know you can still work hard and choose to take a different way to get there. It might take you a little bit longer than somebody else. Like if I want to go to uni straight after doing year 12 it would cost so much money, whereas for me, it will be easier for me to do school, do TAFE for a year and still be working and do a bridging course between TAFE and uni so*
already have a head start into my uni stuff that I want to do. It might take me an extra year or so than someone else doing the same course but I would get there in the end. Just have to go a different way. (Kayla, 16)

Kayla was an example of how the young people in this study appeared to be reflexively planning their futures despite the financial barriers they faced. But it was also clear that as Beck (1992, p. 35) argues, poverty seems to attract an abundance of risks and for young people like Kayla, these risks will be likely to further cement her disadvantage. When financial circumstances leave individuals with little choice other than to take pathways that are more precarious, the ways in which institutions such as the welfare state actively contribute to the reinforcing of structural barriers becomes evident. This is an example of what Beck (1992, pp. 131-132) describes as the institution-dependent control structure of individual situations. As the young people in this study seek to manage and construct their biographies, it becomes apparent that they too are sharing the burden in a society in which the responsibility for managing social risk is largely individualised—even for children (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p. 39).

9.4 Summary

This chapter has shown how the temporal context of transitions and events can act to mediate outcomes for children and the need for research and policy to be sensitive to issues of transitions and time. Broader macroscopic influences such as welfare policy and economic and labour market conditions provide the context in which lives are lived and intersect with the individual micro influences within the interdependent lives of families. Ill-timed and coinciding events can have greater effect on the
present lives and also the future life-course of individuals. Changing family structures, financial and living arrangements, caring needs and relationships can collide with shifts in policy, employment and education in ways that can be very problematic for children in sole-parent families. The findings show that whilst the universal policy approach, exemplified by welfare-to-work in Australia, draws on chronological age-graded perspectives of childhood to determine the eligibility of parents for income support (eight to seventeen-years-old), the lived experiences and needs of children vary greatly. The impacts of policy have differing effects within such a broad age range; the needs of children at eight-years-old are very different from those of adolescents. By triggering policy for adults based on normative assumptions about a child’s age, policy fails to account for the particular needs of children at different times in their lives. This is of particular concern for older children when it impacts on their education. The findings reveal the ways in which older children are feeling the need to pursue individualised and reflexive biographies and this supports Redmond’s (2010, p. 479) assertion that by putting children’s educational pathways at risk, welfare-to-work policy stands as a contradiction to traditional normative understandings of the state’s role in resourcing and protecting children. The sequencing of life events such as marriage and child-bearing outside of institutional norms can also be problematic, particularly when social policy is still largely modelled around those norms.

This section began by pointing to the possible existence of a ‘cohort effect’ for this group that has been impacted by the social, welfare and labour market changes characteristic of the historical context of their lives. These changes have personal implications for families in the short term and arguably across their life-course. In
order to fully understand how the notion of a ‘cohort effect’ might apply to this group, further longitudinal life-course research would be most beneficial. Elder (1994) argues that as well as impacting on the nature and severity of change, the personal implications also depend on what the individual brings to the change process; in other words, through their own human agency. The following chapter draws primarily on the data collected from the children in this study to examine their agency and how it is employed in different ways to shape their lives and the lives of others in response to their families’ circumstances.
10. Children’s Agency

The previous chapter revealed the importance of the timing of events and transitions in lives and it also hinted at the ways in which the individualised burden of social risk associated with parents’ life choices is being carried by children in areas such as education and work. In this chapter the ways children’s agency is shaped by the implications of the welfare-to-work policy, how they share the risks and responsibility faced by their families and actively support their mothers’ choices around work and welfare are revealed. In seeking to develop a more nuanced understanding of poor children’s roles as agents in shaping their own and their families lives, Lister’s (2004) model of ‘four forms of agency’ (see Figure 4.1 in Chapter Four): getting by; getting out; getting back at; and getting organised, provides a useful tool to analyse the data from this study (Lister, 2004: 124-57).

Redmond (2010) argues that when policy reform, such as welfare-to-work, leaves children with little choice but to become active agents in adult worlds of work and care, it contradicts normative notions of children as ‘priceless’ and protected recipients of public investment intended to enhance their productivity as adults. It therefore becomes important to understand how children’s agency and adaptations are shaped by their lived experiences and socialisation particularly by their mother, but also and how through their own agency they are supporting the welfare-to-work agenda. It is also important to understand how they may be inadvertently contributing to the creation of structural constraints in their own future. As Redmond (2010, p. 479) further contends:
The more parents are constrained by welfare systems to take up paid work that is not compatible with their caring responsibilities, the more likely they are to compromise the state’s expectations of them as parents and to constrain their children to compromise their ‘pricelessness’.

10.1 Getting by

*Getting by* sits within the personal/everyday quadrant of Lister’s model and deals with the things individuals do to cope, keep going and get by. These can often be taken for granted or not seen as expressions of agency (Lister, 2004: 130). They include reflexive agency, involving rational choice and reflexive monitoring, but also non-reflexive modes that are often non-deliberative or impulsive responses to powerlessness (Hoggett, 2001: 53).

In this study *getting by* was the most common expression of agency by children as they did what they could to manage the day-to-day experiences of their lives. This supports other studies (Attree, 2006; Skattebol et al., 2012) where children were found to employ a range of strategies to manage their family’s economic adversity including saving or contributing their own money, going without food, clothes, and social activities and seeking support outside of the home. They often *got by* through going without things that would be considered normal for children their age like sporting and recreational activities, but also more basic needs like food and health care. Many of the children spoke about ‘not really needing’ things, suggesting they were actively moderating their own needs and adapting preferences around what their families could afford.
Like my birthdays in a week and I don’t really need anything. There’s no point in stretching the budget for a stupid little birthday present when you can get little chocolates for ten bucks or so…some of them just want too much and you just sort of see that it is not very necessary. You see the difference between what you need and what you want. …sometimes it really hurts when you can’t have things that you want (Karalee, 13).

They reported adapting or moderating their preferences so as not to place more stress on their mothers, and also as a strategy to avoid the disappointment of not being able to have things they wanted. They also exercised their agency by withdrawing from participation or excluding themselves from social situations that were likely to cost money or cause them embarrassment because of their financial circumstances.

Children were also agents on the home front in managing household budgets: strategising, going without or delaying the purchase of items such as school shoes to save money. They were also active in reducing household expenditure on items such as heating and electricity.

...extreme budgeting can be tough because if you are under budget by the end of the week we’ll have about $4 left and sometimes we can’t buy milk...So you just have to wait until the pay comes in again and then it’s alright for a couple of days and then it just cycles over and by the end of the week... without a job it just doesn’t last for the whole week. If we are careful we can make it last pretty well. But sometimes it just doesn’t work. Like the extreme budgeting would be like trying to spend as little as possible. Like the power- trying to cut that out and the water and the gas and the phones and the internet it’s all of that. (Mandy, 14)
Some children were active in seeking financial support from others and grandparents in particular were often called upon to help out with financial and practical support. Children also garnered support from friends—borrowing money, visiting them when they knew there was no food at home or to get away from the conditions of their own homes.

*I don’t really want to ask for money for things, like if my friends are going out or doing something, I say I can’t go, or I’m busy, cos I don’t want to ask for the money to go out.*

*I sort of feel like all the time I am relying on my friends, like if they really want me to come they will offer to pay for me and I feel really bad about that…I don’t want to be taking money from my friends sort of… so I feel like I am always depending on them.*

*Sometimes I go to my friend’s house, like if I know that we don’t have enough food at home* (Eliza, 16).

This intersection between agency and dependency among children and their peers is interesting and suggests that for poor children peer relationships may provide important pathways for expressions of agency outside of their homes. It also hints at how poor children may see they have no choice but to act in ways that lead to dependency on others outside of their families. This may also have implications around the formation of gangs and even criminal activity in disadvantaged neighbourhoods as poor children come together to seek more deviant ways to *get-by* (Warr, 2005). The decision by children to exclude themselves from social activities is also an important issue. Eliza was not the only child who spoke about lying to friends to avoid having to ask for money or to avoid embarrassment.
Children’s agency was also found to be active when families moved house. Children usually had no choice but to accept and adapt to new neighbourhoods and fit in at new schools. Several families had moved house due to financial pressures since their mothers had been moved on to Newstart Allowance (NSA). These moves were often quite sudden and there was little or no time for planning or preparation in these transitions. This also meant moving away from family support or friends and the need to build new networks, that was not always successful. They also adapted to changing child-care situations if their mother was working: for some this meant staying home alone when they were unwell, taking greater responsibility for self-management and care or spending time with new carers who were often not well known to them. Seth’s mum worked in the city and was frequently delayed coming home since they had moved to the outer suburbs. He often had to go home alone if his mother was late from work and his comments here hint at his ability adapt or get by as the circumstances required.

Yeah, when she worked she used to take me to the after-school care but there was a very bad boy there named Nathaniel... So I stopped doing it and started walking home ... if she’s not at the gate I just go home...I’d go here but sometimes the door was locked so I would jump over the gate there and go through the back door, the doggy door was small enough for me... or the door is unlocked so I can just open the door, but that is a bit dangerous so we don’t like doing that. I didn’t like it but I had Toby [the dog] to keep me company. (Seth, 11)

Some of the older children were in paid employment helping their families’ to get by; contributing to the costs of items such as food, housing and fuel. Whilst they spoke about the benefits of work in some cases they also reported that it placed considerable
stress on them as they struggled to manage the demands of their schooling and shifts that in some cases went into the early hours of the morning. Kayla often worked until 1.30 am at her job at a fast food restaurant and spoke about what she had given up and the stress she felt. Her fifteen-year-old brother, Jack, also worked for the same employer. But their work hours also meant that their mother, Janine, had to pick them up after they finished work at 1.30 am and then started her own split shift in the morning at 6.00am. Kayla and Jack contributed to the cost of fuel, car repayments and mortgage payments on a regular basis. As Kayla explains, this also had impacts on other areas of her life.

