

Persistent Disadvantage

Enoch Qualls

Introduction:

This submission identifies two leading causes of persistent disadvantage: perception of lack of hope and distribution of wealth. I argue that the former is derived from a number of social factors including family dysfunction, role modelling, addiction, education disparity, lack of willingness to participate in economic activity, and disadvantage arising from not being Pakeha.

It is my opinion that the best way to address persistent disadvantage is to change our taxation system from income based to asset based and provide a range of long term social initiatives that will assist families and individuals to experience better life outcomes.

My Background:

In order for the reader to understand where my perceptions and opinions arise from, I have provided a summary of my background.

My name is Enoch Khalil QUALLS. I am a Caucasian male aged 47. I was born in the United States of America to academic parents and moved to New Zealand at the age of nine in 1984. Since then I have lived in Christchurch where I was educated and have worked a variety of jobs. I have trained to be a teacher, cared for the disabled, worked as a Cycle Safety Instructor, and worked as a software engineer before joining the New Zealand Police.

In the 15 years I've worked for the Police, I have had the following work history:

2006 – 2011	Frontline: emergency response (Constable)
2012 – 2014	Family Violence Team (Constable)
2014 – 2021	Criminal Investigation Branch (Investigator/Detective)
2021 – Present	Frontline: emergency response / custody supervisor (Sergeant)

During my career in the Police I have been trusted with managing difficult and high profile events. For example, I have been file manager for murder and sexual violation investigations and was the crime scene coordinator for the scene examination of the Linwood Mosque after the 15 March 2019 shootings. My experiences in the Police cause me to believe that emergency response staff are the only public servants who see families/people at their very worst. We are therefore in a unique position to report on their persistent disadvantage.

Perceptions of Disadvantage:

During the time I have been in the Police I have noticed that, overwhelmingly, Police resources are utilised by folks from lower socio-economic parts of society. From homicide to shoplifting, victims and offenders are almost always poor folk. It is uncommon for more affluent people to be victims (except burglary victims) or offenders and when they are my colleagues often comment on it.

It is my opinion that criminality is indicative of persistent disadvantage: many people who are charged with offences are unemployed, have addiction issues, minimal education, little or no life direction, dysfunctional relationships, unplanned children, and are very often Māori or Pacifica. The criminology literature calls this 'multiple disadvantage'; it is a form of 'strain theory' popularised by Robert Agnew of Emory University in Atlanta, USA.

A perpetuating cycle develops with the children of those who are persistently disadvantaged being exposed to harmful family dynamics, having little positive mentoring, being educated at under resourced schools, and ultimately not developing the skills and thought/behaviour patterns needed to escape the cycle.

Ultimately, I believe that the root cause of persistent disadvantage can be identified by two overarching and linked contributors: individual perception (whether real or imagined) of lack of hope and disparity of wealth.

Hope:

If you don't think you can succeed, haven't experienced success, or have grown up with a culture of not achieving, why try?

The following address those factors that I believe cause the persistently disadvantaged to not have hope.

Family Dysfunction:

Through out my life I have had numerous "ahh-ha" moments that have led me to deeper insight into human behaviour. The most profound of these relate to brain development, criminality, family cohesion, and the cycle of disadvantage.

New Zealand has the dubious honour of being a leader amongst developed nations with regards to child homicides¹. Because of the difficulty concealing a child's death I believe that the only true measure of the frequency and severity of family harm incidents in a society (a low proportion are reported) is child homicide.

Training I received in the Police some years ago by The Brain Waves Trust and Dunedin Longitudinal study highlighted correlations between exposure to family harm as a child and the development of a brain that is not wired to succeed in today's world.

There are two other studies that I am aware of which have shown a correlation between imprisonment and family dysfunction:

- In Steve Biddulph's book *Raising Boys* he quotes a study of a prison population where 90% of the men imprisoned report have no effective father figure.
- Most inmates in New Zealand Prisons report having had lifetime exposure to sexual violence and or family violence².

