

# Consumer-led research gives a voice to disadvantaged

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In the last week of August 2018, the Australian Government's

Productivity Commission released its "Rising inequality? A stocktake of the evidence" research paper. Its conclusion: "Over nearly three decades, inequality has risen slightly in Australia."

"We haven't shifted the dial on the number of extremely disadvantaged people in our population in the last 20 years. What a disgrace that is, when we've had consistent growth during that time," says Swinburne Adjunct Associate Professor Jo Cavanagh OAM, the CEO of industry partner, Family Life, an independent, family-focused community services organisation.

"But it's because we haven't really been effective in understanding people's needs and designing to meet them, rather than just managing the social problem," says Associate Professor Cavanagh.

## **Living life without barriers**

Swinburne's partnership with Family Life and Life Without Barriers, a [foster care](#) and disability services provider, has generated a new 12-month project to explore better ways to address the needs of vulnerable young [parents](#) and their children.

"Swinburne and Family Life have a very strong alignment in using knowledge for public value," says Associate Professor Cavanagh.

"That can really help government use resources effectively, as well as attend to the needs of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable people in the community."

The Family Life/Life Without Barriers co-funded project is grounded in consumer-led research: that is, the researchers will be conducting interviews and workshops with young parents themselves, to directly learn of their experiences and needs.

"The workshops are explicitly designed for participants to outnumber the researchers in the room, so that they aren't just a token participant," says Swinburne project leader, Associate Professor Kay Cook of Social Innovation Research Institute.

"We'll be posing the questions to guide them, and we'll pay them, demonstrating that their time and input are valuable."

The aim is for participants to drive as much of the information-gathering as possible, while also meeting the university's research standards.

It's a big shift away from participants checking boxes in a survey or answering questions that come from the researcher's perspective. That format requires participants to respond to the researcher's world view.

"The power dynamic is imbalanced," says Associate Professor Cook.

## **Smart technology and digital service delivery**

One element of this project is to explore how digital [service](#) delivery might benefit young parents who may be struggling due to family breakdown, cycles of abuse, poor parent role modelling, lack of support networks and entrenched engagement with family services that may be generations old.

"There has been a big focus on aged care and smart technologies," says Associate Professor Cavanagh.

"I thought, "Why aren't we doing any of these with young people?" They have grown up with the internet and [smart technology](#), yet there's underinvestment in how we can use that part of their world ecosystem to provide a human-centred service."

This research will focus on the voices and self-advocacy of these young parents – both mothers and fathers, who are often left behind by the system.

"We will be able then to use the technical expertise of Swinburne and our practitioners to design responses for those young parents to test. They can tell us whether those responses are effective," says Associate Professor Cavanagh.

"Long term, I want to see us reducing the number of children that are removed from young parents and also tracking the wellbeing, milestones and outcomes of those children. We want to demonstrate a more effective way of responding to people's needs, by listening to them and aligning our services in response to their needs, not in response to a service system requirement."

Provided by Swinburne University of Technology

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