

The Great Depression and the pension

I lived through and since researched the social history of the Great Depression, World War II and the years that followed. I have major problems with the validity of the findings in some of the present pension research. My concern is that erroneous conclusions could be drawn from some of these findings which could affect the justice of the final outcome.

I have travelled with Older People Speak Out, holding both training sessions and forums for the last 15 years. Originally at the end of these sessions we asked for an evaluation form to be filled in by each participant. We changed this procedure to an oral evaluation after we were constantly told that there were many participants who believed they had neither the ability nor self-confidence to fill in the questionnaire. Although this came as a surprise to younger researchers, it certainly was not a surprise to any of us who lived through the Great Depression and World War II.

During the Depression a huge number of unemployed faced seemingly endless poverty. Many families were forced to live in “susso” camps or travel from place to place trying to find work. In some cases the women and children remained at home while the breadwinner took to the road. There were very few families who were not directly, or indirectly, gravely affected. It is difficult for anyone today to understand the hardship suffered by that generation.

Many of the children had very little or no education. This was not from choice, but from circumstance. What these children had was the fine example of their parents – particularly the mothers – who went without continually in order to give their children and their husbands the best of the little food that was available.

It was these mothers who would always say “Oh, I get by, I get by” no matter how hard or difficult the circumstances. It is this personal pride that makes these older single pensioners today maintain – no matter how difficult things are on a single pension – that they “get by”.

Many have told me that they have \$25 or less left a week for food after bills are paid; that they stay at home because they cannot afford to go out; that sometimes they cannot afford their medication. Doctors and nurses will speak of malnutrition ... but they still “get by”.

This same attitude of “making do” continued through the hardships of World War II. It is of course common knowledge that in those days males, rather than females, were given the advantage of education. After the war the old order – where women stayed at home – was reinstated. Those women who did work were dismissed on marriage. Very few women ever received superannuation.

People of that generation were determined to give their children the advantages they did not have – the best education they could afford, and the things they had gone without as children.

That generation knew they had the security of the pension for their old age: after all, they were paying for the pensions of the older generation of the day, and would duly receive their own pension when the time came.

They saved for their own home: to have the roof over their heads paid off by retirement was security.

Women in general deferred to their husbands, who were not only the breadwinners, but attended to the business aspects of family life, and were regarded as head of the family.

Consequently today, these "older" older women on a single pension find it difficult to – and lack the self-confidence to – fill in forms or even oral questionnaires. Most try to ensure they do not participate in surveys and research of any sort.

As a result, any research that does not divide responses from the pension group into single and couples could give false conclusions. Even if they do participate, many on a single pension are unlikely to tell it how it "really is" but rather indicate "I get by".

These women are fearful of "making waves". For those on a pension there is always the fear of destitution. This is so, particularly for those on a single pension who lived through the Great Depression – while younger recipients of Centrelink pensions who do not have this background will simply tell it as it is.

In considering the adequacy and inadequacy of pensions overall it is important that we do not compare apples with pears ... and that we understand the difference.