Marginal Men

Mark Peel has fond memories of Elizabeth, the tough working-class suburb in Adelaide where he spent his early years. A few years ago, the Monash University historian revisited the suburb to find out how the working-class community was changing. Over many months he conducted hundreds of interviews, not only in Elizabeth but in struggling suburbs elsewhere: Melbourne's Broadmeadows, Brisbane's Inala and Sydney's Mount Druitt.

When he arrived in each place, he noticed something strange.

"If you drive through the poorer areas, you get the impression that no men live there. The public space – the streets and shopping centres – are filled with women and children. The men are all sitting at home waiting to work again."

These are all suburbs containing pockets, housing estates, where adult male unemployment hits 30, 50 or even 60 per cent. Robbed of their role as providers, the married men in these communities struggle to maintain their place in their families. But there was another group of men Peel came across – men on the fringe. "There was the story about the 32-year-old still living with his mum. No money, no job, nowhere to go. Stories about young single men on their own who end up committing suicide because there's no future. And, most of all, young men blocked from becoming real men, family men, because they can't get work. Many of these young men are ending up on their own. They have no path, no way in."

Mark Peel discovered a group of men who are being locked out. Excluded from family life, from settled relationships and marriage. Men whose lack of economic resources are now sentencing them to life as outsiders.

They are a rapidly growing breed according to Dr Bob Birrell and Virginia Rapson, from Monash University's Centre for Population and Urban research, whose 1998 report, *A Not So Perfect Match*, showed dramatic shifts occurring in partnering patterns in Australia.

Their research showed that between1986 and 1996 there was been a substantial increase in unattached males. For men aged 30 to 34 the percentage unpartnered increased from 29 to 37 per cent, while the increase for 35- to 39-year-olds was from 21 to 29 per cent. At an age when traditionally men were raising young families – their early 30s – it was startling to discover only half of all men were married, with a further 10 per cent in de facto relationships. Almost one in four men in their 40s was unpartnered[1].

It was mainly the poorer men who were being left out. In 1996 only half of men aged 30 to 34 earning less than $15,600 were in couple relationships compared with 76 per cent of men earning $52,000 or more. By the of age 40 to 44 the proportion of partnered men in this poorer group rose to 65 per cent, while 87 per cent of the high earners had partners. We're not talking here about some tiny minority of the population. Massive numbers were being affected by these changes – 19 per cent of men aged 25 to 44 earned less than $15,600 in 1996 according to Birrell's analysis.

These men were hit hard by the deterioration in the male labour market in Australia, which led to a 7 per cent drop in full-time work over the previous decade. A striking 30 per cent of men in their 30s were not in full-time employment. There was clear evidence that this dramatic drop in men's capacity as breadwinners meant many were unable to maintain stable relationships. Bob Birrell found men in full-time work were far more likely to be partnered than those in casual or part-time employment. Linking occupation with men's partnership status, he showed that men in high-status jobs, such as managers, were far more likely to be married or in de facto relationships than unemployed men or men in low-status jobs. So, for men aged 35 to 39 in 1996, 82 per cent of managers were in couple relationships compared with only 54 per cent of unemployed men and 66 per cent of men in labouring and similar jobs.

This strong trend for such a large sector of our male population to remain unpartnered is well known to those working in disadvantaged communities. John Embling, founder of Melbourne's Families in Distress Foundation, has been working with low-income families for many decades. He has long been aware of this growing group of unpartnered men. He refers to them as "floaters", drifting at the edges of society.

"Since the '80s I've started seeing more and more of these blokes," he said. "It's become a real phenomenon. These itinerant men float around, sometimes trying to find an old girlfriend in the hope she'll put them up for a few nights, or going back to Mum, if she'll have them. They come and go from pretty second-rate rental situations, caravan parks, boarding houses. Many of them end up as pretty pathetic characters, broken down and sometimes into pretty serious addictions. No-one wants them, no-one knows what to do with them."

The Birrell data showed surprisingly high numbers of low-income men end up living at home with their parents. For the low-income men aged 30 to 34, 15 per cent were still at home with their mums or dads.

So what's going on here? Bob Birrell's explanation as to the plight of these men lies in what's called "resource" theory, the notion that low-income males fail to make lasting relationships because they haven't the goods to attract and support women.

