

THE DEMOGRAPHY OF DISADVANTAGE

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This paper discusses the contribution that demographers can make to the study of disadvantage. Demographers from Malthus onwards have been interested in analysing disadvantage through the lens of demographic variables, notably fertility, mortality and population growth, and their effect on poverty and welfare, both at an aggregate level and in terms of intra-household differences in well-being. The methodology of demography, including the concern with getting denominators right, cohort analysis and standardization procedures, can contribute to the analysis of disadvantage in many different ways. As examples, this paper highlights two issues: that of inequality of access to quality education, and the social and economic disadvantage faced by Indigenous Australians. The goal of understanding the causes of disadvantage with a view to reducing it may be best served through multidisciplinary efforts, in which demographers should play a role.

Keywords: poverty, methodology, measurement, disadvantage, inequality, high fertility, education

In a world of inequality and injustice, does the demographer have something fresh and insightful to say about disadvantage, based on the methodology of demography or on particular ways in which demographers view the world? Just as importantly, are there insights from other disciplines of which the demographer needs to be aware? This paper is an attempt to explore these questions, focusing, admittedly selectively, on a number of areas where a demographer's perspective is likely to be relevant. First, different definitions and approaches to the measurement of disadvantage are reviewed, followed by a brief foray into the debate about poverty trends and inequality. The traditional areas of demographic concern – the relationship between population growth and human welfare – are touched on briefly. These relationships can be addressed at an aggregate level, or at a household or individual level. The focus on the effects of population growth on well-being can also be based on population growth disaggregated into its components. Fertility is briefly touched on in the discussion, but not mortality or migration, either of which could provide adequate material for a separate paper.

The largest sections of the paper discuss disadvantage through the examples of education, drawing on material from both the developing and the developed countries, and the situation of Indigenous Australians. The choice of these two examples for a demographer's perspective on disadvantage is based on no more than some

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experience in analysing educational materials, and an interest in the subject of Indigenous Australians.

Definition and measurement of disadvantage

If our policy aim is to reduce disadvantage, we need to be clear what it is we are aiming to reduce, and where such disadvantage is located in the society. Only when these matters are settled can we set about seeing what demography has to contribute: perhaps in measuring disadvantage, perhaps in considering how disadvantage is linked to demographic factors, perhaps in other ways.

A key element of disadvantage is a lack of material resources. Indeed, there is a line of continuity from the great political economists right through to current international agency emphasis on poverty alleviation that stresses income poverty. The World Bank claims that 1.2 billion of the earth's population survives on less than one US dollar a day. This statistic certainly focuses our attention on real need, even if it does raise measurement issues relating to purchasing power parity¹ and questions about how many more poor people there would be if we raised the hurdle (as is sometimes done) to, say, two dollars a day.

But we have to acknowledge that poverty is too narrow a concept to fully capture disadvantage. Being disadvantaged, and experiencing inequality, is more than a matter of income. Sen (1999: 87), in arguing for widening the concept of poverty to encompass 'capability deprivation', notes that income is not the only instrument in generating capabilities. Fincher and Saunders (2001: 5) note that we can experience disadvantage or advantage through dimensions of our lives such as the characteristics of the neighbourhoods we inhabit, or access to the collective resources of the communities in which we live. In some contexts, low income can be compensated for by public investment in public amenities and community facilities. And income support by itself cannot make up for the loss of self-worth experienced by those in long-term unemployment.

There is currently a ferment of competing concepts of human well-being and disadvantage. Led by development economists such as Amartya Sen and Richard Jolly, the UNDP promoted its Human Development Index in order to broaden the traditional emphasis on income. This index, though it has served to broaden people's thinking about poverty, has come in for criticism on a number of fronts (Kelley 1991; Castles 1998, 2000). The philosopher Nussbaum's 'capabilities approach' proposes that there is a set of minimum social, political and material conditions necessary to enable a person to live a 'truly human' life (Nussbaum 2000). The notion of social capital, defined in various ways by various users, but referring at least to 'the ability of actors to secure benefits of membership in social networks or other social structures' (Portes 1998: 4) has become popular among scholars, policy makers and even the World Bank, which promoted it to the development community as a kind of 'missing link' in its *World Development Report 1997*. Though social capital is usually constructed as a generalized social good (see Putnam 2000), it can produce negative results for individuals; processes of exclusion are the inevitable consequence of processes that privilege insiders (Portes 1998: 11–13). In European Union countries, the notion of social exclusion, deriving from the French tradition, has been gaining in popularity. Social exclusion emphasizes the multidimensional aspects of disadvantage, and focuses particularly on relational issues, such as inad-

equate social participation, lack of social integration and lack of power (Whiteford 1998).

Measurement of disadvantage can be in absolute or relative terms. A headcount index of poverty is an example of an absolute measure. But even the *term* 'disadvantage' implies a *relative* state, a comparison with those living in 'average' conditions. For poor people, it is not always the absolute level of poverty that concerns them, but sometimes the comparison with the living conditions of neighbours or some other reference group. Measures based on the Lorenz curve, such as the Gini coefficient, indicate the degree of inequality in the distribution of income or of some other variable considered relevant, and give a better sense of the extent of glaring inequality in a society. Such inequality in the distribution can be applied to a whole range of indicators considered to reflect dimensions of well-being, such as access to secondary education, use of public health services, or access to sources of credit.

