



**Lived
Experience**
AUSTRALIA

Royal Commission into the Robodebt Scheme

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Introduction

Lived Experience Australia Ltd (LEA) is a national representative organisation for Australian mental health consumers and carers, formed in 2002 with a focus on the private sector. All members of our Board and staff have mental health lived experience as either a consumer, family carer or both.

Our core business is to advocate for systemic change to improve mental health care across the whole Australian health system. This includes advocating for empowerment of consumers in the broad range of issues that impact their mental and physical health, empowering consumers in their own care and contact with health and social services, promoting engagement and inclusion of consumers and carers within system design, planning and evaluation and most importantly, advocating for consumer choice and family and carer inclusion and wellbeing. Our submission comes from the perspectives and experiences of people with lived experience of mental health challenges, their families, and carers.

Feedback on the Royal Commission Terms of Reference

1. The establishment, design and implementation of the Robodebt scheme:

- *who was responsible for its design, development and establishment*
- *why it was considered necessary or desirable*
- *any advice or processes that informed its design or implementation*
- *any concerns raised about its legality or fairness*

The Robodebt scheme indiscriminately targeted vulnerable people, causing significant and widespread harm to their psychological and financial wellbeing. The Australian welfare system provides targeted means of payments and benefits to a wide range of people who are the most disadvantaged or vulnerable in society. Therefore, the effective function of this system is critical to many families, including those with complex barriers to employment or any other source of income generation. These payments and benefits are tested against predetermined income thresholds, and under the Robodebt Scheme, the automated income verification process replaced the manual process and aimed to detect welfare fraud by comparing the income reported by the individuals (periodically) with their data from the Australian Taxation Office (ATO).

Communication Approach: Since its launch in 2016, the government has adopted the wrong communication approach that relied on threatening language. In 2016, for example, the then-Minister of Human Services appeared on TV threatening those who were overpaid "We'll find you, we'll track you down and you will have to repay those debts and you may end up in prison," he said. The repeated threatening language was criticised heavily by many organisations in the social services space. This and many other statements have ignored the impact of this communication approach on the psychological well-being of all welfare system users. They have indiscriminately targeted everyone in the system, especially those who had no knowledge of the reporting process or were confused about it. This communication approach has not improved throughout the scheme's lifecycle and has created a great amount of unnecessary stress and anxiety among those struggling the most.

Absence of Consultation: The Robodebt scheme aimed to automate the manual income verification process by automatically comparing the income reported by individuals to the ATO database. No consultation has been done prior to this project with any end-user groups, their representatives or service providers, which led to many complex issues that affected everyone on the system. Some of these issues are related to change management, technology, access and availability of information.

Shifting Accountability: Through the integration of accounting and technology in the form of an automated verification system, the government has shifted the responsibility of income accuracy to the end users who found themselves in a position where they were required to follow up with Centrelink on what they considered unjustified debt. There was little information provided on how the numbers are calculated, nor information available to the public to help. This has created unnecessary uncertainty and ambiguity and impacted the psychological well-being of those accessing the system. The hashtag #notmydebt is full of stories of users who were faced with debt letters from Centrelink that they believe it was utterly miscalculated.

2. Concerns raised following the implementation of the Robodebt scheme

- *the impacts that the scheme had on individuals and families*

Robodebt has enforced another level of complexity and difficulty on an already complex social issue by solely relying on online and data-driven processes and decisions. The integration of accounting and technology is a well-known approach that aims to adjust human behaviour. The online system and the data-driven processes have added unnecessary work to those who are already struggling with daily life challenges such as unemployment, technology, access to computers or reliable Internet and most importantly, the system was designed with zero attention to people's abilities or capacities. Everyone on the system was expected to become self-managed, financially responsible and had the technological capacity to perform what needed to be done. This has not only impacted the users of the system but rather forced massive challenges on service providers (employment services, mental health and disability support services) when people rushed to ask for help in reporting their income.

The Robodebt scheme disempowered people, causing significant long-term emotional trauma, stress and shame. Robodebt has placed a lot of ambiguity on the lives of welfare recipients. There was no reported consultation with end users, Centrelink staff, nor service providers regarding the design and implementation of the system. The aim of the system was solely to save Centrelink's Budget rather than improve people's lives, and welfare recipients found themselves in a position where this system was enforced on them with no preparation, consideration of their circumstances and minimum attention to co-production processes. Little information was provided to the public about the automated process and the algorithm behind it.

We are aware of several victims of the Robodebt scheme who experienced a range of emotional and psychological reactions, including stress, anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation and trauma. The extent to which individuals affected by the Robodebt scheme may require access to trauma-informed care will depend on a range of factors, including the severity and duration of their experiences, their pre-existing mental health conditions and support systems, and other personal and social factors. It is highly recommended that a personalised examination of each of these cases is conducted in order to fully determine the extent of the impact of Robodebt for each individual.

These concerns are exemplified by the comments of one of our LEA friends who stated,

“Shame is always felt when a person gets a debt notice. That notice was a gut punch for all folk. Every time I open my Centrelink app I worry about how I am going to be shamed or traumatised. This Robodebt debacle will lead to a generation like myself wondering if the next time I open my Centrelink app another Robodebt incident may happen. I am a super empowered person in life living with a mental illness and psychosocial disability, yet when I open my Centrelink app I always feel like a ‘dole bludger’. This term was a hark back to the 80’s, and now Robodebt makes me feel like I am a person who has been assumed to be a criminal.”