Birrell referred to the substantial literature on the plight of American black men who have become increasing detached from family life – most black children are now being brought up by sole mothers. Many American commentators believe a major factor contributing to this trend is the low economic resources of the black man, which reduce the economic gains from marriage and hence increase marital disruption and the likelihood that sole mothers remain unattached.

Birrell's finding that a similar pattern was emerging in Australia has big cost implications for this country. The deteriorating mental and physical health of this male population is well documented. But Birrell also suggested a link between male detachment and the growing numbers of single mothers and consequent rise in the welfare bill.

Compounding the problem is the sheer impossibility of extracting child support payments from impoverished fathers who form a significant part of this population.

"The damage that has been done to the male workforce through the economic restructuring is now coming back to haunt us," Birrell said. "There's a very strong connection between the economic circumstances of these men and the increasing numbers of poor single mothers supporting children on their own."

It wasn't hard to find Australian men in this plight but far harder to persuade them to talk about it. This 40-year-old man – I'll call him "James" – preferred to remain anonymous. He was reluctant to be named because he had been unemployed or in part-time jobs for most of his adult life but had just scored a decent job and was nervous that publicity may jeopardise his hard-won situation.

For James, the link between his lack of resources and his unpartnered status was obvious: "I've had women interested in me and then when they found out I didn't have a job, or when they found out where I lived, they didn't want to know me anymore." He was living in a room in a boarding house in Marrickville. It was pretty basic, but better than some of the other dives in which he had lived. He went home to his mother for a while but she couldn't handle his being out of work, so he moved into his present place and was staying there until he managed to get a little more firmly on his feet.

But he was very conscious that his rough abode doesn't help when it comes to the ladies. "I wouldn't bring any woman back here," he said. "When people ask where I live, I just lie."

Not that James was holding his breath expecting some great new romance. He'd been on his own much of his adult life, apart from a few casual relationships and a period in his 20s when he lived with a woman. She was a uni student, he was unemployed but then was pretty active in various political causes such as the men's movement. All was

fine until she graduated – soon after, she moved out. Since then he'd been through a decade or so of women making it clear that they are not interested. James sums up what he's learnt about women. "If you are a woman and you want a man, it's not so much what he's like; it's 'Does he have the car? Does he have the clothes? The money?' It's a big part of women's culture to go after the bloke with the money. Women who don't think they can make it on their own want to latch onto a guy who's making it so their own lives will be easier."

Even though he was, at the time of the interview, better placed, James wasn't optimistic about his chances of settling down. "In some ways I have given up. I'm not feeling too confident about myself."

I talked to Paul Whyte, a Sydney counsellor who often worked with unemployed, low-income males. He was well-aware of their social isolation. "These men often have a sense of complete hopelessness and worthlessness," Whyte said. "They internalise their economic position. As far as women are concerned, they don't want these men around. They see them as just too dribbly, needy, useless. 'No, Thank You!'

In trying to help these men gain some sense of self-worth, Whyte found he was pushing upstream. His conversations with these men revealed they were all too aware of how they were seen by women. "They are treated with such open disrespect, like the women who roll their eyes when they are around. It's seen as all their fault for being such a failure as a male."

This was an important theme that emerged in Mark Peel's historical analysis of the changes occurring in working-class suburbs. Males in these communities are usually the most traditional of men, whose sense of masculinity is utterly bound up in their role as providers. "That's what it meant to be a man in the working class," Peel said. "Men earned a wage and brought it home. Work provided the momentum of their lives."

In such a context, unemployed or a failure to find full-time work hits very hard indeed. And as any welfare worker will tell you, the psychological consequences for these men are all too apparent, ranging from anger and depression, through to substance abuse and even suicide.

"They are emotional basket cases," says Margana Smith, 22, from Mount Gambia in South Australia. Smith had had her share of unemployed boyfriends but found them heavy going. "They carry all their shit with them. They become too emotionally dependent on you because they have so many problems of their own."

But what was happening to the women? If there were so many men remaining unattached, surely this must have left large numbers of women on their own, particularly

in these disadvantaged suburbs.

The Birrell figures showed there were indeed plenty of unattached women, but comparatively fewer in the younger age groups (25 to 34) where there was a surplus of more than 90,000 unattached males. (Younger men tend to be in surplus because of the sex imbalance at birth, plus the fact that women usually marry older men.)