Poverty trends and inequality

The consensus among poverty experts is that poverty in the world has decreased over the past decade: even the absolute number of poor people, and even more so, the proportion of poor people (Sala-i-Martin 2002: 19–20). There is no consensus, however, over the apparently simple issue of whether global income inequality is increasing. There is no shortage of rhetoric, particularly on the part of the critics of globalization, to the effect that global inequality is increasing. A media briefing issued by the Royal Economic Society in early 2002 asserted that there are widening income differences between the rich West and most of the rest, due to the strong period of growth in the rich world during the 1990s. This claim sits awkwardly with estimates by the International Monetary Fund (IMF 2001: 195) that the average annual growth in output per capita in the 'advanced economies' in the decade up to 2002 was only 2.0 per cent, compared with an average annual growth of 3.8 per cent in the 'developing countries' in the same period. But the argument of increasing inequality has some high-powered academic support as well. For example, one World Bank economist has argued, on the basis of household survey data covering the period 1988–93, that global inequality is not only high but rising (Milanovic 2002). Others (notably Dollar and Kraay 2002; Sala-i-Martin 2002) argue the opposite, based partly on evidence that China and India, which between them have about 38 per cent of the world's population, have experienced impressive economic growth.²

A report published by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs concludes that there is little support for the argument that economic growth is biased against the poor. It argues that on the whole, global inequality between countries has decreased (from the 1960s until 1998). As for within-country inequality, it has been reduced in half the countries and increased in the other half (Melchior, Teller and Wiig 2000).

Unfortunately, Australia appears to be one of those countries where within-country inequality has increased. 'Executive salaries grew with little restraint, enterprise agreements delivered good outcomes for workers in strong bargaining positions ... and award increases were left to serve as a safety net amongst the weaker sections of the workforce' (Watson and Buchanan 2001: 200). Gregory (1999: 14) highlights the polarization of families with dependent children into 'work rich' and 'work poor', and argues that around half of all Australian children can now

expect to spend as much as four or five years in a family without paid work, and an average of over eight years in a family without an employed adult male. The geographic polarization of poverty and unemployment between different regions in Australia and within Australia's cities has also been becoming more pronounced (Fincher and Wulff 1998; Gregory and Sheehan 1998). Despite these varied indicators of increasing inequality, however, the precise trend in income inequality over the past decade is not easy to determine.

Provided that income distribution does not become markedly more uneven during the course of economic development, economic growth has been shown to be the most effective way to reduce poverty in developing countries. A recent Asian Development Bank study of 18 Asian countries, using national poverty lines and survey estimates of consumption, found that the poverty incidence in these countries had fallen from 65 per cent in 1960 to 17 per cent in 2000. The biggest decline came during the last two decades. A striking example of poverty reduction is Vietnam, where poverty was cut in half in ten years: from 75 per cent of the population in 1988 to 37 per cent in 1998 (World Bank 2002). China, even with its increased inequality, has seen the most spectacular reduction of poverty in world history (Dollar and Kraay 2002). Slightly less spectacular declines in poverty have also been measured for Thailand and Indonesia (Warr 1998; Suryahadi, Widyanti and Sumarto 2002).

There can be, and are, debates about the exact trends, but not about the reality of a substantial decline in the incidence of poverty in these countries. At the same time, it needs to be kept in mind that the decline in proportions falling below the poverty line perhaps exaggerates the degree of progress achieved, because in many developing countries, a large proportion of the population have incomes not far above the poverty line.

Population and economic growth – an emerging consensus?

Since economic growth is a vital determinant of poverty levels, the much-debated relationship between population change and economic growth can also be considered, indirectly, to indicate the relationship between population change and poverty. Have the countries with the slowest rates of economic growth over recent decades been those with the highest fertility rates or with the highest population growth rates? The answer is in the affirmative for developing countries in the 1980s (Kelley and Schmidt 2001). Of course, this answer raises further important questions. Was the higher population growth a cause of the lower economic performance? Or vice versa? Or were both associated with other factors? The answer to all these questions appears to be a qualified 'yes'.

After agnosticism in the 1980s about whether lowered fertility rates would stimulate economic growth, cross-national research in the 1990s has helped put fertility reduction back on the agenda as a poverty reduction strategy in high-fertility countries (Kelley and Schmidt 2001). In recent years, increased attention has been paid to the 'window of opportunity' for faster economic growth provided by age structure changes consequent on fertility declines (Higgins and Williamson 1997; Williamson 2001). The argument is that a number of East Asian countries availed themselves of this 'window of opportunity' by following sound economic and social policies, enabling the large cohort of potential workers to acquire education and skills and

find productive employment. Inappropriate policies may well lead some other developing countries to fritter away the potential benefits of similar age structure changes. Not all economists are convinced by the evidence presented to assert that rapid population growth is a cause of poverty (see Ahlburg 2002). The issues are complex, and McNicoll (1997) reminds us that there are routes other than the direct population-economy one through which population change can influence poverty. Two of these are through environmental effects and effects on the social order.

The policy relevance of this particular debate for many of the world's developing countries, however, has been diminishing, with ever-increasing numbers of countries graduating from the high to the low-fertility category, and some indeed reaching below-replacement fertility. We now witness a growing dichotomy. For many countries, especially in East and South-East Asia, the need to reduce fertility is no longer an issue, but for others (Pakistan, Philippines, more generally for Sub-Saharan Africa and much of South Asia), it remains crucial.