There are many people living with a psychosocial disability who receive Centrelink payments who struggle with or are all too often unable to organise financial concerns at all. Many people with mental health challenges, psychosocial disability, and/or neurodiversity issues have no supports to help. For example, we know that the NDIS serves the needs of only a small percentage of people with psychosocial disability. The Mental Illness Fellowship of Australia, for example, has stated that, “Each year, around 700,000 Australians living with complex mental health conditions require psychosocial supports to live well and connect as contributing members of their community. From this group, around 300,000 people will experience the most severe mental health conditions with additional complexities. The NDIS is projected to support 64,000 people in this group and only 75,000 people are currently being supported by existing Commonwealth and State/Territory mental health programs...The Productivity Commission Inquiry into Mental Health in Australia (2020) confirmed that at least 154,000 people with severe and complex mental illness are missing out on the psychosocial supports in the community they need to enable them to live well and independently.”¹

We also know that many people with disability receive the majority of support from family and informal carers who themselves may have disabilities, physical or mental health concerns to deal with, or may be caring for more than one family member. Many mental health carers are over the age of 65 years and many have been in their caring role for most if not all of the cared for person’s adult life. Family carers may or may not be as IT literate as needed to navigate complex automated online processes in order to get their needs met and that of the people who they provide care to. For example, we know that the ‘My Aged Care’ web portal is incredibly challenging for the very people it is purported to serve. Centrelink online systems and Robodebt are no different in this regard. This must change. Robodebt not only adversely impacted the person receiving Centrelink payments; it had many adverse impacts for the families and carers of these individuals, placing undue stress and burden on them too.

Complex automated processes like Robodebt within government departments put people within these high-needs groups at risk of having their financial affairs being put under the Public Trustee under various Guardianship Acts. This goes against every goal in policy to promote the human rights and maximise autonomy, control and choice in the lives of people with disability.

Other scheme failures like the ‘Pink bats’ scheme gained outrage from the community, particularly because it resulted in some people losing their life. We believe that the Robodebt scheme has not been highlighted as much as a ‘whole of community’ concern, despite instances of suicide by some and significant trauma and harm being caused to many, largely because it predominantly impacted poor and disadvantaged people. This response reflects deep-seated discrimination that must be addressed.

As a consequence of how Robodebt was implemented, people who received Robodebt notices and others who received Centrelink payment who were not directly targeted were immediately, and viscerally thrown into a situation of feeling unsafe, either directly or vicariously. For people who may have experienced abuse and trauma at other times in their lives, this coercive approach retriggered their trauma. As a LEA friend stated,

“When you are seen to be in debt, a person feels like their trustworthiness status will be undermined. The scheme chose to throw a blanket of assumption of guilt by AI without choosing to share this information through an interview in-person that led to trauma. Collaboration with people about an issue of financial struggles by people was totally absent and led to trauma.”

Another LEA friend stated,

“I was unable to work due to Centrelink and then found out I was owing money to Centrelink, which was a shock as I had correctly reported my situation. I was renting a house and was unable to

¹ MIFA (2023) Pre-budget Submission to the Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care

pay the rent, had to rely on parents, which was difficult at the time as the breadwinner was recovering from a traumatic brain injury and was unable to work.”

There are several reform priorities that are important to ensure that victims of the Robodebt scheme and other vulnerable Australians struggling with debt have access to trauma-informed care and support. Some potential reform priorities might include the following:

- Improve the availability and accessibility of mental health services and care by ensuring sufficient response to the needs of people struggling with the traumatic impact of Robodebt. This includes the removal of barriers to access such as simple access points, reduced waiting time, reduced stigma around mental health, reduced cost of treatment and Medicare cover, address language barriers, and provide interpretation and implement outreach projects to identify victims of the scheme who are invisible.
- Promoting awareness and understanding of trauma-informed care: Many people may not be aware of the concept of trauma-informed care or how it can help them. Increasing awareness and understanding of trauma-informed care among service providers, policymakers, and the general public can help to ensure that more people are able to access this type of care.
- Develop targeted and specialised programs and services: some victims of Robodebt have faced complex traumatic experiences that might require specialised programs and services which are not available in the current position of the mental health services. Developing targeted programs and services that are tailored to the needs of these individuals can be an important reform priority.
- Building the capacity of service providers: Service providers who are trained in trauma-informed care may be better equipped to meet the needs of people who have experienced trauma. Building the capacity of service providers, including all Centrelink staff, to provide trauma-informed care and contact can be an important reform priority.
- Centrelink needs to call all people who received a Robodebt notice, regardless of the debt being true or false. Ideally, this could be from a peer worker employed by Centrelink to apologise for this debacle. “Please don’t employ psychologists or HR people to contact victims of Robodebt to apologise as they will make people feel like they were essentially in some way wrong through the use of non-person-centred language.”

Contact

We thank the Robodebt Royal Commission for the work it is doing on this important national issue. We wish you every success with the next steps. We would be keen to discuss further, any clarification or issues raised here with you.

Your sincerely

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References:

The following article provides great insights on future improvements: [Lessons to be learned from failed Robodebt scheme | Victoria Legal Aid](#)

Other Useful References:

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- c. [Is the Coalition profiting off Australia's most vulnerable people with its robodebt scheme? | Australia news | The Guardian](#)
- d. [Homeless woman says Centrelink took entire \\$3,500 tax return for disputed robodebt | Centrelink debt recovery | The Guardian](#)
- e. [These are the seven Robodebt issues put to Scott Morrison for 'consideration and comment' - ABC News](#)
- f. [Lessons to be learned from failed robodebt scheme | Victoria Legal Aid](#)
- g. [Not My Debt](#)
- h. [Concerns as 'vulnerable' welfare recipients targeted by Centrelink robodebt | SBS NITV](#)
- i. [Algorithmic accountability: robodebt and the making of welfare cheats | Emerald Insight](#)