

Shepparton: A city that typifies Australia's rural social crisis

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Shepparton, a city in the Goulburn Valley, a fruit growing and dairy region 180 kilometres north of Melbourne, provides a microcosm of the social problems facing many Australian regional communities. A recent study revealed that mental health indices for Shepparton are consistently worse than the Victorian state average.

Other social statistics provide a glimpse of serious social problems, adding up to a picture of disadvantage, financial distress and insecurity. To make matters worse, the city has been singled out by governments, both state and federal, as a testing ground for austerity measures, with cruel results. The city was made a test case for “welfare quarantining” in 2011, and for stepped-up deindustrialisation in 2014. The consequence has been above-average unemployment and increased social polarisation.

The most recent of these experiments is the current imposition of an amalgamated super school by the state Labor Party government, enforcing a pro-business educational restructure with disastrous outcomes. Far from alleviating the existing social tensions, the troubled restructure has served to exacerbate them.

A recent *Shepparton News* article highlighted the release of an inaugural Murray Health Report on May 13. It showed that Shepparton is recording alarming levels of acute psychological distress, bullying and disadvantage.

In 2017, 34.4 percent of the adults in Greater Shepparton were diagnosed by a doctor with anxiety or depression, compared with the state average of 27.4 percent—itself a staggering figure. In 2017–2018, 14.9 percent of adults in Shepparton had high or very high levels of psychological distress, compared with the Australian average of 12.9 percent.

These trends will have been intensified by the

coronavirus pandemic. Considering the forced merger of all the local high schools into the “super school,” the indices concerning young people are doubly concerning.

The proportion of Shepparton children developmentally vulnerable in two or more domains in 2018 was 19.4 percent, almost double the state average of 10.1 percent, and far above the Australian average of 11 percent and the Murray Region average of 11.8 percent.

Reported instances of bullying for school years 7 to 9 (the youngest secondary years) for 2018 in Shepparton were 22.7 percent of students, while the state average was 17.5 percent. Bullying for school years 5 and 6 (the highest primary years) in Shepparton affected 17.8 percent of students, while the Victorian average was 15.9 percent. Anecdotal evidence indicates that bullying has further increased since the creation of the amalgamated secondary school.

Other educational statistics also place Shepparton worse than the state average. For example, in 2018, annual days absent in secondary school per child were 26.3, compared with the Victorian average of 19.2.

The merged school has meant the elimination of special needs and student well-being programs, and experienced teachers have been driven out. The merger has provoked widespread community opposition, fearing just such consequences.

People living in Shepparton have been singled out as austerity trial victims by federal governments, both Labor and Liberal-National.

In 2011 the Gillard Labor government imposed a pilot “welfare quarantining” program—a punitive measure against welfare recipients—in selected locations, including Shepparton. Jobless parents had 70 percent of their benefits withheld for “income

management” and other unemployed people had it applied to 50 percent of their payments.

This measure, first imposed on Aboriginal communities in remote areas of Australia, was designed as a means of forcing people off government payments.

The deteriorating conditions in Shepparton were intensified in 2014 with the announcement of the closure of the SPC Ardmona cannery, one of the main employers in the region, with a direct workforce of 1,000 and 4,000 indirect employees. This followed the refusal of the Liberal-National federal government to fund a \$25 million “rescue package.”

Despite the trade unions’ complicity in offering a two-year wage freeze and productivity increases, the government declared the decision was necessary to eliminate “uncompetitive” plants.

An appendix to the Murray Health Report provides a range of statistics that indicates the deepening level of disadvantage. Shepparton’s official unemployment rate in 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic, was 7.8 percent, compared to the Victorian rate of 4.6 percent and the Australian figure of 5.2 percent.

In 2014, 16.1 percent of Shepparton residents delayed a medical consultation because they were unable to afford the cost, while across Victoria the rate was 11.1 percent. Those in Shepparton who delayed purchasing medication due to cost were triple the state figure.

In 2016, according to the national census, the median weekly household income in Shepparton was 82 percent of the state’s, resulting in a 13 percent higher rate of homelessness.

In 2017, the percentage of people on the disability support pension was almost double the state figure.

Shepparton has a diverse population, with 3.4 percent of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Island descent, 15 percent of residents born overseas and a number of recent immigrants, including refugees, alongside descendants of post-war soldier settlement farmers.

The Victorian average per local government area receiving humanitarian new settler arrivals is 54 people, while Greater Shepparton received 142. Many of these families fled war, social dislocation and deprivation, and require specialised care and attention, but are sent to areas that are already underfunded, underserved and understaffed.

A project by the Murray Primary Health Network, which worked with the local Hazara people from

Afghanistan, indicated that mental health remains a common and serious issue at individual and community levels for this group of Shepparton residents. The causes included family separation, pre- and post-arrival experiences, depression, anxiety and social isolation.

These social problems are part of a wider government and corporate offensive against the conditions of working people. The forcible merger of Shepparton’s public secondary schools clearly emerges as an anti-working class exercise carried out by a Labor government.



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