Family-level consequences of high fertility

Aside from the aggregate analysis of the consequences of high fertility, the issues can also be addressed at a household level. Does having a large family correlate with household poverty and disadvantage? At least in developing countries, the answer is 'yes' (Lipton 1983; Merrick 2001). But what is the causal direction? Why do poor people have large families? There are many debates around this issue. One line of argument is that much of the higher fertility in developing countries is not really volitional, but results from inadequate access to the means of contraception, or from certain people (notably, the mother) not being given the opportunity within the household to act on their preferences. Measuring unwanted fertility has become a refined though still controversial art (Westoff and Ochoa 1991; Bongaarts 1997). The issue is important. If most births to poor mothers are indeed unwanted, family planning using modern contraceptives can be seen as contributing significantly to their welfare, rather than, as some radical feminists argue, inherently antithetical to women's interests.³ There can be criticism of the methods adopted in making the contraceptives available, and of the way poor mothers are treated by clinic workers, but not of the potential benefit of modern contraceptive technology in enabling women to avoid unwanted births. Studies in northern and northeast Thailand (Mougne 1978; Muecke 1984; Whittaker 2001), for example, emphasize that village women see new contraceptive methods as freeing them from drudgery and from the financial burden of sending many children to school, and enabling them to continue working and remain economically productive. As one elderly woman in northeast Thailand said, contraception has freed women from 'balancing the water buckets on a pole over one shoulder, having a baby in a sling at your breast and another child on the hip' (Whittaker 2001: 212).

A different line of argument is that in the institutional setting in which poor households find themselves in much of the developing world, large families make sense, at least in enhancing both economic and physical security (Caldwell 1976, 1978; Cain 1983; Oberai 1993: Chapter 6). Family strategies of using migration to minimize risk can also really work only where families are large (Stark 1991). The problem with a strategy of 'economic security through large families' is that the poverty of the household restricts the education, nutrition and health of the addi-

tional household members, thus reducing their productivity and incomes. It is really only a small step from such a strategy to the opposite strategy of lowering fertility as a path to economic mobility. Much depends on the perceptions of the poor about their chances of achieving economic advancement. Though these perceptions will not always be accurate, the removal of institutional obstacles to their prospects of benefiting from fertility reduction and human capital development may ultimately prove crucial to their strategy for economic advancement.

Power relationships within households may mean that certain members are disadvantaged by high fertility while others are not. For example, both the father and mother may feel that, even if there are certain economic advantages in limiting the number of children, such limitation can restrict the enjoyment of family life. However, as the mother is the one who has to undergo the rigours of childbearing and most of the burdens of childrearing, she may want fewer children than her husband does. In some more patriarchal family structures, there may be little or no communication between spouses on this crucial matter.

Demography and the analysis of disadvantage

The discussion thus far has followed the traditional pattern of demographic analysis of disadvantage: through the lens of demographic variables and their effects on poverty and welfare. From Malthus onwards, demographers, particularly those with a link to the economics profession, have seen a role for themselves in addressing the relationship between population growth and human welfare. This is a valid and broad-ranging concern. However, the demographer's methods, including the concern with getting denominators right, cohort analysis, and use of standardization procedures, can contribute to the analysis of disadvantage in many different ways. Much useful work has been done on disaggregating the effects of fertility changes by considering their different effects on different cohorts: for example, studies of the Easterlin effect of cohort size (Easterlin 1987). There is no need to limit this analysis to the effects of human fertility and population growth.

Demography as a discipline is probably also better equipped than others to study many aspects of intra-household differences in well-being that are ignored by the economists' concept of a household utility function. Intra-household differences in well-being flowing from particular fertility regimes, discussed in the previous section, have their parallel in many other areas, stemming from the uneven rights and endowments in relation to income and education accorded different family members on the grounds of age, sex, and other factors.

Education and disadvantage

Education has been lurking in the wings in this discussion, but now it can move to centre stage. Education is crucial for modern economic development, not only for the economic advancement of the individual recipients of that education, but collectively for the nation's economic development (Easterlin 1981). The contribution of education to economic growth preoccupied many economists in the 1960s and 1970s (see Psacharopoulos and Woodhall 1985). By the 1980s, technology was receiving more attention, but clearly technology could not be separated from the human agents who create or use it. Thus the 'new growth theories' emerging in the

second half of the 1980s gave considerable prominence to technology diffusion and the human inputs that enable technology to be effectively harnessed for development (e.g. Romer 1990; Barro 1997).

One of the crucial lessons to come from the human capital literature is the need to achieve universal primary school education, and the basic literacy and numeracy skills that this brings. Psacharopoulos (1993) shows that rates of return to education are higher for primary education, especially in the less developed countries. Mass formal schooling preceded economic growth in Western countries such as the United States of America and Germany, and it has frequently been cited as the main explanatory element in the four East Asian tigers' rapid economic growth in modern times (Ogawa, Jones and Williamson 1993; Chowdhury and Islam 1993; Sen 1997). Caldwell (1980) has argued that it was crucial in determining the onset of fertility declines.

Equity of access to education: gender and socio-economic background

Various studies have shown that the education of girls is particularly important for development. For example, Benavot (1989) applies a panel regression method to 93 developed and developing countries to investigate the long-term effects of enrolment rates at primary and secondary levels in the 1960–85 period. His results show a substantial contribution of primary education to economic expansion, but with important gender differences. 'In less developed countries, educational expansion among school-age girls at primary level has a stronger effect on long-term economic prosperity than does educational expansion among school-age boys' (Benavot 1989: 28). The importance of educating girls has been shown to be an essential foundation for building the next generation of human capital, because of the importance of mothers in determining the education and health of their children (Schultz 2002).

