

Cutting the Safety Net

The Impact of Cuts to Status Resolution Support Services

Status Resolution Support Services (SRSS) is a safety net for vulnerable people seeking asylum who are excluded from mainstream support services in Australia.

Services include a small amount of income support for rent and food, subsidised medication and torture and trauma counselling.

Over the past two years, the government has cut its budget for the SRSS safety net by 60%, putting thousands of people at risk of compounded poverty, deteriorating health and homelessness.

SRSS Cuts - Summary

SRSS is lifesaving access to torture and trauma services, subsidised medication, casework and income support of 89% of Newstart or approximately \$250 per week to cover rent and food for single adults.

Not all people seeking asylum have access to SRSS - they were reserved for vulnerable people who are unable to meet basic living and healthcare needs.

The Federal Government has chosen to cut its budget for the SRSS safety net by 60%, resulting in dramatically increased vulnerability requirements to remain eligible. This has excluded many people who do not have secure housing, health care or employment. Medical evidence is now needed to prove vulnerability.

A threat to families

With 42% of SRSS recipients under the age of 25, a cut of 60% affects many of the youngest people seeking asylumⁱ.

Only families with children under six years old will still be considered "vulnerable" under the new eligibility requirements.

As of February 2019, the government has begun cutting off families with children over the age of six years from support.

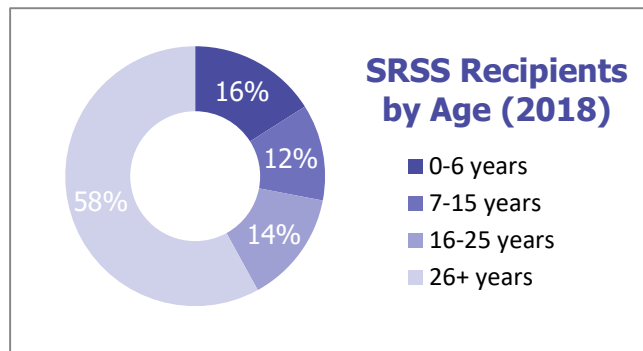


Figure 1ⁱ

An unsustainable demand

People being cut off from the safety net of SRSS rely on charity and services of unfunded organisations including the ASRC to fend off crises of homelessness, deteriorating illness and hunger.

Cuts have resulted in an unsustainable demand on our services and increasing complexity and volume of need that cannot be met.

Snapshot of SRSS Cuts

Before the Cuts (2017-2018)	After the Cuts (2019-2020)
13,299 people were accessing SRSS	Only 5000 people expected to remain (1200 men and women are already cut off)
3,815 recipients were under 16 years old	Only families with children under 6 are now considered eligible
Budget for SRSS was \$139.8 million	Budget cut to \$52.6 million
Who was eligible for SRSS: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Vulnerable people with unresolved immigration status ■ People seeking asylum living in the Australian community and unable to meet basic healthcare and living needs 	These groups are NO LONGER eligible: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ People without enough medical evidence to support physical or mental health which would impede their ability to work ■ Full-time students ■ People who sent or received money transfers over \$1000 ■ People on a substantive visa (such as a spouse visa)

A new housing and hunger crisis

The ASRC has seen increasing numbers of new people seeking support for food, housing, medical, legal and employment services.

Furthermore, there has been a steady increase in new plane arrivals, particularly families presenting for 'settlement support' services such as enrolling children in school, referrals for health care in community, PTV forms, and employment support.

New people coming to the ASRC for help are all being managed in the "New Presentations" program as services of housing, casework and continuing care are under enormous strain due to increasing demand as a result of cuts to SRSS.

There has been an increasing need for:

- Crisis accommodation with capacity to provide no more than a couple of days of emergency relief housing funded by the Housing Establishment Fund
- Support and access to food parcels for people issued with Notice-to-vacate, VCAT hearings and imminent homelessness
- Emergency food care packs and emergency pharmaceuticals to fill the gaps
- Sleeping bags for people sleeping rough

In February and March 2019 alone, we took 179 and 183 new appointments respectively. In March we distributed 63 emergency relief food packs to new people needing help. In the first week of April, we made 35 new appointments and distributed 20 food packsⁱ.

One method to measure and track complexity and volume of work is the number of case notes taken for each client. The chart below shows a significant increase over the past few months in the volume of workload of frontline staff serving new people presenting to the ASRC for assistance.