By the age of 35, the numbers reversed, with more unpartnered women than men. This is particularly true in lower-income suburbs – for men and women in their 40s in 1996, there were over 35,000 more unattached females than males, with the unattached female surplus significantly higher in the groups lacking post-school qualifications. By the early 40s, most of the unattached females (37 per cent) and 55 per cent of the males were divorced. Theories abound to explain this overall trend towards delaying marriage or avoiding permanent partnerships. Certainly, in the more affluent, better-educated population, women's increasing economic independence was encouraging them to explore the benefits of such options. Equally, it may be that more affluent men were showing some fear of commitment with the costs of divorce so loaded against them.

But at the other end of the income scale, more traditional values were still holding sway and marriage remained women's best hope of improving their situation. But complicating the mating game with this group is the fact that large numbers of unpartnered women are single mothers. By the age of 35, more than half of all unattached women had children, with the proportion of single mothers far higher in lower-income groups.

While most of these single mums in the older age groups were divorcees, particularly in low-income suburbs, there also had been a rapid increase in the number of unmarried young women having children on their own. Twenty-seven per cent of Australian children were born out of wedlock and more than half of these ex-nuptual births were to women under 25.

By 1996, there were 101,224 female sole parents aged 15 to 29, up from 75,533 in 1986. Of these women, 71 per cent had never married in 1996 compared with 53.5 per cent in 1986. Three-quarters of never-married lone mothers were on welfare.

Many working with disadvantaged communities believe that the declining breadwinning capacity of the low-income males is contributing to this trend because they are unable to entice single mothers into permanent partnerships.

Andrew Humphreys was a social worker operating in the Dandenong area of Melbourne. His research work on male suicide gave him insight into the troubles of

low-income males – Dandenong has the highest suicide rate in Victoria and one of the highest in the world. He found that when they are young, the women in his area were happy to be with low-income males. “At 20, it’s whether he has a car, or is good looking or has a nice haircut.” But once they are older, and more often than not have a child or two in tow, then their priorities were different.

Said Humphreys: “She’ll then be hoping to marry out of her situation. You are not going to marry a lemon. You are not going to marry someone who is in the same boat as you are. You want the guy with the job and the Commodore.”

But there just aren’t enough guys with jobs to go around. Not only are many of the men Humphreys came across unemployed but most were pretty unemployable. “In this group you’ll find a huge over-representation of men who can’t read or write” – a result that Humphreys attributed squarely to the failure of the education system to address critical issues affecting boys’ education.

According to Humphreys, this was having a big impact on the marriage market in such areas. “This is the first generation of young women who’ll be largely picking their husbands from men who earn less than they do, men who are less educated, less employable and often coping less well than they are.”

This was a strong theme to emerge from conversations with welfare workers – they have a strong sense that the women in their communities are coming out on top. Some are benefiting from efforts being made to improve girls’ education but others gain maturity through becoming single mothers.

John Embling, of Melbourne’s Families in Distress Foundation, said: “The single mums had a pretty rough and ready education in the mechanics of survival; they’ve learnt how the system works, become involved in re-education schemes with the schools. It all brings them back into the mainstream, re-socialises them, and they end up quite robust, strong. The last thing they want is a broken-down guy who can’t hold down a job.”

As the Birrell research showed, while the male workforce was contracting, women’s participation was improving significantly. Over the previous decade there had been roughly a 7 per cent improvement in the proportion of women aged 25 to 44 in employment – although mainly in part-time work.

Humphreys said women in his community had noticed the score. “They are angry at what’s happened to their potential partners. They are aware that their group of guys is impaired in some ways. That the pond they are fishing from is not a very good pond.”

But for those women who do have children, there were also are other issues – such as welfare payments. For a woman on a lone-parent’s pension there can be real financial

penalties associated with taking on a low-income male. If she acknowledges living with a male, she must then give up the lone parent's benefit, (now known as the "parenting payment") but the couple could still receive welfare support if their combined income remained sufficiently low.

This means that even if the man is unemployed, their combined welfare payments would exceed her previous pension. For instance, a sole parent with a 10-year-old child would have a disposable income of $247 a week from her pension. Living with a man on unemployment benefits, their combined disposable income would be $342.00 – a significant advance[2].

Yet most single mothers didn't see it that way. As Deb Pedretti, a welfare worker in Moe in Victoria, and herself a single mother, explained: "You are going from having your own income, and knowing what's coming into your bank account, to all the hassles about who is going to divvy up what, not knowing if he'll spend the pay cheque before you see it. Most of these women have been down this path before. They've learnt to cope on their own and they don't want to go back to all that."