These findings provide a clear rationale for stressing the expansion of education for girls; the argument is further strengthened by the evident importance of female education in determining fertility decline (Jejeebhoy 1995; Schultz 1993). At the level of the individual, too, educational achievement is crucial for economic opportunity, for status within the household and for a number of aspects of personal development. Little wonder, then, that the 'population and development' literature these days gives considerable emphasis to the expansion of girls' education.

The rhetoric of international agencies, unfortunately, tends to get carried away with particular emphases, to the extent that valid facts (in this case, the importance of girls' education) are given invalid applications. The need to give priority to girls' education is indiscriminately argued, not only in those countries of South Asia and elsewhere where yawning gaps exist between enrolment ratios for boys and girls (Cavicchioni 2002), but also in countries such as Thailand and the Philippines, where, seemingly unknown to the proponents of the argument, the gender gap is essentially non-existent; indeed, in the Philippines, whatever gap there is at the secondary and tertiary levels favours females (Knodel and Jones 1996). Even less widely known is that the sex ratio of university students in one South Asian country, Iran, has changed in favour of females in recent years. In 1998, around 52 per cent of candidates admitted to government universities were female, a figure which increased to 57 per cent in 1999 and to 62 per cent in 2001 (Abdollahyan 2001).

Unfortunately, the stark differences across socio-economic groups in access to secondary education and above are almost totally ignored in a literature suppos-

edly devoted to population and development. In the case of Southeast Asian countries, there is no justification at all for this. Even for South Asia, exclusive emphasis on gender differentials is unjustified. Equity of access to education for different socio-economic status groups is an issue that knows no boundaries. I am unaware of any country where it can be considered satisfactory. Consider the following evidence.

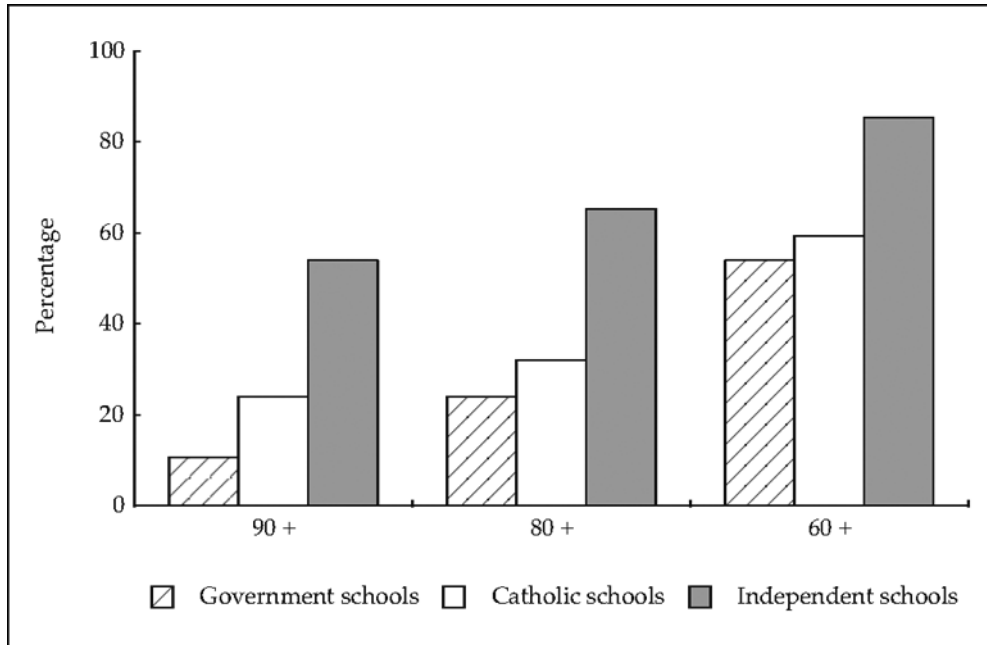
Asia. There is abundant evidence of the highly inequitable access to education for the children of poor, rural dwellers in Asia, where children of white-collar workers are overrepresented in higher education enrolments by a factor of 13 compared with children of farmers (calculated from Gertler and Rahman 1994: Table 4.13). In Indonesia, enrolment ratios increase with income in both urban and rural areas, the disparity growing as level of education increases. Data from the late 1980s show that by age 16–18 years (the upper secondary age group), school enrolment ratios rise from 36 per cent in the two lowest quintiles of households classified by household expenditure, to 53 per cent in the third and fourth quintiles and to 65 per cent in the top quintile (Gertler and Rahman 1994: Table 4.16). Differences between the highest and lowest deciles were even more dramatic: in 1989 only about two per cent among the lowest but almost all among the highest income decile were attending this level of schooling (World Bank 1993: 15–16). More recent Indonesian data, for 1998, show that inequality of educational access is striking, particularly at the upper secondary school ages, whether the data are arrayed by education of household head or by income level (Jones and Hagul 2001: Figure 2).

The lower income groups are disadvantaged not only by their much more restricted access to secondary education but also by the inability of poorly educated parents to help their children with homework, and by the much lower quality of the schools, both at primary and secondary level, that they are able to attend. These disadvantages are reflected in test scores. For example, not only does the Philippines score well below the mean of developed countries in tests of reading achievement of 14-year-old students, but it shows considerably greater variation around the mean, both of student scores and of test scores. This appears to be related to differences between rural and urban schools (World Bank 1995: 46).

