Towards a framework for statistics on welfare services and assistance

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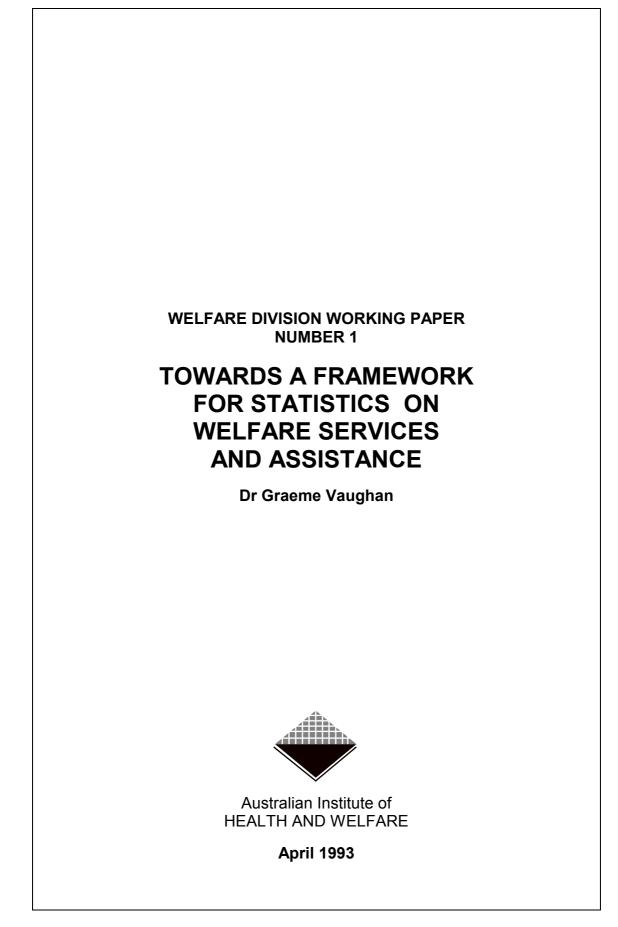
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**WELFARE DIVISION WORKING PAPER
NUMBER 1**

TOWARDS A FRAMEWORK
FOR STATISTICS ON
WELFARE SERVICES
AND ASSISTANCE

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Australian Institute of
HEALTH AND WELFARE

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Preface

This paper sets out a broad conceptual framework for organising statistical information of welfare services and assistance. It is proposed that this framework will guide the AIHW's collation of national data in the four major areas of services and assistance for which it has responsibility - housing, aged care, support for persons with disabilities and support for children and families. The framework will provide the conceptual base for the development of standard classifications and definitions of services and assistance by the Institute.

This paper also forms part of the Institute's collaboration with the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) in the development of a broader framework for statistics on wellbeing. Comments provided by the ABS on this paper are duly acknowledged. Responsibility for the content of the paper remains with the author.

Comments from those interested in this aspect of the Institute's work are invited and may be sent to the author at the address below.

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Towards A Framework for Statistics on Welfare Services and Assistance

Why a Framework?

In the most general sense, a statistical framework is a conceptual tool which attempts to impose some basic order on the apparent chaos of the real world. A statistical framework acts as a map describing the field of interest, identifying those features of relevance and describing their relationships to each other. A statistical framework thus identifies and describes those aspects of the subject about which data need to be collected and analysed. It differs from a theoretical model in that it attempts neither to explain how events are caused nor to analyse underlying factors.

Welfare and Wellbeing

The need to impose some basic order is quite apparent in the field of welfare, which has for so long resisted the definition of its nature and boundaries. 'Welfare services and assistance ' is a term used to embrace a range of activities which are aimed at serving a multiplicity of purposes. Nevertheless, these activities seem to have a common core; namely, they are intended to promote 'welfare' or, to use the current term, 'wellbeing'.

The issue of how these terms are defined is of fundamental importance to understanding the nature and extent of government intervention in people's lives. As Bryson (1988) argues, the restriction of the term 'welfare' to those forms of support aimed at the economically disadvantaged and socially vulnerable sectors of society artificially limits the analysis of the range of, and the benefits accruing from, government support. For the social statistician, the question of definition assumes practical importance in a number of ways, particularly in describing the nature of the field of investigation and in leading to the identification and measurement of key outcomes.

The social meaning of the terms 'wellbeing' and 'welfare' is, at any given time, embedded in prevailing ideological and practical discourses and constructed through a variety of semantic and practical manoeuvres. At no time could the meaning of these terms be said to be fixed; rather, it remains a site of contention between different political ideas, social philosophies, disciplinary paradigms and social practices. It is not merely that the dominant meaning of the terms shifts over time, nor that the terms hold multiple meanings simultaneously, but rather that, like an archaeological site, new layers of meaning are placed over the old without, however, entirely displacing them.