It’s so hard, oh my gosh. I cut back on sport this year, I went from playing sport everyday but Sunday to three days a week, and it killed me. I am like ‘what am I doing?’ And my friends, I don’t really have a social life. I’m either at work or netball, netball is kind of my thing but none of my school friends are there (Kayla, 16).

Children’s financial contributions to supporting their families and the impacts that it has on other areas of their lives, especially education and peer relationships, emerges as a key finding from this study. It supports other research (Fattore, 2005) finding that although work can be beneficial for children and their families, poor children tend to find work that is less rewarding and less well paid than children from more affluent families and they are often less able to regulate their hours. In most cases the children in this study had no choice but to become ‘active’ in the adult worlds of work, self-care and the care of others. As Redmond (2010, p. 479) contends, by-way of their ‘usefulness’ and agency children who support their families through domestic
work, emotional support, and paid employment become key agents in the welfare-to-work process.

When children’s agency is prompted by necessity rather than choice it suggests non-reflexive (Hoggett, 2001) forms of acceptance and adaptation that are common but perhaps overlooked forms of agency. The agency employed by children to get by as a result of their families’ circumstances was in many cases about them accepting without question situations that would not be considered ideal for children or going without things that would be considered normal for children their age. In this way the impacts of welfare-to-work reforms can be obscured or normalised.

*It doesn’t impact me that much because mum is…she believes that education is important so like if there is something we really need we will get that and we will eat like rice dishes and stuff for a week. She rather[sic] us to have what we need. We can live off rice, it may not be as tasty or special but… it’s good* (Eliza, 16).

Eliza’s notion that getting by on cheap staples like rice and potatoes in order to afford schooling is an acceptable sacrifice to make hints at the extent to which children become agents in normalising their experience of poverty. This may also act to create a *habitus* or *milieu* (Bourdieu, 1984), or as Lash (1994) describes, predispositions or ‘aesthetic reflexivity’, in which living in poverty is the norm for children and becomes a form of self-socialisation (Heinz, 2002, p. 42) that shapes their agency.

In some cases, children’s choices about which things to go without and which were more important seemed to reflect socialised values or preferences (Elder, 1974: 13). The expression ‘mum likes us to…’ or ‘mum thinks that x is more important’ was not uncommon. This included giving up or prioritising particular activities and in more
than one family’s case limiting food choices in favour of other priorities. Although they may have had little choice but to comply with their mother’s wishes, none of the children said that they disagreed with their mother’s priorities. Education in particular was given high value and the children in this study were actively going without many things that would be considered normal for their peers including proper meals in order to afford their education. Schools can also play a role in socialising children to act in particular ways. Kayla spoke about feeling pressured by her school to find employment.

‘Cos school pressures you into it. They’re like, ‘have you got a resume, have you gone for a job before, have you done this, have you done that? When are you going to do this, you need to aim for that!’ I’m going ‘what?!’ I’m 14! I don’t need to do that yet! It’s crazy. Hit year 10 and they are like, ‘gotta get a job’ and I’m like, ‘no I don’t!’ (Kayla, 16).

In Kayla’s case her school was encouraging students to find employment and as such normalising the activation of young people into the workforce. Kayla lives in a regional city where youth unemployment is very high and as such the focus on job seeking and work experience seems, on the surface, to make sense. However, the value of this reflexive agency and the financial benefits that flow from it may be of less value as she gets older and if it is detrimental to her education in the present it may impact significantly on her future options. It indicates a problematic policy position that in promoting the ‘useful’ child ahead of the ‘priceless’ one, may lead to more unequal outcomes for disadvantaged children like Kayla in the longer term (Redmond, 2010, p. 479). The agency of children in this study in helping their families in ‘getting by’ from day-to-day came at some cost to their well-being in the
present, creating stress and anxiety and not surprisingly in some cases, it led to other expressions of agency whereby they sought to ‘get-back’ at those whom they held to blame for their circumstances.

10.2 Getting (back) at

Lister (2004: 140-1) identifies getting (back) at as forms of resistance that could include expressions of anger, despair or forms of destructive agency against themselves, their families, or wider society. Several of the mothers in this study were able to enact forms of resistance and getting back. For Eleanor it was by way of non-compliance with Centrelink and effectively using the system to her advantage and in Kathy’s case a more public protest through the media. Similarly, for children getting back can be a response to their sense of powerlessness or a challenge to authority, although the avenues for them to express this type of agency are more likely to be limited to school and family settings. Studies have found children play active roles in managing the complex reconstituted family structures that result from family breakdown (Pryor & Trinder, 2004). For many of the children in this study their family was the site of expressions of resistance or anger— in particular towards their fathers’ who did not provide the financial support the children felt entitled to.

Matilda’s decision to break ties with her father was one example.

Well, it started off as fight and then he just made it into this big thing. He has a wife and his wife has an original daughter–she’s fourteen. And then they had two other kids a girl and a boy... He tried to stop me doing dancing— he was never really into that and then they just have arguments with me and they just call me out of the blue...

And then he informed me that the girls were doing dancing. I went ‘it was alright for
Matilda used her agency to get back at her father by severing their relationship. This action gave her some power but came with consequences as she and her mother then felt the need to move house so her father could no longer make contact with them. As well as the loss of the relationship with her father, this move had in turn created other problems for Matilda around schooling and access to transport as she felt less safe walking to-and-from school in her new neighbourhood and had also experienced bullying at school.

In a different expression of getting back at, Leo had been caught smoking marijuana at school. When asked why he thought he did it he explained:

Well I feel like my mum’s...well it’s not my mum’s fault, it was my choice but I feel like my mum wasn’t there because of ... [work]. Like she’s trying to afford us and it’s just that I wanted relief and there was all this talk about it and it sort of came about (Leo, 15).

Whilst Leo did not blame his mum, he seems to suggest that his actions were a response to his family’s circumstances. For Matilda and Leo, getting back came at a cost and in Leo’s case his actions could be considered to be destructive agency against himself. Hoggett (2001:38) argues that as such, when imagining models of agency, we need to confront the subject’s refusal of agency or the assertion of forms of agency which are destructive towards self and other, and that it is both possible and necessary to explore such ‘negative capacities’.
Several of the children in the study had had a range of social and behavioural problems at school and many expressed varying degrees of anger and frustration with their families’ circumstances in the interviews.

Evelyn spoke about her son Patrick in this regard and the issues he was having at school:

> He says he hates this house, he hates the car, it’s a real issue for him not having much money. He really...he’s become very negative; I suppose that’s a teenage thing I suppose... Being expelled, he’s on the verge of being expelled from school, he’s very unhappy. (Evelyn)

Some older children were aware of the stigma attached to their poverty and family circumstances that had led to incidents of bullying and conflict at school.

> It feels like society hates us, wants us not to exist, I feel like we’ve been chucked on the rubbish heap and everyone’s OK with that (Eliza, 16).

> I used to get picked on for having the same clothes, I had my favourites that I would wear all the time, whereas they had lots of things to wear all the time. I remember being bullied over it actually. I remember in year 7 when I was bullied really bad, I changed schools after Year 7 because of bullying. Now I have just learnt to deal with it. (Karalee, 16)

> Yeah, I cried, but it was mostly because of the teacher. She went ‘I’ve just taken you off the list’ as she walked past. She was a cow! I went, oh, thanks for upsetting me. (Jodie, 17)

The stigma attached to welfare and poverty was similarly expressed by many of the children and gives a sense of the potential damage to their self-esteem and identity
The significance of shame and humiliation and ‘narratives of personal failure’ in maintaining social inequality is well understood (Beck, 2000: 167; Goffman, 1968) and was a pervasive theme of this study. The ways in which poverty and the stigma attached to welfare can lead to future acts of resistance that are potentially damaging for children is an area where further study would be valuable. Despite their circumstances many children also spoke positively about their future plans to ‘get out’ of their current situations.

10.3 Getting out

Lister (2004, pp. 144-6) regards getting out as encompassing a range of ‘officially sanctioned responses to poverty’ such as education and employment. For children, getting out of their situations is rarely possible in the short term but many in this study were strategic and aspirational about how they might get out in the future. Several older children were working and saw their current employment as advantageous to their future work prospects. They also spoke of working in order to save money so as to go away to university or to pay for driving lessons or their driver’s licence that would improve their mobility and employment prospects. This was especially important for those living in rural, regional and outer suburban locations where there was little or no public transport. A recent study from the Brotherhood of St. Laurence (BSL, 2016) found that sixty-one percent of unemployed young people did not have a driver’s licence with almost a quarter citing transport as a key reason for being unable to find a job. The potential cost of living away from home loomed as a barrier to higher education options for those living in rural and regional areas in particular and some had already begun to plan how they could manage that.
I think… [being poor] gives me less choices than what other people have because I can’t afford to go to university like that’s another thing I’ll be saving up for and it’s like in my mind just thinking that how am I going to afford it... If I apply for a job at IGA or something, it’s just I find it very frustrating with all the school hours I’ve got to do. (Leo, 15)

The interplay between social and cultural structures, future aspirations and the capacity individuals have to exercise agency was a common theme in this study. When asked about her future study hopes, Eliza explained how her lack of confidence in social situations and limited social connections and experiences might be an impediment to her succeeding in her desired career as a graphic artist.

Your ability to sell yourself, to promote your work I guess…I’m confident in my artistic ability but I’m not so sure about talking to people who have more authority that me…it’s a bit intimidating. (Eliza, 16)

For a young person to be daunted by the prospect of a job interview is not surprising but for someone like Eliza, who had experienced life-long social exclusion and poverty and as a result had a very limited social network, setting her sights on tertiary study seemed to her to be very ambitious. She spoke about the importance of social connections in her chosen field, suggesting she already had a good understanding of the role social capital can play in limiting or opening up career opportunities.