One important element in the poorer quality of rural schools is their less-qualified teachers. 'The general trend seems to be a continuous displacement of teachers from rural to urban zones on the basis of official criteria and of individual negotiating skills so that, in the end, the least experienced and least qualified teachers start or end up in the countryside' (Carron and Chau 1996: 251). This problem is compounded by the greater frequency of one-teacher schools, or teachers having to take multigrade classes, in the rural areas. Teachers are not usually trained for this task (Carron and Chau 1996: 86).

Europe. In France, although the wide gap existing some decades ago in entrance to lower secondary school according to occupational status of parents has now almost vanished, this is not the case for access to upper secondary school or university, where the differences remain remarkably wide.⁴ Moreover, if the comparison is restricted to students who had been enrolled in lower secondary school, there has if anything been an increase in the gap between the access of children of professionals and of manual workers to the higher levels of education (Duru-Bellat and Kieffer 2001: 196–198). In other words, although access to the different levels of education has increased for most social groups, the inequalities previously observed at

Figure 1 Percentage of students achieving matriculation scores above certain levels by school type, Victoria, Australia, 2001



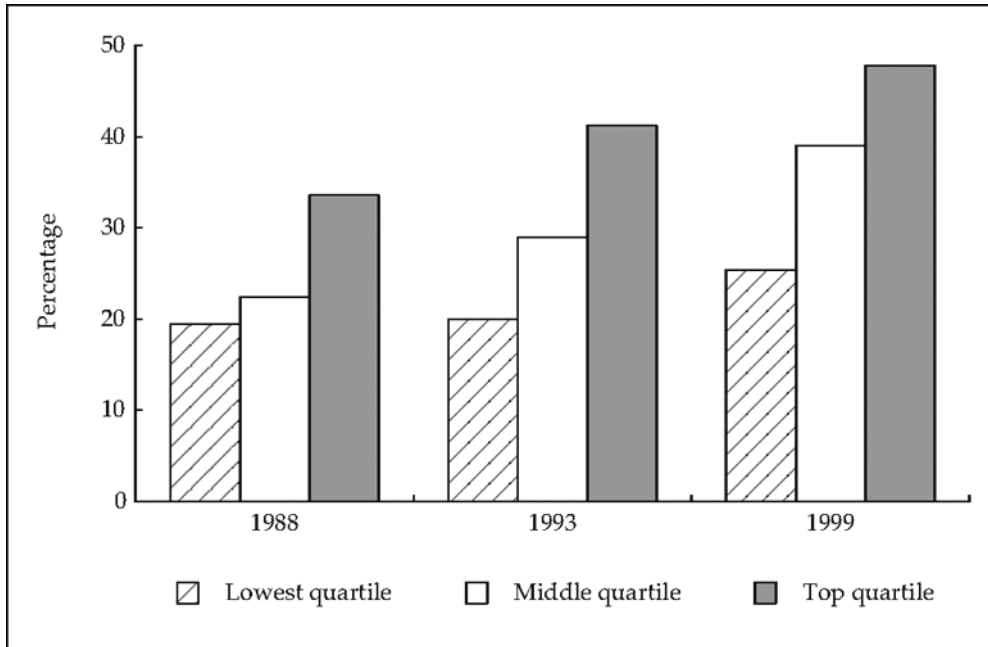
Source: Computed from Birrell *et al.* 2002.

the lower levels of the system have shifted to the higher levels. Further investigation is needed into whether the French case applies more widely in Europe.

Australia. In Australia, the advantage gained by young people attending expensive private schools is clearly demonstrated in the distribution of scores in the matriculation examination taken at the end of secondary school in the state of Victoria (see Figure 1). Whereas 59 per cent of students from independent schools had scores of 80 or higher, this was true of only 24 per cent of students from government schools. Equally troubling, there were wide differences in scores for government schools according to geographic location. Scores of 80 or higher were achieved by 42 per cent of students from government schools in high socio-economic status (SES) areas of Melbourne, compared to only 13 per cent from schools in low SES areas of Melbourne (Birrell *et al.* 2002: Table 13). It is highly unlikely that these differentials reflect differences in intelligence among students. It is more likely that the students in the independent schools and in the high-SES-area government schools have more supportive home and neighbourhood backgrounds, and that, particularly for the independent school students, the standard of teaching and facilities is better in the schools they attend.

Another study, based on International Social Science Survey data, found that parents with higher socio-economic status are much more likely than those with lower socio-economic status to send their children to non-Catholic private schools. Only four per cent of parents with less than a secondary school education sent their children to these schools, compared with 11 per cent of parents with secondary edu-

Figure 2 Percentage of persons aged 18–19 attending university by socio-economic background, Australia, 1988–99



Source: Chapman and Ryan 2002.

education and 23 per cent of those with university education. Correspondingly, 25 per cent of professional parents sent their children to these schools, compared with under 10 per cent of routine sales and service workers and less than four per cent of manual workers. These private schools succeed in graduating a higher proportion of their students from secondary school and from university as well, and their better performance does not appear to be due in great measure to the large differences in the family backgrounds of their students (Evans and Kelley 2002: 67–72).

Both these studies indicate the enormous educational advantage gained by children able to attend these private schools, and hint at the role they play in the perpetuation of privilege in Australian society. And this does not take into account the further elements of privilege that flow to private school students through 'old school tie' networks in the business sector and elsewhere.