Among the different meanings that can be attributed to the terms 'welfare' and 'wellbeing', the following may be distinguished:

> • welfare as charity, provided to the deserving poor, who through no fault of their own are unable to provide for themselves and who are of good moral character; wellbeing as the satisfaction of immediate and basic needs for food, shelter, clothing and security;

> • welfare as a safety net designed to catch those suffering from external circumstances over which they had no or little control and who were unable to meet their own needs by individual effort or through family support; wellbeing as the alleviation of poverty, the loss of family breadwinners and the breakdown of family supports;

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- welfare as support for a minimum standard or quality of life to which all citizens are entitled; wellbeing defined positively in a number of different areas - individual development, personal economic situation, physical environment, social networks, for example - each with their own minimum socially acceptable standard;

- welfare as a means of redistributing social benefits and opportunities; wellbeing lies in the provision of material benefits and opportunities in a more nearly equal way;

- welfare as a way of enhancing social justice (access, equity, equality and participation); wellbeing is conceived as multi dimensional and sited within the individual's capacity to participate in the full range of community activities.

These differences in meaning suggest a number of different approaches to the question of describing and measuring the outcomes of welfare services and assistance.

Nevertheless, each of these descriptions of welfare and wellbeing has, at its core, the aim of altering, by socially organised activity, the social conditions in which individuals are located. The framework presented below is based on this central core and is not dependent on a specific definition of wellbeing or welfare. Rather it is capable of being utilised across the range of definitions of welfare and wellbeing.

Analytical Focus

Welfare services and assistance are purpose driven activities, that is, they are intended to produce some effect on prevailing social conditions. Ultimately, all questions concerning welfare services and assistance, revolve around the central core of the intended purpose of the services. While this purpose may be stated as improving social wellbeing, this statement is too abstract to guide the organisation of data.

Under the general concept of wellbeing are more specific, but still quite broad, community level goals which services or assistance are intended to achieve, such as preservation of the family, social justice, and the empowerment of individuals. More specifically, services and assistance address population groups (a set of people having some defining characteristic in common, such as women, persons with disabilities, aged persons) and social concerns or problems (a social circumstance or set of events deemed to be desirable, for example, an appropriate standard of housing, or undesirable, for example, the maltreatment of children).
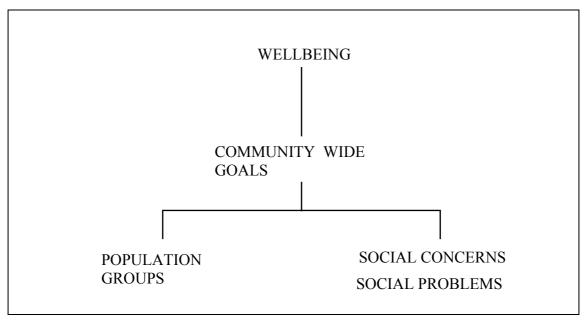
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Figure 1: *Focus of Analysis*

Thus, the focus of interest might be on the impact that welfare services and assistance have on broad level community goals, or how a range of services impact on the lives of a particular population group or whether a particular service advances some social concern or ameliorates a particular social problem (Figure 1). Each focus of analysis targets a specific aspect of social conditions which are likely to be influenced by social services and assistance. It is this relationship between social conditions and social services and assistance which is crucial to the framework.

The Core of the Framework

The core of the statistical framework is a dynamic interactive model involving three major systems (social conditions, social services systems, and the informal support systems) and their cross linkages or interactions. Diagrammatically, the model can be presented simply as follows (Figure 2).
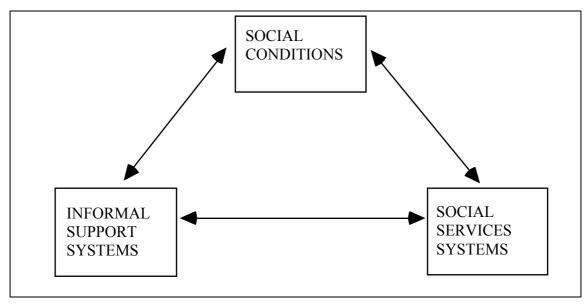

Figure 2: *Conceptual Framework Core*

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The term 'social conditions' refers to the prevailing set of social circumstances, structures and relationships. As discussed above, social conditions can be considered, in terms of social wellbeing, at the macro level of community wide goals, conditions and circumstances, or at the more focused level of population group and social concern or problem.