Older children also looked to get out of their financial difficulties by going on Youth Allowance. Some received these payments themselves that gave them a degree of independence and others had it paid to their mothers to help with family expenses.
Jodie: Well I mostly remember when mum had to go off it [Parenting Payment] and she had to get Youth Allowance for both of us and we didn’t get any of it, well we did get some of it, but there was a lot less money to go around.

Interviewer: How did you feel about going on to Youth Allowance?

Jodie: I didn’t mind it because Mum needed the money. I’m on it for myself now.

I don’t like being on Centrelink [Youth Allowance] but at the moment I don’t have choice. I am studying but I just got a job so that will cut it down then. It’s helpful but it’s not quite enough to get me through I’ve noticed. I don’t really know how I think about this. Centrelink has always just been there—there’s been no big change throughout my life. (Jodie, 17)

This early engagement with the welfare state as result of their parent’s circumstances, making it normal and even advantageous for young people to engage with the welfare state from a young age, seems problematic and at odds with policy goals of reducing intergenerational welfare dependence.

Another area in which children were active in strategies to get out was through their participation in social and cultural activities such as sports, church groups and music lessons. These were regarded as being important socially and in some cases also as pathways for future career aspirations that they were active in managing. Studies by Lareau (2003) and Sutton (2008) examining how participation in sport and cultural activities can provide a range of advantages to children in their later lives would suggest they are not wrong. Matilda for example learned dancing and spoke of her hopes of being accepted into a vocational school and Sonia studied music that she planned to continue at university. The decision to prioritise these activities often
meant sacrificing other material things—even food as was revealed in the earlier section by Eliza whose family often ate rice or other cheap staples so they could afford the costs of schooling or transport. Sisters, Sonia and Mandy, both attended a private school despite living with constant food and housing insecurity. Lister (2004: 145) notes, that whilst ‘individuals exercise their agency in negotiating routes out of poverty…the routes themselves are forged by structural and cultural factors that can assist or obstruct the exercise of that agency’. Many children in this study could see their ‘way out’ but were also somewhat limited by both structural and cultural factors. Their desire to ‘get out’ depended to a large degree on their individual aspirations and their family preferences. These, as Redmond (2008: 16) suggests, were adapted to fit within their individual economic circumstances but were very much driven by the agency of the children themselves and their belief that they could have better futures.

For many children in this study the agency of getting out was expressed in terms of anticipated actions and hopes for the future; this included future relationships and even marriage. Whilst none of the children were openly critical of their mothers, some of the girls spoke about having learnt from their experiences and not wanting to end up in the same situation as their mothers or for their own children to experience what they had.

And also we know what husband to choose, yes, we know exactly who to marry. I will make sure my husband looks after me and doesn’t beat me…we know because we have experienced it and have been the children of it. Not that mum intentionally did it and I don’t hate her for it, I love her because she has tried so hard not to let that affect her. But I reckon I wouldn’t want to make my kids live the way we do. I do like to be independent because I don’t like to rely on people…because what if it all turns
the table and turns you upside down and then you are lost and you might end up being a sole parent like mum did. It wouldn’t be intentional for anybody but it just happens. And I don’t want that to happen to me in the future or anyone really (Mandy, 14).

These comments suggest a socialised and gendered trope in which sole-mothers largely carry the responsibility for choosing the ‘right’ partner and the burden of the consequences if they do not. Although Mandy is careful to say she does not blame her mother for their situation, she clearly sees that it is the role of the women (mother) to protect herself and her children. This reflects a normative social and policy discourse that often ‘blames’ sole-mothers for their circumstances (Dunstan, 2017).

Several children spoke of imagined futures for themselves and their mothers and their hope for a ‘way out’ of the difficult circumstances of their day-to-day lives. Nine-year-old Evie explained details of a childcare centre she had planned where her mother could work and she and her friends could play.

I made this kinder thing for a job.

(She showed me detailed drawings and plans for a kindergarten that will employ her mother in the office. It includes details of wages, staff, timetables and fees)

I might just buy a house and turn it into a Kinder and after that I might just turn it into a pet kinder. Before I do that I’m going to be a helper at a… [not clear on recording] and then I’ll have enough money to buy a house and that. (Evie, 9)

Seth also had future plans for getting out.

Well, mum and me always like dreamed of going around Australia in a little caravan RV thing like that … if we sold the house we could actually do it. But we don’t have
enough money yet. When mum’s fixed up the house. I would like it, I like travelling around. Ahh holidays! Well I think it is like buying a better house in a way. This house is not a very good house so maybe we could buy a better house or maybe rent an apartment that’s dog friendly or something like that could just help us a little bit, but the caravan thing is a good thing because I like travelling so that would be nice. And it would be a good experience for me and I would learn on the trip. So everyone would see benefits and my dog Toby he would love going in the outback and just searching around for stuff (Seth, 11).

These imagined futures suggest that forms of agency described as getting out may not necessarily be tied to action in the present. By constructing positive futures for themselves children are using the resources and strategies they have available; as such their aspirations represent a form of creative agency that helps them to cope with, plan and improve their lives. They also demonstrated that they were reflexively creating their own futures and taking responsibility for managing the risks and challenges that lay ahead for themselves and their families. Even imagined pathways for getting out can provide hope for the future for children who have little or no collective power.

10.4 Getting organised

Understanding the ways in which structural and cultural contexts can shape the collective agency of the poor falls into the getting organised quadrant. This was the form of agency where the children in this study were the least active. Lister argues that discourses that stigmatise and ‘other’ groups such as sole-parents can diminish their sense of political agency and capacity for activism (Lister, 2004: 149). For children, who lack social ontology, being regarded largely as ‘future adults’ rather
than as holding rights or power in their own right (Wyness, 2012: 58), political agency is also limited as a consequence of their age. However, there were examples in this study of resistance and families ‘getting organised’ despite the many obstacles they faced. Children may have limited scope for collective agency but many in this study spoke about feeling they had rights that were being ignored. They also expressed narratives that identified collectively with others that shared their circumstances in what they clearly understood as social inequality.

_There’s a guy in my class he still lives at home, and he works about 20 hours a week and he’s on a Youth Allowance- he must be bringing in so much money- and his father’s a doctor. And I’m just like- How do people actually, whatever Centrelink payment he’s on it makes me wonder how he has managed that and how easy it has been for him to do things in life compared to me. Because he drives he’s got all this stuff. I don’t know I just kind of think how unfair some things are with Centrelink. I know with mum getting whatever payment she is getting now it’s hard, and I’m on a payment. It just doesn’t make sense how they work things out to me._ (Jodie, 17)

Leo and Seamus supported their mother in establishing a sole-parent group and appeared on a television current affairs show speaking about the impacts of the policy change in their lives. They also gave up some of their own family’s scarce resources to help others. Seamus spoke with some knowledge of broader policy and social concerns that demonstrated he had a sense of being part of a social group.

_I think the government should just think about what they have done and change it because most of the population are single parents and about 67 percent already do work. …and sometimes the people that are living off soup every single week, my mum will just take $20 off the house loan and just give it to them… Like it’s just really hard_
because she will discuss it and talk about it with the family...people are living in their
cars and living off soup and we are living in a house that is paid for but it does really
put stress on our family as well...knowing that we are the more fortunate ones I
guess. (Seamus, 12)

Several children spoke about their participation in this research as a pathway for
having their collective concerns heard and felt that by speaking to me about their lives
they could make some difference. Mandy and Sonia spoke of wanting to ‘tell the
politicians’:

Mandy: can you please increase it [Newstart] because it would make everybody’s life
so much better. It doesn’t have to be like millions. A little bit...

Sonia: Even a $100 extra like that would be nice.

Mandy: Have you seen how parents react to money worries, have you seen how hard
it can be when you want your mum to be happy but the bank is empty?

Sonia: And also jobs are hard to get. Mandy: and if she was at jobs all the time then
she wouldn’t be our parent. Sonia: She wouldn’t be there to help us.

Mandy: We need our mother, or a father...we need love. We are going through high
school. We come home from school with assignments on your hands and they can
help you do them.

Sonia: Help you cope, comfort, love, a wise role model to help you through stuff.

One of the reasons mum doesn’t get jobs is because of the whole stereotype of the
single-parent.

Mandy: We’ve been knocked back for houses because she’s a sole parent

(Mandy, 14 and Sonia, 16).

The need for further research to provide avenues for children’s voices to be heard
about issues that affect them and to open up pathways for them to exercise their
agency in more public and strategic ways was a key motive for this thesis. It is only by making a space for children’s concerns and experiences to be articulated and heard that those experiences and concerns can be reflected in policy.

10.5 Summary

This chapter has highlighted the ways in which children are reflexive, autonomous and purposive actors across all of Lister’s (2004) four types of agency, but also how their agency can be constrained by structural and cultural circumstances. It was in the day-to-day- getting by that children were most active, managing their own and their families’ everyday needs and often at considerable personal cost. In many cases the impacts of the welfare-to-work policy and their families’ disadvantage resulted in children being ‘activated’ into adult roles as workers, carers, counsellors and managers of household budgets. Whilst these experiences were not necessarily seen as negative, many of the children in this study spoke about feeling stressed and that balancing these things compromised other areas of their lives, particularly schooling and social relationships. The findings suggest that although children are generally regarded in policy as dependent and a cost burden, they are also part of the ‘real’ economy (Zelizer, 1985), contributing to their families’ resources and incurring costs to themselves. It indicates as Redmond (2010) contends, a contradiction in policies that seek to address disadvantage by ‘activating’ parents to paid work but in doing so hastens the ‘activation’ of children, potentially adding to structural barriers in their future. The active participation in work and the future aspirations of many of the children also suggests a weakness in policy justifications that cite the need to activate sole-parents into paid work in order to provide their children with positive role
models of work ethic (Blaxland, 2009). Many of the children in this study already demonstrated strong motivation to work, to better themselves through study and not to be dependent on welfare.