Despite widespread statements that Family Harm infiltrates all parts of society, I have found that most family harm events Police attend involves the poor and the young. Of course, there could be many other reasons for this such as stigma for the affluent associated with calling the Police. Regardless given my extensive anecdotal experience, aforementioned brain development research and child homicide concerns, I believe that family harm is mostly perpetuated by the poor and is significant driver of persistent disadvantage.

Young families do it tough, whether disadvantaged or not, whether supported by others or not. One of the realities of the world we live in is families seem to struggle the most financially when they need resources the most.

¹ [Child homicide in New Zealand: How do the numbers compare internationally? | Stuff.co.nz](#), [Study confirms New Zealand's high rates of violence against children - Massey University](#)

² [New Zealand prisoners' prior exposure to trauma | Department of Corrections](#)

I believe we need to have much more proactive prenatal, neonatal, and infancy support whereby the right people get into the homes of those who are having babies and provide real & meaningful assistance: food, time away, education on child rearing, vocational training, life planning etc. By having eyes and ears in all families before and after a child is born, and by providing real assistance so that those helping are wanted, we can reduce stress, identify problems, and achieve positive outcomes.

Mentoring:

Through my work in the Police I have had numerous contacts with young men who I believe are the least able to become productive: criminal history leading to imprisonment, no supporting family, uneducated, with no aspirations or life plan. I have found that often these guys crave male mentors.

Examples:

I recently dealt with a 15 year old boy who has enormous behavioural problems. His father was imprisoned, his mother kicked him out so he had to move to a different town to live with his Aunty. This boy's aspiration was to join a gang and get facial tattoos. His course facilitators called 111 because he was threatening people with a screwdriver. I attended, he made a show of trying to stab me, I arrested him. With very little effort (by talking to him like an adult, treating him with respect, and being kind and decent), I had the lad hanging off my every word.

Several years ago I prosecuted a man who sexually violated a young guy in prison. The young guy was just 23 and had a massive criminal history for relatively low level offending. We took the offender to trial but at the first trial the victim wasn't emotionally able to take part. I was tasked with getting him ready. For about a year I mentored this guy: when he had a problem I solved it, I drove him places, got him to see a doctor to tell him what he had experienced, I mobilise resources to support him long term. During the time I mentored him he did not commit a single offence (that I know of) and stayed out of trouble. Once the prosecution was finished we went our separate ways and the long term assistance I tried to arrange came to nothing.

What I think a lot of these troubled guys need is a person they can relate to who will listen and provide real and meaningful help. Our volunteer systems are all well and good but they are not consistent enough, are not sufficiently long term, do not provide enough people to be able to help those that need it, and they allow our at risk young people to decide to stop engaging.

As I understand it, a person costs about \$100,000 NZD to be kept for a year in prison. If, for the right people, we developed long term mentoring programs I believe we can make significant differences for substantially less cost: assign each young, vulnerable, persistently disadvantaged person a mentor to get them up, make sure they are fed, ensure they make court appointments, get them qualifications, help them find employment, have a mature sensible person to give them advice and help them deal with life's trials. Such an undertaking needs to have a long term commitment that is not limited by punishment based criminal sentences for criminal offending.

Some might argue that the Department of Corrections does this, my experience has been this is not the case. Multiple people I have spoken to, as a Police Officer, have told me that our rehabilitation system all too often is simply a box ticking exercise: require the person to do some courses, report to corrections every couple of weeks, then when their sentence ends so too does the influence of corrections. I have not spoken to anyone who Corrections has had oversight of, that tell me Corrections has provided real assistance: qualifications, employment, addiction management.

Addiction:

Criminalisation of addiction closes doors to people discussing their problems. It is difficult enough for people to admit failures but when the risk of criminal prosecution is added, we cannot expect that authorities will ever be able to have honest conversations about addiction.