This is not intended to be a closed model. It does not attempt to account for all possible factors which might affect social wellbeing. Factors not specified in the model such as economic policy, taxation measures and business subsidies may have a considerable influence on the social wellbeing of some, if not all, sectors of the community and on social conditions generally. They may also affect the capacity of governments and other agencies to provide services and influence the way in which services and assistance are provided. Similarly, they may affect the amount and type of informal support available within the community.

Recognising that such factors may also affect social wellbeing or a specific aspect of it can be done in one of two ways. Either such factors can be treated as extraneous to the model or they can be incorporated into the model as part of the social services systems.

Factors to be treated as extraneous are those which are relevant to the matter under investigation, but which affect it indirectly via a specified part of the model. For example, the consequence of economic policy programs might be to affect social conditions so that the numbers of people eligible for welfare services and assistance increases dramatically. Hence they could be considered as extraneous factors which provide a context necessary to understand changes in factors incorporated within the model, such as the usage of services.

In contrast, aspects of the taxation system may be better regarded as part of the social service system, when they are being used as a means to affect social conditions and social wellbeing. For example, the collection of child support payments through the taxation system or the provision of taxation concessions for persons with disabilities or the exemption granted on capital gains tax to owner-occupiers would properly come within the domain of the social service systems. Such activities operate within the model in that they represent part of the total range of assistance being provided. Without consideration of such activity a comprehensive understanding of welfare services and assistance cannot be obtained.

The intention here is that the informal support systems and the social services systems together comprise the total amount of assistance and support that is provided within the Australian community in relation to a particular social concern or problem, population group or community level goal. Hence, aspects of other activities not normally considered part of social services, such as the taxation system would be included here so as to build a comprehensive picture of welfare assistance and support.

The informal support systems include that support and assistance provided by family, kin, friends, neighbours or individual persons within the community. It is not possible, and perhaps not desirable, to draw a precise boundary separating informal support from social services. For example, self-help groups would appear to occupy the middle ground in that they display some of the organisational features of the social service systems but are not necessarily integrated into those systems by mechanisms such as funding and licensing. The relationship is more appropriately conceived as a continuum with activities at either end clearly within one domain or the other with a good deal of overlap between the two. For the purpose of data collection and analysis, however, it is necessary to attempt some separation since the sorts of questions to be addressed and the data available differ between the two.

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The Social Services Systems

The social services systems include the big six social service areas - health, employment, education, income security, housing and community services (Jones, 1990: 224).

In addition they include those aspects of other organised activities which are intended to affect social wellbeing directly, as discussed above.

While most of the activities usually regarded as welfare services and assistance, which are the focus of the Institute's work, would be included under the headings of community services and housing, aspects of the other four social service areas are also included. The overlap and linkages between health services and welfare services for aged persons and persons with disabilities and the connection between child care and the employment, education and training of parents, especially women, are particularly important. The monetary assistance provided within the income security domain to people such as those with disabilities (the Disability pension) or of old age (the Age pension) or to assist people with housing and accommodation (Rent Assistance) is also important to developing a national picture of assistance and support. Such forms of assistance may become more important if governments move away from providing services directly, or indirectly via funding non-government organisations, and begin to provide cash payments to persons to enable them to purchase services and assistance directly on the open market.

The social service systems thus include Commonwealth, State , Territory and local government programs which provide services and assistance directly, services and assistance provided by non-Government organisations which are funded by government, and relevant services and assistance not funded by government but provided by non-Government organisations whether for profit or not for profit.

Service and Assistance Description

Consideration of welfare services and assistance in isolation from the other elements of the model provides a static description of the service or assistance in terms of

> • the type of service or assistance provided;
>
> • the service environment (geographic location; organisational setting; human, capital and financial resources; methods of financing);
>
> • the process of service delivery (methods, outlets, availability of services);
>
> • client information (eligibility criteria, characteristics of clients);
>
> • outputs (services provided, number of clients served).

In other words, this description focuses on these key questions: what form of service and assistance is provided; who is providing the service; how is the service being provided; and who is using the service? This description can be based on either the service which is provided (service inventory) or on the organisations which are providing the service (organisation inventory).

Such descriptions provide a basic starting point for more complex analyses. They lead onto considerations of outcomes for service delivery, for example efficiency evaluations in terms of the relationship between costs and outputs (cost per service). They are an important and necessary first step which can be built on to develop more complex and useful analyses of the relationship between the social service systems, the informal support systems and social conditions.