The avenues taken by children for getting (back) at in this study were limited. Many children blamed their financial circumstances on their fathers’ lack of support as much as the policy or their mothers’ situation, and this often became a site of tension for older children in particular. Whilst issues about Child Support were not a focus of this study, children are playing active roles in negotiating the often difficult family relationships and financial arrangements resulting from family breakdown and this is an area where further research would be valuable.

Although many of the children spoke about plans for their future, their ability to get out in the short term was limited. The financial benefits of their efforts to get out through work were often subsumed by their families’ immediate needs. Many of the children recognised education as a pathway to get out but there were barriers for them with lack of economic and social resources placing constraints on current and future plans for education. Geographical location was also a key issue, as for children in rural and regional areas, getting out often also meant moving to the city for more opportunities in education and employment. The findings suggest that welfare models that are sensitive to children’s social, economic and personal resources and how they restrict or support their agency may lead to better policy directions.

Finally, the scope for children in getting organised is limited by their relative lack of collective political power and further research that makes a space for their voices to be heard and shines a light on their agency and contributions but also the costs they
incur in supporting their families will be valuable. A way forward in the design of better policy necessitates a move away from thinking about homogenous ‘problem groups’ such sole-parents, towards a broader conception of families as units of interdependent individuals with diverse, changing and particular needs. Policy that supports the agency and well-being of all family members and removes the stigmatising discourses associated with ‘problem groups’ provides the challenge for policy-makers of the future.
11. Discussion and Policy Recommendations

This closing chapter draws together the theoretical and empirical literature previously reviewed and the findings from the preceding five chapters as it relates to the key themes and the central questions of this thesis. It begins by examining children’s experiences of poverty and social exclusion and how they are connected to the impacts of the welfare-to-work policy and more generally to the influences of ‘individualised institutions’ (Beck, 1992) in their lives. Secondly, it discusses the interdependent relationships of families and others and how these and other factors mitigate the impacts of the policy for sole-mothers and their children. Thirdly, it considers children’s agency and how the policy reform and other individualising processes are leaving children with greater responsibility for managing risk in their lives. Finally, a number of specific policy implications and recommendations are identified and discussed.

Chapter Two of this thesis detailed how welfare-to-work policies as they have developed in Australia, can be regarded as part of a wider government agenda to activate sole-parents into the labour market. The policy is regarded as adopting a ‘worker-first’ rationale in seeking to normalise the work orientations and practices of income support recipients (Brady, 2007; Grahame & Marston, 2012). Sociologists have observed that these types of policy approaches have come concomitant with other social and economic changes in late modernity, such as the detraditionalisation of family and gender relations, deregulation of labour markets, the individualisation of risk and responsibility (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1999). At the same time as the traditional ties and supports of family and community have weakened, there has been
an increased embeddedness and reliance of individuals upon institutions such as education, the labour market, and welfare. This has meant significant changes for women in particular, with the normalising of a gender-neutral worker model and the expectation that women and men should participate in the workforce equally. However, the persistence of the traditional gendered division of labour, particularly around child-rearing, and a lack of affordable quality child-care makes this expectation problematic for women especially for sole-mothers who do not have the support of a male-breadwinner. Welfare dependence is still regarded as a moral hazard for recipients and their children and there has been a shift in the balance between public and private responsibility for groups such as sole-parents. For the sole-parent families in this study this has become particularly problematic, as they seek to juggle the demands of work, welfare and caring for their families. As the findings in this study have shown, the impacts are often experienced most harshly by their children.

11.1 Children’s experiences of poverty and social exclusion
The policy reform in Australia that saw all sole-mothers with children eight-years-old and over moved from PPS to NSA in January 2013, was part of an ongoing process of welfare reform over several decades. Welfare has moved from a social safety net model with no work requirements to an ‘activation’ model where the focus is on prompting recipients into paid employment. Significantly, most recent policy reforms have also come with reductions in the benefits paid to sole-parents with an estimated $6000 per year in accumulated cuts over the past decade (Joseph & Phillips, 2016). The most recent changes saw reductions of as much as $100 per week for some
families, heralding concerns to be expressed by the United Nations in a letter to the Australian Government that the current policy approach:

could entail a violation of several rights included under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural (ICESCR)... such as the rights to social security (article 9 ICESCR), the right to an adequate standard of living (article 11 ICESCR), and the prohibition of non-discrimination in the enjoyment of these rights (article 2 paragraph 2 ICESCR)... It could also entail a violation of additional provisions... such as the prohibition of retrogressive measures (article 2 paragraph 1 ICESCR)... There could also be violations of the Conventions on the Rights of the Child and on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women (UN, 2013).

The findings from this study strongly support those claims with evidence from all families of multiple effects of the policy reforms. Children from all of the families experienced degrees of food insecurity, housing insecurity and homelessness, limitations to their social and recreational activities, a high incidence of poor health and mental health, and disruptions and limits to their educational opportunities and pathways.

In the literature about welfare-to-work and sole-parents the concept of social exclusion features prominently. Social exclusion has been described as the progressive multidimensional rupturing of the social bond at an individual and collective level (Silver, 2007). The linked multiple disadvantages that characterise social exclusion can include interrelated problems such as unemployment or insecure employment, low income and assets, low educational attainment, housing stress and poor health. Entrenched and persistent disadvantage also places children at risk of experiencing disadvantage due to their parent’s circumstances. For the sole-parent
families in this study social exclusion was already a feature of their lives with all of the families experiencing a number of associated disadvantages. It was also evident firstly, that the experiences of social exclusion had become more severe as a result of the policy reform, in particular through the reduction in the benefits, and secondly, that the impacts were being experienced by the children as much as by their mothers.

What also emerged from the study was that when policy seeks to address social exclusion by blaming the victim with rhetoric that implies a moral deficit or social disorder, it can overlook the structural inequalities and barriers that contribute to social exclusion. Many in this study spoke about the stigma attached to being a sole-parent, poor and on welfare. They felt that as a group they had been singled out and that as one child said, ‘society hates us’.

For most mothers in this study it was not an unwillingness to work that stopped them from doing so, as most had long work histories and were actively seeking work. It was their low educational attainment, limited job skills, the lack of secure and financially viable work that allowed for their caring responsibilities, and the lack of affordable and age appropriate child-care that often stood in their way. Many also suffered from poor health and mental health that had made sustaining work difficult and others felt that there was a stigma attached to being a sole-parent that deterred employers from giving them work. Geographical location also emerged as a factor as place based disadvantage around availability of work, education and transport were strong themes for those in the outer suburbs and rural and regional areas. For many of the mothers it was also the changing and complex needs of their children that determined whether they felt they were able to sustain work and for how many hours.
Sensitivity to these concerns appears to be absent in the universal welfare-to-work policy framework that takes a ‘jobs first’ approach and does not allow for the consequences of these individual and socio-structural factors.

When policy attempting to address social exclusion reframes issues of disadvantage and inequality as issues of market and economic activity, or what Levitas (2002, pp. 26-27) describes as the ‘social integration discourse’, it also becomes more problematic for sole-parents. Welfare-to-work policy regards paid work as the solution to issues of disadvantage and inequality. This study found that not only did paid work not address many of the issues of disadvantage, it often did not assist in alleviating poverty either. Frequently the only work the sole-mothers in this study could find was low-paid and very insecure. In many cases when mothers did work, the reduction in time available to spend with their children and take them to social and recreational activities, combined with their low incomes meant their children experienced increased social exclusion. Welfare-to-work policy seems oblivious to issues such as workplace inequality, gender bias, insecure labour markets and low wages. It also undermines the value and legitimacy of unpaid work, volunteer and community work and especially the work of caring for children. The importance of this unpaid work for mothers and their children and its value to society more broadly was spoken about by many in this study as was the lack of recognition afforded to that contribution.

The intergenerational nature of social exclusion was evident in the lives of the children in this study. There were many structural issues that impeded access to education for young people, for example where they lived and the cost of study that
made it necessary for them to take on work that impacted negatively on their schooling. In some cases, their families’ circumstances made it advantageous for them to go on to welfare themselves. The impacts on children were often less linked to a mothers’ current employment or her employment history and more to her cultural capital—educational attainment and a range of other social values and expectations. These factors also influenced how severely the children had been financially impacted by the policy changes. In families where the mothers spoke strongly about the value of education, they did whatever they could to maintain educational and recreational opportunities for their children, but this was connected to whether they were working at the time. Regardless of the mother’s cultural capital or whether or not she was working, children’s lives were most significantly impacted by their family’s financial resources at the time.

Many of the children in this study had restricted access to participation in social and recreational activities as a result of their financial circumstances; being unable to do things that were usual for their peers. In some cases, this exclusion was self-imposed as children worried about the embarrassment of not being able to afford to join in with their friends or the additional financial stress on their mothers. This supports Ridge’s (2006) findings from research with children in similar situations in the United Kingdom, that experiences of social exclusion are often constituted by their inability to share accepted social practices. For the children in this study that included attending birthday parties, movies, shopping, sporting activities and not having access to consumer goods like mobile phones or the internet. Family poverty also restricted the development of social capital that several of the children felt would make transitions into further study and employment more difficult. Studies (Chesters &
Smith, 2015) have found correlations between participation in social and recreational activities in childhood and future educational aspiration and outcomes, suggesting another area in which welfare-to-work may be adversely impacting on children’s futures.

Many of the children in this study also had diagnosed stress related health conditions, depression and anxiety that the mothers attributed to their families’ financial circumstances and indicates a particular area where further study is warranted into the effects of welfare policy reform. Concern for their mothers’ well-being was also seen as contributing to this. The worry of being evicted from their homes and not having money for food each day was a particular and ongoing concern and food insecurity, poor diet and a reliance on cheap staples was common amongst families in this study. The need for society to care for the health and well-being of children, but also for those who care for them, seems an obvious one. As Kittay (1999, p. 199) argues, giving care ‘involves the charge of one who is in many ways helpless without a caretaker’. Policy that impacts so significantly on the health and well-being of mothers and ignores the burden of the ‘double-shift’ (work in paid employment as well as unpaid domestic and caring roles), with the added uncertainty and responsibility that comes with caring for children alone, clearly falls short in this area. The burden of stress and exhaustion was felt by many of the mothers, and their children spoke about this and how it affected them. The strength of the bond between mothers and their children was a powerful theme of this study and was spoken of by many of the children.
11.2 Interdependent lives and mitigating factors

The important role played by the interdependent relationships between family members and others in managing the impacts of welfare-to-work emerged as a key theme in this study. In some instances, these were supportive but in others, such as with fathers, they were less so. Although, as Huinink (2009, pp. 304-305) suggests, ‘communal relationships can be important to maintaining an individual’s capabilities and support individual welfare production’, for the children in this study, some relationships created added challenges.