It may well be that part of the explanation for the increases in unattached males and females showing up in census figures lay in the conditions governing these welfare provisions.

Sole mothers were allowed to have defactos stay overnight three times a week before having to shift to couple status but Deb Pedretti acknowledged many single mothers stretch the rules. "There's heaps of it going on. There are plenty of people I know are cohabiting but still they'll come to me wanting help with forms for sole-parent's benefits."

But there are many others whose economic circumstances presented genuine obstacles to re-partnering. A substantial proportion of the unattached low-income males, particularly in the older age groups, had in fact already been married. But many of these divorced men were so badly hit by the financial consequences of the marriage break-up that they had little hope of forming stable new partnerships.

The Birrell data showed that men in the lower-income groups were far more likely to remain divorced or separated than higher-income men. For example, of the ever-married men aged 35 to 39, 24 per cent of men earning less than $15,600 were divorced or separated in 1996 compared with just 10 per cent of those in the $52,000 income group. Over the previous decade the proportion of men remaining unattached after divorce in low-income suburbs increased dramatically but remained stable with more prosperous men.

A study conducted at the Research School of Social Sciences at the Australian National

University showed that many of these low-income divorced men could barely afford to support themselves, let alone pay child support. The research showed that men earning under $15,000 a year were required to pay about half their disposable income, (excluding a minimal self-support component), in child support.

The Birrell research included an intriguing new analysis of Child Support Agency figures which showed that 46.2 per cent of men registered with the agency reported incomes of less than $16,000. It's true that some of these men may have been involved in income minimisation and others deliberately cut back on their earnings to avoid paying what they should. But the ANU research showed many were simply not in any position to support their children.

Steve Carroll was a nurse/educator working at Long Bay Jail in Sydney. He came across plenty of prisoners who are in jail for defaulting on paying child support. They were usually males who have been struggling on very low incomes, living from day to day. "They couldn't have paid in a fit, they are so chaotic and disorganised."

It's hardly surprising that many of the low-income divorced men were bitter at the obstacles they face in finding new relationships. For instance, there was a very nasty little surprise for any sole mother who decided to live with a man paying child support. The way the system was set up, the calculation of the new family's entitlement to the family payment was then based on their combined household income but this income test failed to take account of the fact that he could lose substantial amounts through child support. So, her welfare payments could be reduced significantly, yet they don't even have access to the income he was assumed to provide.

Greg Holmes was eating banana sandwiches three weeks out of four in order to afford food for his four children when they stayed with him a week every month. He was a farm labourer living in a weatherboard shack near Coffs Harbour, a shack with no electricity or running water, and the dunny was a pit up the back.

The area was doing it tough, with unemployment about 30 per cent, but Holmes wasn't prepared to move away from his kids so he survived on casual work, mainly on banana plantations. For the previous two years, his income had been about $11,000 a year.

Greg was not optimistic about his chances of finding a permanent relationship. "The only way it would work would be if the lady had a good job and she'd end up supporting us while I supported my kids. Why would she want to do that? She'd be far better off having me as a boyfriend rather than any sort of live-in relationship." In fact, Greg was involved with a woman, Susan Foster, 36, a single mother with four children. Foster was supporting her family on a pension plus a little casual work. She knew it would be many years before she had any hope of living with Greg.

“There’s just no way you can move in with your partner if he’s on a low wage or on the dole. It just puts so much stress on the relationship to have that financial crisis where he’s supporting another family and you’re losing some of your pension because he’s also expected to support you.”

Like many thousands of others, the couple was on hold, awaiting the economic miracle that would make it possible for them to be together. Meanwhile the community has to support them.

These alarming trends are costing us plenty, not only in growing welfare payments but the long-term social consequences of children being raised in poor single-parent families and many thousands of lonely men living on the fringes of society.

With youth employment reaching new heights, new generations are headed in the same sad direction.

The message to government and society is clear – we simply cannot afford to ignore the drastic need for more targeted education and training for these large numbers of working class boys and young men. We cannot leave them with no hope of a decent job. By depriving them of these fundamentals, we sentence them to a fringe existence, excluded from the comforts of family and community – a tragedy in a society that prides itself on giving everyone a fair go.