Linkages

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Linkages between social conditions and the social service systems

The Australian Bureau of Statistics in *A Guide to Australian Social Statistics* proposed to describe the connection leading from social conditions to welfare services and assistance in terms of social response: "... that supply [of welfare services] is in response (supposedly at least) to a *demand* which reflects the *needs of the community for support and assistance.*" (p.81) This implies that social conditions give rise to needs which, when articulated, either by the persons experiencing the need or by advocates on their behalf, are translated into demands. Services are thus a social response to expressed demands, conditional upon those in positions of authority recognising those demands as legitimate and organising the provision of services.

Social conditions need not be experienced as dysfunctional in order to give rise to needs or demands for assistance. As discussed above, welfare services and assistance may be aimed at enhancing social conditions, rather than only ameliorating social problems.

A crucial distinction is made between need as a felt want and need as an articulated demand (Bradshaw 1972)[1]. It is a moot point whether a felt want is a necessary precursor to articulated demands.

The ABS formulation can be enhanced in three ways.

- First, service providers can, and often do, conduct needs assessment, either systematically or informally, without waiting for needs to be translated into demands (Figure 3).

- Second, service providers also evaluate social conditions directly and introduce services in order to effect some change in social conditions, particularly, but not exclusively, in pursuit of some broad level community goal (Figure 3).

- Third, the organisation of services has its own dynamic imperative. The emergence of new forms of services and assistance may reflect new developments in the theory and practice of relevant social sciences. Services may evolve and change over time, adapting to changed circumstances. Services and assistance may change, disappear, amalgamate or appear as a result of administrative rearrangements (Figure 3).

The information requirements implied by this enhanced model occur at two levels. One is the monitoring and analysis of broad social conditions, as they pertain to the community as a whole and the relative position of various groups within the community. This information is required to provide status reports on community wide goals and assess societal wellbeing.

The other is at the level of population group and social concern. Here, data are necessary to support needs analysis and assessment, that is, to verify and map the extent and location of the social concern or problem and to identify the target population. The target population can be identified either in terms of the population in need (whether assessed objectively by norms, comparatively, or by socio-demographic characteristic, or subjectively, by self-reporting), the population with an expressed demand for

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[1] Bradshaw identifies four definitions of need: felt want, expressed demand, normative need and comparative need. Normative need is need defined by experts, based on some minimum condition. Comparative need is based on the absence of assistance for those with similar characteristics to those already receiving assistance. Bradshaw, strictly speaking does not define "need", but rather identifies four methods of assessing whether or not a need exists. He omits to mention that need can also be assessed in terms of socio-demographic characteristics; that is, all persons with a particular set of characteristics are defined as being in need of some assistance, by virtue of those characteristics.

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assistance, or the population at risk (that is, the population which will, with a certain degree of probability, become in need of assistance).

Thus far, the link between social conditions and services has been considered only in terms of the connection *from* social conditions *to* services. It is also important to consider the possible effects that social services and assistance can have *on* social conditions. Services and assistance are usually targeted at some segment of the total population and used by some proportion of the total target population. Thus, it is important to investigate who is using the service, and how the use of services by a particular set of people relates to the target population for the service (Use analysis).

Service outputs cumulatively produce outcomes for the population group (changes in the life circumstances of clients), in terms of social concerns or problems, or for the community as a whole. Whether the change in social conditions that occurs as a result of the service intervention is considerable and in the direction intended is very much the crucial question to be addressed. The fundamental form of analysis concerning the relationship of services to social conditions is impact assessment which 'is directed at establishing, with as much certainty as possible, whether or not an intervention is producing its intended effects ' (Rossi and Freeman, 1982: 165). This sort of analysis is concerned to identify measures which relate to the purposes of the service, and then to measure the net outcomes of the service.

Linkages between the informal support systems and the social services systems

As discussed above, it is difficult to draw precise boundaries between the informal and formal systems of social support and assistance and the relationship is appropriately conceived as a continuum, rather than a clear cut division.

In order to present a comprehensive picture of welfare services and assistance, it is necessary to consider the role played by the informal mechanisms of support. As indicated above, both systems together represent the total support and assistance being provided within the community. The balance between that support which is provided through organisations and that which is provided by family, friends, neighbours and individuals is an important question in its own right. Indeed, it could be argued that a need for formal services and assistance only arises when the individual or group cannot achieve the desired state out of its own resources or those available to it from the informal support networks. Conversely, it could be argued that informal supports are called on when formal services and assistance are inadequate, unavailable or inaccessible.