Finally, Figure 2 shows university participation of 18- and 19-year-old Australians by socio-economic background in 1988, 1993 and 1999 (Chapman and Ryan 2002). Although university participation for all socio-economic groups has risen over this period, the gap between the lowest-quartile households and the highest-quartile households has actually increased.

What factors work against access to quality education?

A number of factors work against access to quality education for children from disadvantaged groups in the society. As Booth (2002: 196) has noted in relation to Indonesia, because of the up-front costs of education at the secondary and tertiary

level, 'it is the more affluent households that can afford to keep their children in school long enough to gain the entry-level qualifications needed for the better paid and more secure jobs in manufacturing and the modern service sector'. For poor and isolated rural populations, distance to secondary schools and the extra costs involved can be a significant deterrent to keeping children in school. So too can be the poor quality of these schools, and absenteeism among the poorly qualified teachers often assigned to them.⁵ The low reputation of the schools attended by the poor and the lower quality of the education that they receive in these schools seriously disadvantage them in the job market once they have left school.

An example is taken from a 1996 study in East Nusatenggara, one of Indonesia's poorest provinces. Many students from poorer families experienced great financial difficulty in completing their upper secondary studies; and these were already only a small remnant of children from poorer families, most of whom had already dropped out at lower levels of education.⁶ The principal burden on such students was the school fees and other costs, including the need for students to stay in town for their education in cases where they lived far from the nearest upper secondary school. Many such students entered into arrangements with a family in town whereby they were given accommodation and meals and in return worked for the family as domestic servants while continuing their studies. Many students were exploited under this system, and they had to work so hard that their performance in school suffered (Jones *et al.* 1998: 68).

Such factors cannot be addressed simply by making more resources available. The principal reason for the promotion of school integration in the United States was the finding of the 1966 Coleman Report on Equality of Educational Opportunity in the United States (Jencks 1972) that factors such as physical facilities, formal curricula, and measurable characteristics of teachers in black and white schools were quite similar. In any case, measured difference in these things had very little effect on either black or white students' performance on standardized tests. 'The one school characteristic that showed a consistent relationship to test performance was the one school characteristic to which most poor black children had been denied access: classmates from affluent homes' (Jencks 1972: 69).

If this was indeed the case in the United States, it suggests almost intractable problems in dealing with wide socio-economic status differentials between school classes in developing countries, or in Australia, for that matter. The processes observed in Australian cities are not really so different. The best teachers gravitate to private schools or to government schools located in higher-status suburbs. The increasing geographic polarization of high and low mean household income in Australian cities has attracted attention. Many children are now growing up in both households and neighbourhoods of poverty (Birrell, Mayer and Rapson 1997; Gregory 1999). In the United States, busing of black students to white schools and *vice versa*, though highly controversial, was at least clear enough as a policy aim. But to even suggest a similar policy in Australia, based on difference in socio-economic class rather than on ethnicity, seems ludicrous. And the problem in developing countries is not so much the socio-economic differences between students within a given city (which are certainly very wide), but rather the wide differences between the poor rural population, especially those living in more isolated areas, and the urban population as a whole. There can be no 'quick fix' for these differences. Poor rural children will inevitably be attending school with other poor rural children.

Government investment in education – the problem or the solution?

In social democratic countries, governments are called on to help redress patterns of disadvantage. Unfortunately, in most countries, far from redressing imbalance, patterns of government expenditure on education exacerbate differences in opportunity in the society. This is because government expenditure on education contributes to inequality of access to education, and it also contributes to inequality of outcomes within the education system. Why is this? Cost per student at the post-secondary level is a large multiple of cost per student in primary school. In most countries, the small group of students who reach post-secondary education receives heavy public subsidization. This group is highly selective of those from white-collar backgrounds, with higher family income levels (Tan and Mingat 1992: 84, 99–101). Put together, these two facts indicate a heavy usage of public funds to benefit those who are already advantaged by socio-economic background. The fact is that students who remain longest in the education system, who tend to be those from more advantaged socio-economic backgrounds, receive a disproportionate share of the public subsidies to education.⁷

Of course, the issue is more extreme in some countries than others. For example, the bias towards higher education in public educational expenditures is particularly pronounced in Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Papua New Guinea and many African countries.

We need to search for ways of improving the access of bright children from disadvantaged backgrounds to more advanced levels of education. The present situation, in which ‘survival’ to upper secondary and university education has more to do with social class than with inherent ability, is not only unjust but also extremely wasteful from a human resource development point of view (Jones 1989: 61). But the search poses difficult policy dilemmas. In principle, ‘user pays’ approaches together with heavy subsidization of students from poor backgrounds at all levels of the education system would be the logical way to deal with the issue. But even where the will is there to diminish socio-economic inequities, the approach is a difficult one to sell. For example, there is strong resistance by Australian undergraduates to payment of fees amounting to some 20 per cent of the cost of their university education, despite their access to special government loans, which they only begin to pay back once their income reaches a certain level.