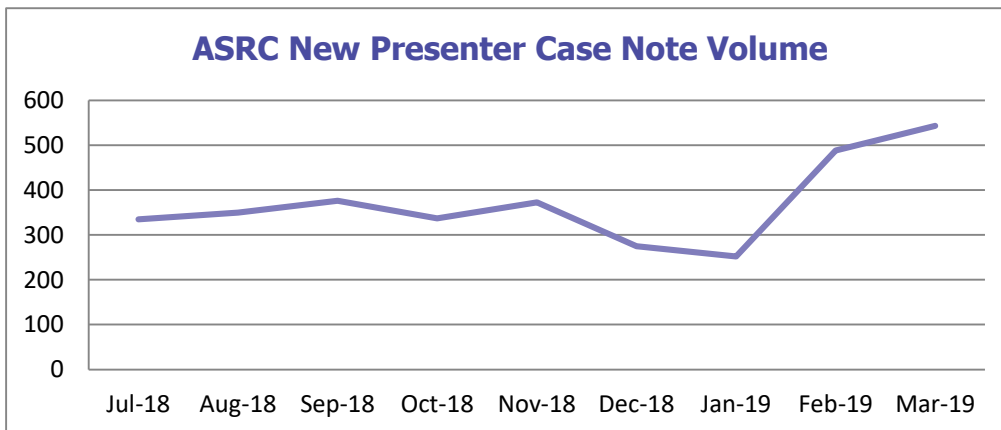


Figure 2ⁱⁱ

Housing

Housing is the biggest risk for people being cut off support services. The ASRC has been inundated with requests for housing and cannot meet the demand.

Families are currently increasingly at risk of homelessness.

At the peak of demand in 2018 the ASRC paid rent for 348 people through the Rent Assistance Program and has provided 64,643 nights of accommodation this financial year. This was up from only 96 people supported over 17,682 nights in the 2016 financial yearⁱⁱⁱ.

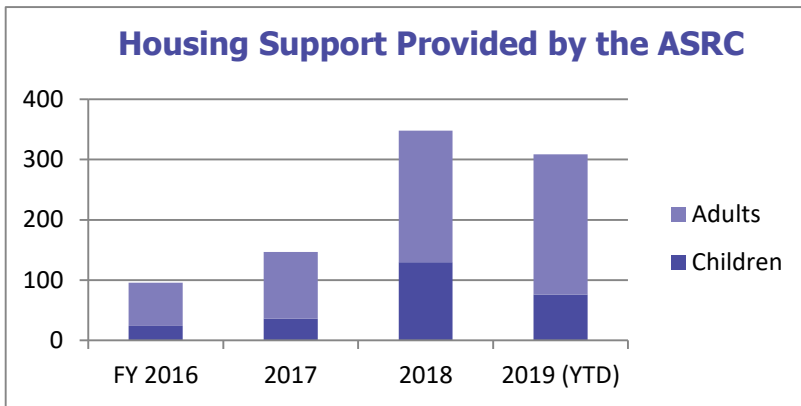


Figure 3ⁱⁱⁱ

Hunger

The ASRC runs a food bank and serves lunch every day for our members. Currently 750 people rely on our food services every week to feed themselves and their families. This has increased from 590 people per week at the beginning of 2018^{iv}.

We have had to develop a new service of Emergency Food Packs due to the ever increasing demand for food as a result of SRSS cuts.

Children and young people are increasingly hungry as families are cut off SRSS.

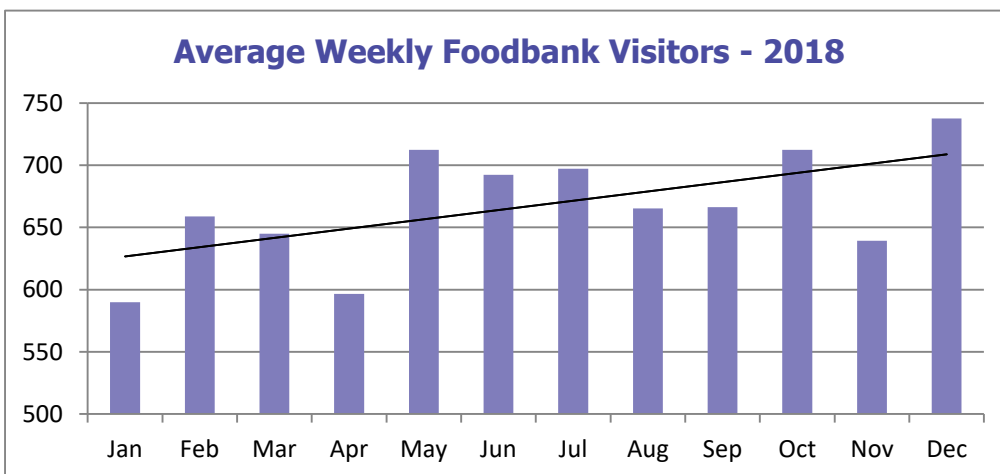


Figure 4^{iv}

Health deterioration

Social determinants such as housing and food security have a big impact on people's mental and physical health, therefore SRSS cuts compound vulnerability and risks to health.