The bond between mothers and their children was largely found to be very supportive, although children did feel the burden of their mother’s stress especially when there were financial pressures. Children also felt the burden of their mother’s choices about relationships, work and other life changes. When mothers were working children missed the support and care that they were accustomed to their mothers providing when they were not working. This included help with homework, counselling and advice, and practical support like providing transport that allowed them to participate in social and recreational activities, or having meals prepared for them when they came home after school. Children also spoke about missing having their mothers involved in their social or sporting activities when they were working. Many of the children also felt a sense of responsibility to help and support their mothers in practical and emotional ways. Some worked to ease the financial burden on their mothers and to be able to treat them to little luxuries like going out for coffee or a movie. Others moderated their own needs and wants so as not to place additional strain on their mothers. Mothers mostly tried to shield younger children from the impacts of their financial circumstances and often went without themselves to be able
to provide for their children. Many of the mothers were very concerned about their inability to provide the level of support and care for their children they would have liked to. This was a concern that brought many of them to tears in the interviews, highlighting the importance of the mother-child relationship and the significance of the policy impacts. It points to the problematic nature of family policy that is largely silent about care, mother-child relationships and children’s needs in general.

The linked lives of others, grandparents in particular, provided vital support for many families. When families had the support of grandparents this offered something of a buffer to the impacts of the policy reforms, especially for children. Grandparents provided child-care, food, housing, clothes, paid for recreational activities, schooling, and even family holidays, and were a reliable standby in an emergency. They also provided a back-up that allowed mothers to work and study or take career risks knowing that their children would be cared for. This has important implications for policy that are discussed later in this chapter.

The lack of support from fathers was a key finding from this study. Not only were very few fathers contributing financially to the care of their children by way of Child Support payments, but many had little or no regular contact with their children either. None of the fathers in this study shared the responsibility of care for their children in ways that facilitated mothers’ work, study or allowed them to have personal time to themselves. Many fathers had re-partnered and several had children with their new partners. When children spent time with their fathers it was often seen by them as a disruption to their normal routines and lives and time spent with their fathers’ new families was often problematic for children. In some cases, children felt their fathers
now preferred their new families and children over them, particularly financially. This led to the breakdown of relationships for some. These findings suggest that the current arrangements around Child Support and shared custody are not always ideal for children and as Son, Rogers and Smyth (2014) argue, are based on male-breadwinner models that do not adequately reflect current social change. It also points to a gender bias after family breakdown that leaves fathers relatively free to move on with their lives, relationships, and careers, whilst mothers are left with the responsibility to provide full-time care and in many cases full financial support for their children. This needs to be better reflected in policy and is discussed further in this chapter. This study suggests that the social processes in late modernity that have seen the detraditionalisation of family and gender norms, leave sole-mothers and their children more likely to be exposed to greater risk of poverty and social exclusion than is the case for fathers after a marriage breaks down. Children, themselves, had to manage the often challenging relationships between their mothers and fathers and reconstituted and ‘patchwork families’ (Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). This was just one of many areas where children were found to be active agents in managing the circumstances of their lives and the impacts of the policy reform.

11.3 Individualisation, risk and children’s agency
The children in this study were active as reflexive and strategic actors who contributed to many aspects of their families lives. The social processes of individualisation that have opened up more choices for adults around relationships, gender, work and education, were also experienced directly and indirectly by the children in this study. Children often had no choice but to manage and take
responsibility for the risks associated with their families’ circumstances. They dealt with the indirect consequences of their parents’ choices around relationships, work, housing, and consumption, all of which created risks for them. These risks were experienced in the present, such as food insecurity or homelessness, but also created the likelihood of future risks such as unemployment, caused by disruptions to their education or poor health outcomes. They grappled with their own individual life choices around study, work, peers, recreation, consumption, relationships and family. The ways in which their future life course outcomes were firmly embedded within the requirements of institutions such as education, welfare and the labour market was evident in the data. In most of the families in this study it could be argued that children were given little choice but to manage the individualised responsibility for risks, in their own lives and their mothers’ lives, as a result of their own interactions with those institutions: what Beck (1992, pp. 131-132) terms ‘the institution-dependent control structure of individual situations’. Examples of this were children feeling that they needed to take on casual work even when it placed them under stress or impacted on their schooling, going on to welfare support themselves despite feeling negatively about this, and negotiating educational pathways that were often less than ideal. The children in this study were not passive incumbents of their childhoods, but actors who performed socially and financially necessary activities and played important roles in creatively producing their own unique lives (Corsaro 2011, p.9).

Another way in which children were active in helping their families to get by was through their activation into adult worlds of work and welfare. Redmond (2010, p.479) argues that when policy such as welfare-to-work encourages the activation of children in to work or caring situations that are detrimental to their education, social
lives and participation in recreational activities, then it contradicts normative social expectations of children as ‘objects of protection and public investment’. This study found that children were being left with little option but to take on work and other adult roles that were detrimental to their schooling, their social relationships and recreational pursuits in order to help support their families. This also had impacts on their well-being—creating tiredness, stress and anxiety. Arguably, even the need for children to be so concerned with their families’ day to day financial circumstances and the consequences of those, is unusual and places them into adult worlds of responsibility and even risk management. They worried about not having enough money for food, being evicted from their homes, managing household budgets, and the consumption of electricity. They managed their own expectations around things like birthday and Christmas gifts and downplayed the importance of even the most basic things like a balanced meal. In most cases these actions were not by choice but a necessary result of their families’ financial circumstances. Ridge (2007) suggests that when children’s agency is a result of necessity rather than choice, when it is impulsive rather than considered, it can be regarded as non-reflexive and may come at considerable future personal cost. For many of the children in this study this non-reflexive type of agency was part of the day-to-day experience of getting by and any future costs to them were of little consequence. The ways in which families got by was a collective and communal activity where children shared, negotiated and created their social worlds alongside adults (Corsaro 2011, 20-6). It highlights the need for policymakers to place children at the centre of policy that impacts so powerfully on their lives.
Children were found to be actors across Lister’s (2004) four types of agency, although most prolifically in *getting by*. The findings supported previous studies (Skattebol et al. 2012) with children managing the everyday circumstances of their lives, adapting their preferences, moderating their behaviours and expectations. Going without many things that would be normal for children their age was a common theme in this study. Children helped to manage the family budget, especially around food and utilities. They also had to take more responsibility for self-care and the care of younger siblings when their mothers were at work. Many children in this study also spoke hopefully about their futures.

Lister (2004) identifies *getting out* as another form of agency where individuals employ strategies and pathways out of poverty. For the children in this study, pathways out of their situations were mainly based on future plans and imagined aspirations. Many expressed an agency of intention—what they hoped to achieve—as they spoke about their futures and this often included plans to improve their mothers’ lives as well as their own. What emerges from the findings is that whilst children recognised that there were limitations to some of their options around study due to their financial circumstances or where they lived, they generally did not lack aspiration or the desire to work to improve their lives. Their levels of aspiration seemed closely linked to their mother’s educational attainment and girls generally seemed to hold higher levels of ambition around education than their male counterparts. The participation of mothers in paid work at the time of the study was not a significant factor in determining this aspiration. This suggests the need for a more nuanced approach to research that informs policy, allowing for socio-economic
and structural factors when seeking causal links between parental participation in the workforce and outcomes for children.

This study found that children’s outcomes around education and recreational activities in particular, were more closely linked to their families’ current financial circumstances, support from others and to their mothers’ cultural capital, rather than to whether their mother was in paid work at the time. Whilst low educational attainment and limited financial resources often went hand in hand with unemployment for mothers, this study suggests that mothers’ unemployment in and of itself did not restrict outcomes for children and did not impair their aspiration or desire to improve their lives. Children seemed to understand clearly the links between education, work experience and future employment. What they lacked in many cases was the financial and social capital to follow the pathways of their choice. This mismatch between children’s aspiration around education in particular, and their families’ financial means to achieve them, is a strategic point where policy could play an important role to improve outcomes for children. Further longitudinal research linking parental employment and child outcomes that controls for socio-structural factors would provide valuable insights. The role of children’s hopes and future aspirations in driving them to achieve, despite their families’ circumstances, is an important finding from this study. It suggests that rather than seeking to improve children’s lives by reducing the income support paid to their mothers in an effort to coerce them into employment, a better approach may be to provide greater support to the children themselves, to imagine, plan futures goals, and attain better lives for themselves. The frustration many in this study expressed at their circumstances and
the constraints that were placed on their lives had led some to look for ways to get back at (Lister, 2004) those they felt were responsible.

For the children in this study getting back was mostly expressed through bad or disruptive behaviour at home or school. Children have very few legitimate avenues for getting back although several of the children spoke about feeling angry or let down by parents—in particular fathers—and also by the ‘government’. The role played by policy in creating further challenges for children who are already vulnerable, and in contributing to disillusionment and even a desire to get back at society more broadly was another theme to emerge from the findings. The longer term impacts of the stigma expressed by some of the children in this study is also cause for concern. The ways in which welfare-to-work policy contributes to the creation of structural barriers for young people who are already disadvantaged and at risk of social exclusion across their life-course appears perverse when set alongside policy responses to address the growing numbers of young people in Australia who are unable to find employment.