The cost of insisting addiction is a criminal problem, not a health problem, is astounding:

Imagine a person has a methamphetamine addiction and uses a gram a week (not a very high consumption rate, I have dealt with addicts who consume more than a gram a day). Let's imagine that the cost for a gram of meth is \$500 (I have known it to vary from \$300 to \$1300 a gram). At a gram for \$500 a week, a person is spending \$26,000 a year on methamphetamine.

Not many people can afford that. Those who can burn through savings and assets. Those who can't steal, rob, sell drugs, borrow from gangs, or prostitute themselves.

I recently worked for 2 ½ years in a Police squad that targets prolific thieves. My experience has been that when stolen property is sold, the seller usually gets about 10% of the market value for the goods.

It follows that for our addict to pay for a (\$500) gram a week habit, that person must sell about \$260,000 worth of stolen property a year. That doesn't include property stolen that they can't sell. It also doesn't include damage done to buildings in burglaries or emotional harm experienced by victims of offending. The cost to the user, society, and victims is enormous.

I have talked to many meth addicts, and very few of them say they want to be addicted to meth. They tell me when they have a mindset to address their addiction, a spot isn't available on a programme for several months. Paradoxically, if an addict can stop using for several months to get on a rehabilitation course, they wouldn't need the course.

Solution:

Decriminalise possession of highly addictive drugs. Create specialised and funded drug centres for addiction management (we do this extremely badly). Allow highly addictive drugs to be made available for those who meet the criteria of being addicted and wanting to no longer be addicted.

Education Disparity:

During my time training as a teacher and working as a Cycle Safety Instructor I noticed a massive difference in the level of engagement and professionalism of teachers between schools in the poorest parts of Christchurch and schools in the highest.

It makes sense: people become teachers to teach, behaviour management (which occupies a large part of the time of teachers in low socio-economic areas) is frustrating and not emotionally rewarding for teachers. Great teachers go to private schools who can pay more than public schools, have better environments, and fewer problem children. Tokona Te Raki³ have prepared a report which identifies education disparity as a driver of income inequity. This report also highlights that a higher proportion of the Māori population have no qualifications compared to the general population.

Clearly education provides options and opportunities for employment. If we, as a community/country, want to lift people out of persistent disadvantage we must provide relevant, accessible, relatable, inspiring, and effective education. That means a bunch of stuff such as: identifying with peoples cultural and spiritual backgrounds, making schools places kids want to be, supporting parents to

³ [Tokona-te-Raki-Ngai-Tahu-Income-Gap.pdf \(maorifutures.co.nz\)](https://www.maorifutures.co.nz/Tokona-te-Raki-Ngai-Tahu-Income-Gap.pdf)

support their children's education, giving significant incentives for excellent teachers to teach difficult kids, decreasing teacher to pupil ratios in poor schools.

Encouraging Economic Participation:

Our current benefit system does not motivate the unskilled to work. Some come from families with a culture of not working and so finding work and being productive is not part of their life expectation. Others do the math and note that being unskilled and working at minimum wage doesn't earn much more than being on a benefit, plus there are costs: work clothes, transport, food.

The Welfare Expert Advisory Group, has done a large body of work on this area and has commented on the issues I have addressed⁴.

Solution:

Either a universal income or a much, much high threshold for what can be earned on a benefit.

Disadvantage Amongst Those Who Aren't Pakeha:

It is my understanding that there is a swath of studies that have been undertaken that show non-Pakeha (particularly Māori and Pacifica but I suspect the same is true for most, if not all, ethnic minorities) are negatively represented in a host of statistics: wealth, income, health, suicide, arrest and conviction rate, criminality, life expectancy, education, the list seems never ending. This does not appear to be a problem unique to New Zealand with similar issues having been identified in other nations.

I have heard many stories of highly educated people from 'poor' countries having to find unskilled employment. Doctors driving taxis, engineers working in bars and restaurants, university lecturers cleaning buildings.

