



1.0 Introduction

Australia is a diverse nation. Its more than 24 million people have diverse cultural, social and economic backgrounds, and live in a variety of communities. Each person has different abilities, resources, experiences and welfare needs. This chapter looks at the major concepts in understanding welfare across the Australian population.

So, what do we mean by a person's welfare? In the broadest sense, welfare refers to the wellbeing of people—being secure, happy, healthy and safe. This is why the terms 'wellbeing' and 'welfare' are often used interchangeably. *Australia's welfare 2017* is underpinned by the concept that a person's wellbeing results from the interplay of many interrelated individual, societal and environmental factors.

Welfare support provided or funded by governments is complex and wide ranging. Many may see it primarily as income support and tax concessions, but policies and programs for wellbeing extend far beyond this. For example, providing universal services for education and health—and targeted support for housing, employment, disability, ageing and aged care (among others)—is critical to the wellbeing of an individual and their family.

The Australian Government and state and territory governments, non-government organisations and individuals all contribute to welfare spending. In 2015–16, the Australian Government and state and territory governments spent more than \$157 billion on welfare, up from nearly \$117 billion in 2006–07. Welfare spending as a proportion of gross domestic product also increased over the period, from 8.6% to 9.5%.

This chapter profiles the welfare workforce—an estimated 478,000 people who work in early childhood education and care, residential care and a variety of other social support services, such as adoption support and disability assistance. The welfare workforce has grown by 84% (219,000 people) over the past decade. In 2015, it represented more than 4% of the 11.8 million people employed in Australia.

A special feature article commissioned for *Australia's welfare 2017* examines the extent and complexity of persistent disadvantage. It reports that several groups in the community face rates of deep and persistent disadvantage that are 2 to 5 times that of the national average. As the article makes clear, dealing with such disadvantage has potentially profound, positive social and economic effects.

Lastly, this chapter looks at the changing data landscape—in particular, the public data agenda, and the challenges and opportunities presented by 'big data'. It explores the ever growing expectation that organisations such as the AIHW can deliver high-quality information faster, while protecting individual privacy, and profiles the 'person-centred' data model for health and welfare services.