Children’s needs and their right to be supported and resourced in the present is a constant theme in literature about childhood. Unfortunately, children’s voices are largely unheard in policy considerations; even collectively as future adults, children have minimal political voice or power. Despite a number of peak bodies who represent the interests of children challenging the justifications offered for the welfare-to-work policy and the impacts it has on children, there seems to have been very little traction politically. As such, it is not surprising that getting organised (Lister, 2004) was not a type of agency commonly expressed by children in this study.
This study, although drawing on a relatively small sample, produced rich qualitative data from the mothers and their children. Employing a life-course perspective to analyse the data has allowed for the impacts of the macro forces of social and economic change to be observed alongside the micro influences of timing, interdependent lives, socialisation and human agency. The ways that many of the broader processes associated with individualisation, such as institutional changes to the labour market and the welfare state, also impact on children becomes clear. This suggests that theoretical frameworks for research seeking to better understand children’s lives should to be mindful of these influences. The need for research to listen to children’s voices and open up spaces for their experiences and needs to be heard by adult-centric policymakers emerges as a key priority from this study.

11.4 Policy implications

A number of important implications for policy makers emerge from this study. Firstly, the significance of historical time and the prevailing social, economic and labour market conditions in which policy is made is critical. These conditions have very real implications for the availability of secure work, the nature of gender relations and the division of labour, and need to be taken into account when designing policy. If the payment of benefits is tied to employment, then consideration of issues of access to the labour market are paramount.

The timing of policy changes need to be considered in relation to seasonal issues that affect families and the job market. The reforms to welfare-to-work policy that are central to this thesis took effect in the January school holidays just after Christmas and this was very problematic for families. Finding work is more difficult at holiday
time as is accessing childcare when children are not at school. Many in this study also found that their families’ expenses had increased at the time due to Christmas festivities, gift giving and holidays. Cuts to income support payments at this time hit very hard as most had very little in reserve financially to get them by. Providing sufficient information about intended changes in a timely manner to allow families to plan was also an issue. Many felt that they had not been given enough notice or information about the changes to adequately prepare.

Tying policy changes to the ages of children also emerged as problematic: in this case moving sole-mothers from PPS to NSA once their youngest child turned eight-years-old. The assumption that all children’s and families’ needs and capacities are the same based on the chronological age of a child is simplistic to say the least. It also overlooks the changing needs of children for support over time. In this study for example, older children in their final years of secondary schooling spoke about how important having their mothers’ active support was to their success at school. The needs of older children to be able to participate in social and recreational activities meant that the financial impacts of the policy reform were often felt most severely by older children at a time when these things are very important to their social inclusion and future outcomes (Kay et al. 2006; Chesters & Smith, 2015).

The lack of affordable care during holidays or when children were sick was also an area of concern for many mothers. Even older children who did not need childcare in the traditional sense felt the need to have their mothers available for them after school and weekends to support them, provide advice and assist with transport to allow them to participate in social and recreational activities. Mothers also felt that it was
important for children to have a parent or carer there to provide support and to monitor and regulate behaviour if needed. This was even more the case when children reached the final years of their schooling, a time when they also felt they most needed additional support. These findings suggest that a more nuanced and flexible policy approach that supports sole-mothers to tailor their work around their children’s needs would be more appropriate. Policy also needs to be more sensitive to factors such as family support networks, mother’s and children’s health and mental health, and geographical differences in the availability of work, care and transport for example.

The lack of financial support and involvement from fathers was also an issue. In the majority of cases fathers had only limited contact with their children and did not pay Child Support or paid very little. A number of mothers felt that when their former partners were self-employed they were able to manipulate the child-support system to minimise their obligations. This is supported by research that suggests that at least one in five non-custodial parents do not pay child support (Summerfield et al., 2010). However, as Son and colleagues (2014) found, this is a complex area as families are reconstituted, fathers often have children from multiple families to support or are struggling financially themselves. Designing policy approaches that encourage the continued involvement and support of fathers in children’s lives emerges as a significant issue. The gendered bias that leaves sole-mothers almost entirely responsible for their children’s care and financial support whilst fathers move ahead with their lives, but often with little or no ongoing involvement in their children’s lives, is neither equitable nor positive for children in most cases. This is a complex
area but it does have implications for how welfare-to-work policy is experienced by individual families, particularly children, and needs to be factored into policy making. Many children turned to their grandparents for support. The extent to which grandparents were found to be supporting the families in this study points to policy concerns around how others are drawn in to provide support and in essence facilitate the policy by compensating for the cuts to income support from their own resources. If providing support for children and grand-children is depleting the financial resources of grandparents or placing a burden of care on them that has impacts on their own social and recreational lives, health, or their future financial security, then there are intergenerational life-course considerations that need to be understood and addressed. The extent to which this has gender dimensions is also evident as grandmothers appear to be more often called upon to provide care for their grandchildren. The potential for the policy reform to create a ‘domino effect’ for other linked lives is an area needing further research as this has long term social and financial implications for those affected. For example, recent active labour market policies in Australia lifting the age of retirement means women will potentially be staying in the work force for longer. This has implications for their families and suggests the need for a ‘linked lives’ approach to welfare policy.

This signals a further issue that emerged from the study: the need for mothers to be given greater decision-making control over what works for their families and for them in terms of work/family balance. The lack of autonomy over how they managed private and individual family needs was spoken of by many mothers as a key failing of the policy and left them feeling angry with those they saw as imposing the policy
on them and also anxious for their children. Despite the normative stereotype of sole-parents who are unwilling to work, the mothers in this study wanted to work, but they wanted to be able to make choices about the type of work, when they worked, and how many hours, based on their family’s needs at varying times. By setting a minimum of fifteen hours of work weekly and compelling them to take jobs they did not really want, or that were poorly paid, the current policy denies sole-mothers the autonomy to make these decisions. Brady (2007) argues that welfare-to-work policy is built on the premise that women are not the best judges of what is an appropriate balance between work and caring for their family and that left to their own devices would not pursue work options. An improved model would see all parents and in particular mothers, being given more autonomy over their work and study choices and more flexibility in planning these around their children’s diverse and changing needs in a more ‘child-oriented’ approach (Fernqvist, 2011).

What also emerges is how the policy acts to channel mothers and their children into low paid employment pathways that effectively lock them into disadvantage and inequality. The need to find work that fits around their children’s needs meant many in this study moved towards low paid, insecure employment in aged or child care, retail or hospitality work. The lack of support for further tertiary study put even more pressure on those mothers trying to improve their future life chances through study. For children too, there was evidence of them favouring the short-term financial benefits of working in fast-food outlets for example, over longer term study and advancement that seemed beyond their means. More strategic approaches to policy that support disadvantaged children in ways that alleviate the need for them to take on
low paid employment where it is detrimental to other areas of their lives may be more appropriate.

For some children the financial need to move on to Youth Allowance also meant an early engagement in the welfare system. The ways in which this normalises patterns of welfare dependence and interactions with bureaucracy and institutions, trade-offs between work income and welfare benefits and a paradigm in which their day-to-day survival depends on maintaining their access to income support, are areas that have significant implications for policy. If the conditions of income support for sole-mothers are such that they entrench insecure pathways that depend on income support for their children as well, then the policy is likely to exacerbate the conditions under which the intergenerational aspects of welfare dependency and social exclusion flourish. The additional cost to the taxpayer of managing these bureaucratic interactions with children, who are as young as fifteen-years-old, would also seem to be counter-productive. An approach that more adequately supports mothers directly to provide for their children and their educational and recreational opportunities, without the need for children to interact with the welfare system themselves would seem to be an obvious improvement.\(^\text{13}\)

As Redmond (2010) suggests, the children of sole-parents in this study were being activated into adult worlds of work and care and doing so in ways that were detrimental to their education and training. As such, this creates future structural barriers to their success, suggesting not only a contradiction between two policy areas with one supporting children—future adult workers—with public investment in

\(^{13}\) The need for some adolescents for whom living with their family is not an option for a range of reasons to access Youth Allowance would be an exception to this.
education for example, and the other activating them prematurely into adult worlds of work and care to share the burden of the welfare-to-work policy. Children become ‘useful’ and support the policy through their own labour and by sacrificing their own futures and poor sole-mothers have little choice but to encourage that activation. A policy that burdens children with the responsibility to support their families and with ongoing future costs is one that needs reform. By placing sole-parent families on NSA, an unemployment benefit, the policy removes the sensitivity to children’s needs, but also fails to recognise issues of parenting and gender.

The findings support Bacchi’s (2005) view that in ‘gender-mainstreaming’ the policy to remove reference to mothers in favour of a gender-neutral ‘parent’ under PPS or adult-worker under NSA, the specific issues of gender that are clearly present for sole-mothers are obscured. This policy largely impacts on women and by extension on their children. It is essentially gender biased both because it is overwhelmingly women who are sole-parents, and because the financial outcomes for men and women after family breakdown appear to be inequitable. The women in this study bore most of the responsibility for caring and providing for their children following family breakdown. This responsibility is not acknowledged in the current policy that constructs sole-mothers as latent workers rather than as the sole-carers of, and in most cases sole providers for their children. The financial penalty experienced by women in general over their life-course as result of bearing the majority of the child-rearing responsibilities is magnified for sole-mothers and the current policy fails to address this. The financial implications for these women as they move into old age will be significant and highlights further the need for a gendered lens to be cast over policies that so heavily impact on women.
The failure of the policy to give recognition to the value of unpaid caring work performed largely by women stands as another deficiency. By overlooking the social and economic value of unpaid care it also denies the rights of children to receive appropriate care for their age and needs. The women in this study cared for their children willingly and most favoured caring for them themselves rather than placing them in child care. They saw this both as socially beneficial and preferable for their children. Children also preferred to be cared for by their mothers at home rather than being in childcare, although many acknowledged how tired and stressed their mothers were when they also had to juggle work and sole-parenting alongside the financial strains of the policy reforms. The burden that what one mother in this study described as the ‘triple-shift’ (working in paid employment and fulfilling the roles of two parents) placed on sole-parents in this study suggests that the current policy fails in providing adequate support and care for those who are caring for their dependent children. The notion of ‘doula’ (Kittay, 1999), the social responsibility to provide care for those who do the important work of caring for others, is one that warrants consideration in this policy. As the findings of this study suggest, poor health and mental health for mothers are common factors and impact on both their capacity to care of their children but also to engage in work or other social interactions. The devalourising and lack of recognition of the economic and social value of unpaid care work that is primarily performed by women stands as an issue for policy makers and society more broadly. The financial and health costs that this imposes on women over their life-course needs to be considered in policy impacting on families if issues of gender inequality more broadly are to be addressed. Arguably, the devalourising of unpaid care also contributes to the stigmatising discourse and language associated
with the policy. When unemployed sole-mothers are cast as creating social and moral disorder and as poor role models for their children, this inflicts a form of ‘symbolic violence’ (Bourdieu, 1984) that is repeated by the media and in social settings and has impacts on the mothers and their children that can contribute to their social exclusion.