The issue of support and assistance provided by the informal support system has become particularly important with shifts in government policy towards deinstitutionalisation of persons needing care and the mainstreaming of persons with disabilities. It is recognised that these moves place additional demands onto the informal support sector, particularly onto family groups. This shifting balance may have led to an increased demand for other forms of services (such as respite care) and new directions in policy to strengthen informal support mechanisms.

The connections between the informal support systems and social conditions are conceived in the same terms as those which connect the social services systems to social conditions (Figure 3). The connection linking social conditions to the informal support systems can be considered as encapsulating such phenomena as the construction of social roles relating to support and caring, their embedding in social mores and expectations, and the problematic relationship between social structures and behaviour patterns. The distinction between needs and demands perhaps plays a less important role here, although it may become more prominent as the type of informal support under

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consideration moves closer in kind to those in the social services systems. In particular, it is important when the support under consideration is being provided by family members who are themselves being supported in this primary care role by government. In this case an articulated demand for care needs to be identified in order for government support for the carers to be provided.

Provision of support by informal means has a potential impact, both for the recipients of such support and for the social conditions, considered in terms of population groups, social concerns or problems, and community wide goals.
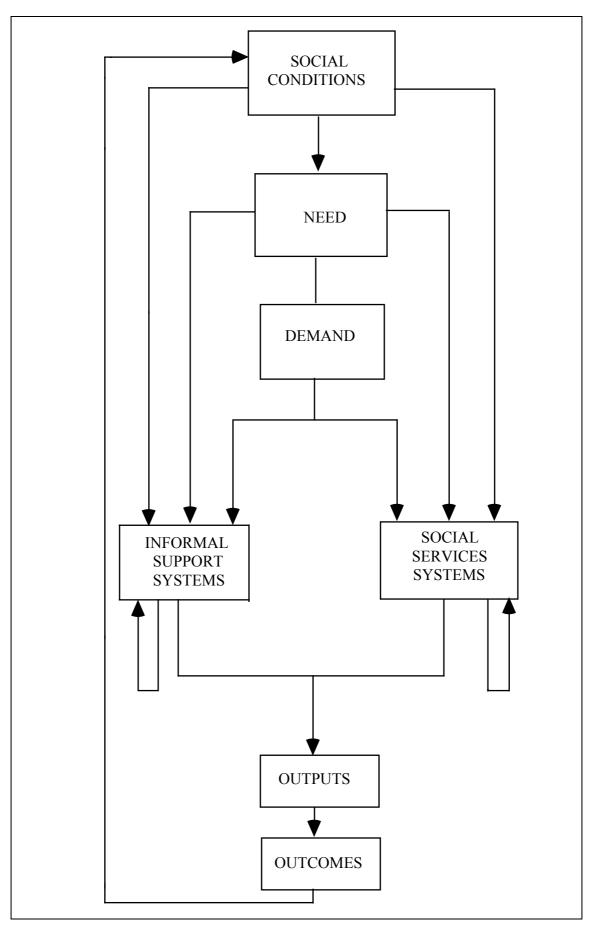
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Figure 3: *Conceptual Framework: Expanded*

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Future Directions

The framework presented here provides the skeleton for the organisation of data collection and analysis. Considerable work needs to be undertaken to identify adequate descriptors of services and assistance as the basis for service and organisation inventories which are the building blocks for more complex and useful data collections and analyses. Classifications for such descriptors need to be developed and/or standardised to provide a common basis for the collection, amalgamation and analysis of data, and to enable analyses to be undertaken across programs. What is required here is a suite of classifications pertaining to aspects of services and assistance which are relevant to analyses such as needs and outcomes assessments.

Similarly, appropriate indicators of social conditions at the level of community wide goals, social concerns or problems, and population groups need to be identified and monitored. To a very large extent, existing data collected by the Australian Bureau of Statistics provide many appropriate indicators. However, the adequacy and coverage of these need to be assessed systematically.

Questions concerning the coverage, adequacy and availability of useful data on both the services and assistance provided by the social services systems and the support provided by the informal support systems need to be addressed. The issue of how to relate data pertaining to each of these systems needs to be resolved.

Appropriate methods, statistical tools and supporting data for analysing and exploring the connections between social conditions and support need to be identified and appropriate analyses (for example, needs assessment and outcome analysis) undertaken.

Areas which seem to be particularly underdeveloped both conceptually and in terms of data are the identification of needs and demands (especially the identification of population groups at risk and the emergence of new social concerns or problems), the description of informal support systems, and the assessment of outcomes in terms of the recipients of services and assistance, social concerns or problems and community wide goals.

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