My suspicion is that our nation's history of racial injustice and inequality has forged unfair stereotyping and awareness (whether real or imagined) that the dice are weighted for Pakeha. Reversing this is difficult. Since I don't have a lot of personal experience with this issue, I don't know the solution, but I recognise it is a significant contributor to persistent disadvantage.

Disparity of Wealth:

The ever increasing and apparent acceleration of the accumulation of wealth by the very few is well document. Research I have conducted on this topic using Google (admittedly not a highly creditable source) and have found some disturbing claims.

- Jeff Bezos' wealth during 2020 increased by 24 billion USD⁵. A Google search of GDP of countries of the world located a 2020 World Bank⁶ list of the reported GDP of 207 countries. Only 108 countries had a GDP greater than 24 billion USD. Although Bezos is not a New Zealander, the information submitted is relevant because it shows how income based taxation systems allow the accumulation of absurd levels of personal wealth.
- It is my understanding that wealth is increasingly concentrated in assets, most particularly intangible assets.
- Some argue (Thomas Picketty in his book *Capital*) that the ever-increasing wealth of the few undermines democracy, I would say it also undermines hope: how can the poor get their voices heard when all the rich have to do is give money to political parties to have an ear to speak into. Further more our legal system heavily favours the wealthy: the poor are assigned lawyers who, in

⁴ [Example-families-010419.pdf \(weag.govt.nz\)](#)

⁵ [Jeff Bezos - Wikipedia](#)

⁶ [List of countries by GDP \(nominal\) - Wikipedia](#)

my experience are often over worked, disorganised, and unmotivated. The wealthy can choose who represents them and for a fee often experience better legal outcomes.

- I read an article where an American CEO, Dan Price⁷ asserts that young adults today own a much lower proportion of the world's wealth (5%) than their grandparents did at the same age (20%).
- Data available from the Ministry of Social Development (MSD) shows that emergency housing grants provided by MSD has increased five fold in the last five years: 2,115 grants in September 2016 compared to 11,163 July 2021⁸. This statistic is not unduly inflated because of Covid-19 because prior to Covid-19 10,668 grants were given in October 2019. I believe that this statistic is indicative that the number of people persistently disadvantaged in our society is growing at an alarming rate.

I have formed the following opinions about wealth and re-distribution:

- Income based taxation discourages productivity while asset based taxation discourages the accumulation of wealth.
- Where wages are less than living wage people develop dependence on state and become trapped in subsistence living.
- Ever increasing house prices preventing those without assets from investing in housing.
- Rent prices in NZ are linked to house prices and this must be a major driver of hardship.
- High house prices lead to people living in substandard homes and the over population of housing. These housing problems must cause massive issues with physical and mental health of those who can't afford their own place. Furthermore, flow on education outcomes for children must be terrible.

Redistribution of Wealth:

I believe the solution to these problems is to abandon income based taxation and replace this with taxation of assets. Such a change would have a number of by-products including encourage people to work, discourage the investment in housing (reduce house prices and therefore rent), discourage greed and encourage community engagement.

Conclusion:

To address persistent disadvantage, we must create hope for those who do not have it. This has to be a long term, multi-generational project because without a long term view we cannot disrupt familial patterns of family harm. First we must provide real assistance those adults who are disadvantaged to address their problems so that their children can escape this cycle.

To create hope we have to create opportunities and remove injustices. Disparity of wealth is a massive inequity; our system of taxation allows and encourages the accumulation of enormous amounts of wealth. By replacing income based tax with asset based tax and addressing social issues that contribute to persistent disadvantage, we can achieve great success.

If MSD data obtained relating to numbers of emergency housing grants provided is (as I believe) indicative of persistent disadvantage, then I believe we will see an ever increasing gap between the wealthy and poor. Numbers of people persistently disadvantaged will continue to grow and we will all be worse for it.

⁷ [Dan Price: the CEO who slashed his salary by \\$1 million | RNZ](#)

⁸ [Social Development Data \(msd.govt.nz\)](#)