Finally, the policy can be regarded as inflicting not just symbolic but physical violence by way of the harsh cuts to income support that create food and housing insecurity. It is clear that the intention of these cuts is to make life on welfare so unsustainable that mothers have no choice but to seek work, regardless of the barriers. Poor health emerged as just one barrier to mothers securing work and was one of a range of mediating factors that also suggested a more nuanced approach to policy that accounts for the diversity in family history, support networks, children’s ages and family circumstances over time would be more supportive of children’s needs. In particular, is the need to ensure food and housing security for children. Along with education these two areas emerged as the most significant for the majority of children in this study. All have longer term life-course implications for educational and employment outcomes, health, and mental health. Reducing the amount of income support for sole-parent families cuts the ability for mothers to provide adequately for their children and stands as the harshest aspect of the policy reform. Based on the findings from this study, calls from peak bodies (ACOSS, 2013a) to raise the amount of income support for sole-parent families are well justified.

11.5 Conclusion

This thesis began by highlighting how changes in contemporary society have combined to create greater risk for groups such as sole-parents: risks that are shared
by their children. The social and economic processes associated with 
individualisation, the detraditionalising of social norms such as gender and family 
structure, deregulation of labour markets and the increasing access to education, can 
all open up options and opportunity for some but for others can create greater risk of 
poverty and life-long disadvantage. For children in poor sole-parent families in 
Australia, risk, insecurity, and increased responsibility for sharing the burden of 
managing their families’ circumstances are intensified by their reliance on welfare 
under the current policy regimes. The conditions attached to receiving income 
support, including that their mothers take on a minimum of fifteen hours per week of 
state-sanctioned work, has left the children of sole-mothers in this study with little 
choice but to take on adult roles as carers, workers and counsellors themselves. They 
often do so in ways that create added risk across their own life-course. By focusing 
on the activation of sole-mothers into the workplace and overlooking many of the 
mediating factors that create insecurity for families who are already experiencing 
disadvantage and social exclusion, the policy places the already vulnerable children in 
these families at increased risk of life-course disadvantage themselves. Sole-parent 
families are increasingly just one in a wide range of family structures in modern 
society, however, it is a model that challenges normative institutional expectations of 
the traditional family and economic rationalist adult worker. The burden placed on 
the children in these families as a consequence of recent welfare-to-work policy 
reforms in Australia can at best be regarded as the result of simplistic and short-
sighted attempts to address the complex, multi-dimensional issues that are faced by 
sole-parent families. At worst, they can be seen as part of a more perverse agenda to 
normalise the work, family and relationship behaviours of a group that are regarded as
representing social and moral disorder. Either way, the consequences of the food and housing insecurity, poor health, reduced educational, recreational and social opportunities and other life-course costs borne by the children of sole-mothers as a consequence of welfare-to-work policy reforms in Australia, will inevitably provide a challenge for policymakers and society more broadly well into the future. More importantly it will create further structural barriers to the well-being and success of the children in these families across their life course. In conclusion, this thesis calls on policymakers to adopt a more ‘child-oriented’ approach that places the needs of all children in the present at the centre of policy deliberations and to provide the resources and support that will help to remove barriers to their future success.
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Appendices
Research Project for Single-parents

All volunteers receive $50 Coles Voucher

Are you a single parent with kids 8-16 years?
Are you receiving a Newstart payment?

I want to hear your story!!
I want to interview mums, dads and kids about what it is like trying to live on Newstart so I can tell policy makers

This is your chance to have a say!

My name is Jennifer Podesta and I am conducting research through the University of Melbourne, Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences and the Brotherhood of St Laurence

If you would like to participate in this research or find out more about it please give me a text or call 0414402558 or email me at podestaj@unimelb.edu.au
Appendix 2: Risk assessment protocol

Child Participant Risk Assessment Protocol

Based on the model suggested by Morris et al. (2012) this Risk Assessment Protocol is designed to ensure that the child participants in this study are not exposed to any undue stress as a result of being already vulnerable. The parents should be asked the following questions before deciding to include the child in the study.

Has your child experienced one or more of the following in the previous six-month period?

1. Family breakdown ongoing custody issues
2. Family violence or ongoing parental conflict
3. Mental health issues
4. Major or chronic illness
5. Loss of a close family member or friend
6. Homelessness or sudden housing change
7. Unexpected change of schools
8. Any other significant change or loss
9. Concerns about safety or security

If the child has experienced more than one of during the previous six-month period, it is advisable that they not take part in this study.
29 April 2013

Dr J.O. Zinn
Social and Political Sciences
The University of Melbourne

Dear Dr Zinn

I am pleased to advise that the Humanities and Applied Sciences Human Ethics Sub-Committee approved the following Project:

Project title:  Shoudering the Burden in 'Risk Society': the impacts of welfare-to-work policies on the children of lone-parents  
Researchers: Dr J O Zinn, J Pedesta  
Ethics ID: 1339364

The Project has been approved for the period: 26-Apr-2013 to 31-Dec-2013.

It is your responsibility to ensure that all people associated with the Project are made aware of what has actually been approved.

Research projects are normally approved to 31 December of the year of approval. Projects may be renewed yearly for up to a total of five years upon receipt of a satisfactory annual report. If a project is to continue beyond five years a new application will normally need to be submitted.

Please note that the following conditions apply to your approval. Failure to abide by these conditions may result in suspension or discontinuation of approval and/or disciplinary action.

(a) **Limit of Approval:** Approval is limited strictly to the research as submitted in your Project application.

(b) **Variation to Project:** Any subsequent variations or modifications you might wish to make to the Project must be notified formally to the Human Ethics Sub-Committee for further consideration and approval. If the Sub-Committee considers that the proposed changes are significant, you may be required to submit a new application for approval of the revised Project.

(c) **Incidents or adverse affects:** Researchers must report immediately to the Sub-Committee anything which might affect the ethical acceptability of the protocol including adverse effects on participants or unforeseen events that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the Project. Failure to do so may result in suspension or cancellation of approval.

(d) **Monitoring:** All projects are subject to monitoring at any time by the Human Research Ethics Committee.

(e) **Annual Report:** Please be aware that the Human Research Ethics Committee requires that researchers submit an annual report on each of their projects at the end of the year, or at the conclusion of a project if it continues for less than this time. Failure to submit an annual report will mean that ethics approval will lapse.

(f) **Auditing:** All projects may be subject to audit by members of the Sub-Committee.

If you have any queries on these matters, or require additional information, please contact me using the details below.

Please quote the ethics registration number and the title of the Project in any future correspondence.

On behalf of the Sub-Committee I wish you well in your research.

Yours sincerely,

[Signature]

Ms Jodie Young
Humanities and Applied Sciences HESC
Phone: 83442074, Email: jso@unimelb.edu.au

cc: HEAG Chair - Social And Political Sciences  
J Pedesta, PhD student

Office for Research Ethics and Integrity  
The University of Melbourne, Level 1, 780 Elizabeth St, Melbourne Victoria 3010 Australia  
Tr. +61 3 9385 8067  
W. www.orei.unimelb.edu.au
Appendix 4: Plain Language Statement for Adults

ADULT PLAIN LANGUAGE INFORMATION STATEMENT

LONE-PARENTS AND THEIR FAMILIES

Thank you for your interest in participating in this research. This research is specifically interested in the experiences of lone-parents who have previously, or are currently receiving Newstart allowance and are working or studying as part of the participation requirements of this programme.

My name is Jennifer Podesta and I will conduct this research through the Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Melbourne as part of my PhD thesis.

This project had cleared by the Human Research Ethics Committee: Project No. Dr. Jens Zinn will supervise me in this research.

Contact Details:

Jennifer Podesta (Principal Researcher) 0414402558
jpodesta@student.unimelb.edu.au

Jens Zinn (Responsible Researcher) jzinn@unimelb.edu.au

Below is some important information about the research and what will be required of you and your children should you decide to participate. Please read it carefully before you sign the attached consent form and feel free to ask me if there is anything about which you are uncertain.

The information for this research will be collected from participants like yourself in a number of ways.

Firstly, by a short questionnaire to obtain general information about you, your family background, living arrangements, education, work force participation and financial circumstances as well. This questionnaire will take approximately 15 minutes and your responses will be noted.

A second longer interview of approximately 45 minutes–1 hour will cover in much more detail your experiences and thoughts about your experiences as a lone-parents on Newstart and how you think your work or study impacts on you and your family.

This interview will be recorded on tape.

I would then like to spend approximately one hour with your child/children who are between 8 and 16 years to conduct activities, which will assist them to share their own thoughts and experiences about the impacts of your participation in work or study on them. These activities may include drawing, diagrams and diaries. The conversations held during these activities will also be recorded.
All the information recorded in this research will be kept in confidence and security except for the appropriate uses for the purposes of the project and all information will remain completely anonymous with pseudonyms used in all written reports.

Confidentiality will only be breached where there is a perceived threat to the health or safety of individuals.

Some contact details may be needed in order to clarify any research but will not be used as part of the research report and will be kept separately from the research data. Your privacy will be of the highest priority at all times and none of the information you give will be shared with other participants.