Disadvantage among the Indigenous population in Australia

If any group in Australia needs to be selected out to illustrate extreme disadvantage, it is surely the Indigenous population. Indigenous Australian disadvantage serves to highlight the relevance of the concept of ‘social exclusion’, referred to earlier. Australia displays the greatest gap in indicators of well-being between the Indigenous population and the dominant settler population to be found in any of the ‘New World’ countries of European settlement. In some cases, these gaps are almost unbelievably wide: notably, the 20-year gap in life expectancy at birth, 56 years for Indigenous males and 63 for females, compared with 76 years for all Australian males and 82 for females, in 1997–99; age-specific death rates more than five times the Australian rate at ages 35–54, in the case of both males and females; reported rate of diabetes among Indigenous people aged 25–55 living in non-remote areas 7–8 times higher than for non-Indigenous people; proportion of adults

Table 1 Alcohol consumption and risk level by Indigenous status,^a Australia, 1995, percentages

	Indigenous	Non-Indigenous
Males		
Drinks alcohol	55.3	65.7
Low-risk level	32.8	55.3
Medium-risk level	10.8	5.4
High-risk level	11.7	5.0
Females		
Drinks alcohol	33.2	45.8
Low-risk level	27.1	39.7
Medium-risk level	3.3	4.8
High-risk level	2.9	1.3

a Persons aged 18 years and over; excludes people living in remote areas; rates are directly age-standardized to the 1991 Australian population; refers to consumption of alcohol in the week before the survey.

Source: ABS and AIHW 2001: Table A18.

with a university degree less than one fifth that of the Australian population (2.0 per cent as against 10.9 per cent). Many other indicators show Indigenous disadvantage, though perhaps less dramatically than the comparisons just given: for example, the proportion of adults who smoke is about twice as high as among non-Indigenous Australians; almost three times as many Indigenous households reported their homes to be in high need of repair as was the case for non-Indigenous households.⁸

Average figures often disguise a pattern of extreme disadvantage for subgroups within the Indigenous population. Figures on alcohol consumption are a case in point, as can be seen in Table 1. What would come as a surprise to most Australians is the evidence that in 1995, the proportion of Indigenous Australians consuming alcohol in the week before they were surveyed was lower than for non-Indigenous Australians, in the case of both males and females. Just over half of Indigenous males drank alcohol, compared with almost two-thirds of non-Indigenous males. Yet the proportion of Indigenous males who drank alcohol at a medium or high-risk level was 22.5 per cent, compared with only 10.4 per cent for non-Indigenous males. Of those Indigenous males who drank at all, 41 per cent drank at medium or high-risk levels, compared with 16 per cent of the non-Indigenous males who drank at all. The pattern suggests a deliberate avoidance of alcohol by a substantial proportion of Indigenous males, perhaps because of the bitter example of Aboriginal communities where alcohol has played a major role in the degradation of community life. But a significant proportion of Indigenous males do drink alcohol at problem levels. The pattern of use of alcohol among non-Indigenous males is quite different,

with a greater concentration of alcohol consumption at the socially accepted low-risk level (see Table 1).

For females, again perhaps contrary to popular stereotypes, use of alcohol is much more restricted in the Indigenous community than among non-Indigenous Australians. In contrast to the male pattern, although there is a small proportion (3 per cent) of Indigenous women drinking at the high-risk level, the proportions of Indigenous and non-Indigenous women drinking at medium- or high-risk levels are the same, six per cent.

Aboriginality as a risk factor for incarceration

The age-adjusted risk of incarceration is much higher for Aboriginal people. Indigenous adults are around 14 times more likely to be in prison than non-Indigenous adults (Walker and McDonald 1995: 4). In both Western Australia and South Australia, the Indigenous rate of incarceration for the adult population as a whole is 23 times that for the non-Indigenous population (Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation 1994: 4). When controlled for other background variables (age structure, unemployment, low income), this differential decreases, but remains high. For example, unemployed Indigenous people are nine times more likely to be incarcerated than unemployed non-Indigenous. Interestingly, however, incarceration rates for unemployed non-Indigenous people are roughly twice as high as for employed Indigenous people (based on Walker and McDonald 1995: Table 3). Completing school has a similarly strong effect in reducing the incarceration rate for Indigenous people. Therefore the potential for reducing Indigenous imprisonment by addressing their unemployment and increasing their educational attainment appears to be considerable. Nevertheless, Indigenous experience with the criminal justice system is clearly worse than non-Indigenous, even when controlling for a number of measurable socio-economic background variables (Walker and McDonald 1995).

Getting the denominators right is perhaps particularly important in the case of issues that are highly emotionally charged, such as Aboriginal deaths in custody. Consider three sequential questions. The first is whether, among those in custody, Aboriginal people are more likely to die in custody than non-Aboriginals. The answer is that they are not; age-adjusted rates of deaths in prison custody for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people are similar (Thomson and McDonald 1993; McDonald and Thomson 1993). The second question is whether, among those who have ever been in custody, the lifetime risk of custodial death is greater for Aboriginal than for non-Aboriginal people. The answer is affirmative, because Aboriginal people have far higher rates of recidivism (Broadhurst and Maller 1990). The third question is whether, among the population as a whole, the lifetime risk of custodial death is greater for Aboriginal than for non-Aboriginal people. The answer is that it is much greater, because as noted above, the risk of incarceration in the first place is much higher for Aboriginal people.