This financial year, the ASRC has 1070 health service clients and has offered 1168 medical appointments.

Since December 2018, families with high risk mental and physical health concerns, young children and parents with none or limited work history in Australia are being referred to ASRC from SRSS providers for crisis support.

The health team is seeing increasing requests for assistance with hospital bills, pharmacy waivers and support for people with cancer or on dialysis.

The vulnerability and complexity of health needs of people accessing our health service is increasing and placing intensifying demand on nursing staff and volunteers.

Case study: Access to medicines and medical care

Julia is in her late 50s and is on medication for mental and physical health conditions. She is learning English and does not have enough language skills to find a job. She volunteers in a kitchen and is reliant on a food bank.

Julia received SRSS payments while she waits for an outcome in the Minister's 'Fast Track' legal process. She was cut off SRSS by the department in October 2018 and lost access to her medication, she is unable to pay rent, is relying on emergency housing and emergency food and pharmaceutical packs. Julia faces imminent homelessness.

Exploitative work

People seeking asylum who arrived by sea after 13 August 2012 waited for 3 years to lodge a protection application. Almost everyone did not have the right to work in Australia as a condition of their bridging visa, and thus were forced to rely on SRSS.

When the government cuts off support, people are given work rights and told to find work.

Many people are not 'job ready' as the government demands them to be for a number of reasons:

- living for years without the right to work and a chance to build skills and networks
- health impacts of trauma complicates capacity to find and retain a job
- short-term and uncertain visa conditions
- low levels of English language proficiency and no support for classes
- lack of Australian workplace experience
- unrecognised or undervalued qualifications
- bias and discrimination

The ASRC's employment program currently serves 578 people.

We have estimated that 90% of new requests for help to find work are from people who have been cut off SRSS or were never eligible for it, such as people arriving by plane more recently.

New requests for employment services increased by 25%-30% initially as the government rolled out cuts to SRSS.

The increase in demand has since stabilised at around 10%-15% because the program has introduced screening for work capacity and readiness (including EAL screening).

ASRC Dandenong and the Hub in Footscray have recently implemented a Pathways to Employment pilot program, with intensive "English for Work" classes for literacy, numeracy and digital literacy for those who fail the initial EAL screening for job placement.

Government budget cuts for 2019-20 removes access to job services for 12 months for people seeking asylum entering the labor market.

People with English ability below level 3 are forced into cash roles, sometimes within their own communities.

Living without a safety-net compounded with barriers to finding a job forces people seeking asylum into exploitative work in unsafe and often abusive conditions.

People are marginalised because they are forcibly prevented from fully contributing to the economy, labor market and community.

Case study: Vulnerability to exploitative work

Amir started working in a bakery 6 hours a day for a \$120 per day, 3-5 days a week. Every two weeks Amir is asked to work more hours per day but with his daily rate staying the same. His work hours increased to 8 hours, then 10 hours and then 12.

Amir told his ASRC case manager that he was afraid for his safety as he was getting burns on his skin during work and he did not get any breaks.

After five months Amir found he was being injured too many times and could not stay in the job. His case manager supported him to leave the job to put his safety first.

He was then unemployed for three months and the ASRC supported Amir to use his networks to find a construction job. However, because he could not do any training on his visa class, he could not do a safety course to obtain a 'white card'. He had to take a big risk of being caught by the department and do the course anyway as he would have lost his job after a week without the card.

Building self-sufficiency

The ASRC advocates and supports people seeking asylum to become self-sufficient contributors to our economy and community because that is what our members truly want to do.

Government policies that remove safety-nets and create crisis lead to forced dependency, extreme disadvantage and marginalisation.

To meet Australia's asylum obligations to human rights, the government must stop cutting off families from live saving support services.

People's reliance on SRSS or charity for protracted numbers of years will decrease if applications for asylum are processed fairly and quickly, and those who are owed protection are granted permanent protection visas with work rights, a safety net and support to participate fully in the economy and community.

The ASRC calls on both the LNP and the ALP to commit to restoring SRSS for all people seeking asylum within 100 days of the new government.

References

An unnecessary penalty: Economic impacts of changes to the Status Resolution Support Services
<https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/srss-economic-penalty/>

Refugee Council of Australia Federal Budget summary
<https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/federal-budget-summary/>

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- ⁱ "An Unnecessary Penalty: Economic Impact of SRSS Changes." Refugee Council of Australia. January 26, 2019.
- ⁱⁱ ASRC Case Data 2018/2019
- ⁱⁱⁱ ASRC Housing Data, 2018/2019
- ^{iv} ASRC Foodbank Data, 2018/2019



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