All of the information recorded will be transcribed and later analysed for the project report.

You will have the right to access the recorded and transcribed text relating to your interviews and receive copies of the same if you wish.

The findings from this research will be used in a thesis and may also be published in either hard copy or electronic form or presented at conferences.

The data collected from this research will not be made available for use on other projects without your express permission.

After ten years all transcribed data and recordings will be destroyed and securely disposed of.

The interviews will be conducted in privacy at a location that suits you and your children with dates and times to be arranged at your convenience.

Participation in this research is voluntary.

If you have any queries or complaints that I or my supervisor cannot answer to your satisfaction, you may contact the Executive Officer, Human Research Ethics, The University of Melbourne, phone 83442073 or fax 93476739.

You are free to withdraw from this project at any time and, further to demand that data arising from your participation is not used in the research project provided that your right is exercised within four (4) weeks of the completion of your participation in the project. You are asked to complete the ‘Withdrawal of Consent Form’ or to notify me by phone on 0414402558 or email at jpodesta@student.unimelb.edu.au if you wish to withdraw your consent.

It is hoped that through this research a voice will be given to lone-parents like you about the challenges of balancing family and work and how these challenges might also impact on children’s lives, which will inform future policy approaches.

Attached you will find an Informed Consent Form that you are required to sign in order to participate in this research project, attesting to the fact that you have read and understand
your role in this research and how the information will be used. You will also be asked to give consent for your child to participate, however this consent will only be sought once the research has been explained to your child and if they have agreed to participate by signing the Minor’s Informed Assent Form.

Thank you so much for your participation!
Appendix 5: Plain Language Statement and Assent Form for Child

MINOR PARTICIPANT

PLAIN LANGUAGE INFORMATION STATEMENT

LONE-PARENTS AND THEIR FAMILIES

Thank you for your interest in participating in this research. This research is specifically interested in the experiences of the children lone-parents who have previously, or are currently receiving Newstart allowance and are working or studying as part of the participation requirements of this programme.

My name is Jennifer Podesta and I will conduct this research through the Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Melbourne as part of my PhD thesis.

Assoc. Professor. Jens Zinn will supervise me in this research.

Contact Details: Jennifer Podesta (Principal Researcher) 0414402558 jpodesta@student.unimelb.edu.au

Jens Zinn (Responsible Researcher) jzinn@unimelb.edu.au

Below is some important information about the research and what will be required of you should you decide to participate. Please read it carefully before you sign the attached assent form and feel free to ask me if there is anything about which you are uncertain.

The information for this research will be collected from participants like yourself in a number of ways.

Firstly, you will be asked to participate in a choice of activities, which will include drawing, diagrams and a diary to help you think about some of the important issues and questions this research is trying to understand.

While you are doing these activities I would like to chat with you about these things and learn more about you and the things that are important in your life.

I would like to record our chat on a tape recorder so I can listen it later and remember the things you have told me.

The results of the activities and the recordings will be kept in confidence and security except for the appropriate uses for the purposes of the project. All information will remain completely anonymous and I will use a false name in all written reports so you cannot be identified.

Confidentiality will only be broken where there is a threat to your or your family’s health or safety.
Some contact details may be needed in order to clarify any research but will not be used as part of the research report. Your privacy will be of the highest priority at all times and none of the information you give will be shared with other participants including your parent unless you give permission.

All of the information we record will be written down so I can use it for my project report.

You will have the right to listen to the recorded and read the text relating to your interviews and receive copies of the same if you wish.

The findings from this research will be used in a thesis and may also be published in either hard copy or electronic form or presented at conferences.

The information collected from this research will not be made available for use on other projects without your express permission.

After five years all the written information and recordings will be shredded and securely disposed of.

The interviews will be conducted in privacy at a location that suits you with dates and times to be arranged at your convenience.

Participation in this research is voluntary.

If you have any questions or complaints that I or my supervisor cannot answer to your satisfaction, you may contact the Secretary, Faculty Human Ethics Committee, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Melbourne or phone

You are free to withdraw from this project at any time and, further to demand that information collected from your participation is not used in the research project provided that your right is exercised within four (4) weeks of the completion of your participation in the project. You are asked to complete the ‘Withdrawal of Consent Form’ or to notify me by phone on 0414402558 or email at jpodesta@student.unimelb.edu.au if you wish to withdraw your assent.

It is hoped that through this research a voice will be given to young people like you living in lone-parent families and how the challenges for parents balancing family and work might also impact on children’s lives.

Attached you will find a Minor’s Informed Assent Form that you are required to sign in order to participate in this research project that says that you have read and understand your role in this research and how the information will be used. Your parent will also be asked to give consent for you to participate, however this consent will only be sought if you have agreed to participate by signing the Minor’s Informed Assent Form.

Thank you so much for your participation!
MINOR’S INFORMED ASSENT FORM

Name of Research Project: LONE-PARENTS AND THEIR FAMILIES

Principal Researcher Name: Jennifer Podesta

Contact Details: Tel: 0414402558

Email: jpodesta@student.unimelb.edu.au

Participant Consent Declaration:

I, ......................................................................................... have read or had read to me and understand the information sheet and assent form relating to my participation in this research project. I have had any questions I have asked answered to my satisfaction.

I agree to participate in this project realising that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time and that I may request that no data arising from my participation are used, up to four weeks following the completion of my participation in the research.

I agree that research data provided by me or with my permission during the project may be included in a thesis, presented at conferences and published in journals on the condition that neither my name nor any identifying information is used.

Signature:............................................................Date:.........................

Researchers Name: .................................................................

Signature:............................................................Date:.........................

Supervisors Name: .................................................................

Signature:............................................................Date:.........................
Appendix 6: Informed Consent Adult and Child

ADULT PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Name of Research Project: LONE-PARENTS AND THEIR FAMILIES
Principal Researcher Name: Jennifer Podesta
Contact Details: Tel: 0414402558
                      Email: jpodesta@student.unimelb.edu.au

Participant Consent Declaration:

I, ................................................................. have read or had read to me and understand the information sheet and consent form relating to my participation and the participation of my child/ren in this research project. I have had any questions I have asked answered to my satisfaction.

I agree to participate in this project realising that my child/ren and/or I are free to withdraw from the study at any time and that I may request that no data arising from our participation are used, up to four weeks following the completion of my participation in the research.

I agree that research data provided by me or my child/ren or with my permission during the project may be included in a thesis, presented at conferences and published in journals on the condition that neither my or child/ren’s name nor any identifying information is used.

Signature:.................................................................Date:.................................

or

Authorised Representatives Name: .................................................................

Researchers Name: .................................................................

Signature:.................................................................Date:.................................

Supervisors Name: .................................................................

Signature:.................................................................Date:.................................
## Appendix 7: Structured questionnaire

### BACKGROUND QUESTIONNAIRE FOR MOTHERS

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1. What is your name?</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2. What is your address?</strong></td>
<td><strong>No. &amp; Street-</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Suburb-</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Postcode-</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3. How old are you?</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>4. What is your current relationship status?</strong></td>
<td><strong>Please circle or highlight one</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Partnered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Currently single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Always single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Separated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Divorced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other <em>please specify-</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>5. If divorced or separated how long ago?</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>6. If you currently have a partner how long have you been together?</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Question</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>How many children do you have?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>What are their names and ages?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Do they all live with you fulltime?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Are you now or have you ever received either PPS, Carers Pension, DSP or Newstart?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Do you have a Job Search Advisor?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Where were you born?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>If you weren’t born in Australia, how long have you lived here?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>What language/s do you speak at home?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>In what year level did you finish school?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td>Have you done further qualifications since leaving school?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Are you currently in paid employment?</td>
<td>Yes/No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 18. If no, can you give reasons why? | Don’t want to work  
Looking for work but can’t find a job  
Looking for work but can’t find a job I like  
Looking for work but can’t find a job with suitable hours  
Other...... |
| 19. If yes, how many hours per week do you work? | |
| 20. On what terms? | Please circle one  
Informal  
Casual  
Temporary  
Permanent |
<p>| 21. What type of work do you do? | |
| 22. How long have you worked there? | |
| 23. Would you say your employment adds to the overall financial well-being of your family? | Yes  No |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>24. Do you now or have you previously worked in unpaid work, volunteer</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Please give details</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>work, or help at school or in any other community group?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>If yes, please give details</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25. Have you previously worked in other paid employment?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Please give details</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26. Are you currently doing study or training?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Please specify</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27. Do your children go to paid or unpaid child-care when you go to work</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Please specify</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>or study or at any other time?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>If Yes, please specify</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question</td>
<td>Response</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28. Do they have contact with their birth father?</td>
<td>Yes / No</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>If yes, please give details</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29. Do you receive any Child Support?</td>
<td>Yes/ No</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30. Is the house you live in....</td>
<td>Please circle as applicable</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Owned or mortgaged by you</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rented through Real Estate</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rented through public housing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other....</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31. How long have you lived in this house?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32. If you have moved recently what were the reasons for moving?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>33.</strong> How long had you lived in your previous home?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **34.** Do you have family or friends who live nearby that you can go to for support or help if you need it? | Yes/ No  
*Please explain further* |
| **35.** Do you now or have you recently suffered any illnesses or other health conditions? | Yes / No  
*If yes, please explain* |
| **36.** Do any of your children suffer from any illnesses or other health conditions? |   |
| **37.** Do you ever feel under financial pressure? | Yes / No  
*If yes, please explain further?* |
| **38.** Do you have access to reliable transport? | Yes/No  
*If yes give details* |


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>39. Do you have any particular concerns about the wellbeing of any of your children?</td>
<td>Yes/No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Please explain-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Additional Notes:
Author/s:
Podesta, Jennifer Anne

Title:
Sharing the burden in ‘Risk Society’ The impacts of welfare-to-work policy on the children of sole-parents in Australia

Date:
2017

Persistent Link:
http://hdl.handle.net/11343/194520

File Description:
Complete Thesis

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