In terms of the well-being of Aboriginal people, it is surely the totality of their contact with the criminal justice system, rather than just the imprisonment rate or rate of deaths in custody, that needs to be addressed. This raises much broader issues. The raw statistics on Indigenous disadvantage need to be interpreted through the prism of an historically and sociologically informed understanding of the situation of Indigenous Australians. The highly disadvantaged place of Aboriginal people in Australian society cannot be understood in isolation from their his-

tory of dispossession by European invaders, their drop in numbers as a result of disease and massacre (Reynolds 2001), and their progressive marginalization. The web of social structures which regulated their lives was destroyed, contributing to the depressed and impoverished conditions in which many Indigenous Australians now live, and their generally low self-esteem. Indeed, government policy over an extended period, most shamefully reflected in the forcible removal of many Aboriginal children from their families (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 1997), was predicated on the assumption (and intention) that the Aboriginal race would eventually disappear as the result of assimilation into the dominant European population. The demoralization of Australia's Indigenous population is reflected in their high rates of assault, self-harm and suicide. These indicators of mental ill-health are in general related to greater exposure to poverty, racism, discrimination, poor physical health and other factors, and for some, the childhood experience of forcible removal and institutionalization or multiple fostering.

Disadvantage and happiness indicators

An underlying assumption of this paper is that we should be doing our best to counter 'disadvantage', objectively measured, because if disadvantage is lessened, people's well-being will be enhanced. Some evidence from the psychology literature should nevertheless be noted: that there is a remarkably narrow range in subjective well-being, if measured on a scale ranging from 0 to 100. Studies from 44 countries, including Western and non-Western countries, showed a mean population life satisfaction score of 70 plus or minus 5 per cent. For individuals within populations, the range is wider, but the normal range for individuals in Western nations is between 40 and 100 per cent, and only 10 per cent score below 50 per cent. Moreover, people who experienced a major life event that disrupted their levels of life satisfaction had a strong tendency to return to their previous levels over time (Headley, Holmstrom and Wearing 1984). In general, then, the considerable majority of people are quite satisfied with their lives. There are many possible explanations for this evidence of positive cognitive bias in life satisfaction, a recent one (Cummins and Nistico 2002) being that life satisfaction is held under homeostatic control.

The troubling question that arises from this psychological literature is: if wealth and good health do not make people happier, why are we working so hard to improve them? As social scientists, we might say in some frustration that people 'have a duty' to be happier if they score higher on objective indicators. But people do not always react as they are supposed to. No doubt the key is that even the poorest adjust to some degree to their poverty and, if asked, will play down its significance. But this does not mean that we should abandon the task of improving things, or question the relevance of the evidence that provides a justification for doing so.

Conclusions

This paper opened with a query about what fresh insights demographers might be able to contribute to the study of disadvantage. The paper argues that the demographer can contribute some insights, partly through careful application of accepted

demographic procedures that are treated cavalierly by many analysts: getting denominators right, cohort analysis, and use of standardization procedures. The teasing out of differences in individual well-being within households is another area where demographers can contribute. Certainly, there has been a great deal of work on the gender aspects of fertility and migration patterns, which have an important bearing on individual disadvantage. The traditional concerns of demographers coming from a broad political-economy background – the interrelationships between economic development, human development and population dynamics – also remain relevant, and new analyses are emerging.

But perhaps more important than trying to carve out a separate niche for demography in this field is to look for effective collaborations. The subject of disadvantage is a broad and complex one, and it cries out for cross-disciplinary work. Demographers do have something to offer, but cross-disciplinary collaborations are likely to be the vehicle for their most productive contributions.

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Notes

- 1 The estimate of 1.2 billion is based on 1993 PPP US\$. See UNDP 2000: 8.
- 2 They also note that Milanovic's limited time sample from 1988 to 1993 may distort the picture, as it was the one period in the past 20 years that was not good for poor people in China and India, with India passing through a recession and rural income growth in China stalling briefly. For a good non-technical summary of some of the debates raging around issues of increasing or decreasing global inequality, see Secor 2003.
- 3 There are more moderate expressions of the radical feminist position, but the uncompromising position is taken by the Feminist International Network of Resistance to Reproductive and Genetic Engineering (FINRRAGE). See Robinson 2001: 43–47.
- 4 For example, although the proportion of children of manual workers entering upper secondary school rose from 5 per cent to 28 per cent between the pre-1929 birth cohort and the 1964–73 birth cohort, the proportion rose by as much (from 65 per cent to 87 per cent) for the children of cadres, that is, senior civil servants, senior managerial staff and higher intellectual professions. The absolute gap, then, remained very wide, although there was a large reduction in the proportionate gap – from 13 to 1 to about 3 to 1.
- 5 The abysmal quality of primary schools in the more isolated rural areas in many countries is hard to exaggerate. 'There are schools without a building, but also without blackboard, without textbooks and without proper reading and writing material' (Carron and Chau 1996: 250). Teachers in such schools often live in another place, receive payment irregularly, have to take another job to make ends meet, are poorly trained, lack motivation, and have a high level of absenteeism.
- 6 As many as 63 per cent of the senior high school students interviewed had fathers with at least lower secondary education, whereas among all members of their fathers' generation, only about 16 per cent would have had at least a junior high school education or above.
- 7 Looking at the matter more technically, we could argue that the effect of public spending is equitable if the poor receive a share of the public financing subsidy larger than their share in private income. If so, the distribution of the subsidy improves the distribution of real income. A stronger criterion is whether the poor receive a share of the subsidy that is

larger than their share in the population, meaning that the absolute size of the per capita subsidy is larger for the poor. For a number of developing countries with relevant data, the first criterion is met, but not the second. A third, even stronger, criterion is clearly not met: that public expenditure, including loan guarantees, is arranged so that no qualified student is unable to enrol in education at any level because of inability to pay (World Bank 1995: 62–67).

- 8 The data in the above comparisons are drawn from different parts of the Australian Bureau of Statistics and Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2001. See also Hunter 2001.

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