

## The Class Ceiling

Australian culture is perceived and celebrated as being built on the harmonious foundations of mateship and multiculturalism. However, the generational socio-economic inequality and disadvantage of minority groups that occurs strips away this ethos. 2011-12 ABS data suggest that around 2.6 million (11.8 per cent) Australians live under the poverty line, 'a disproportionate number being Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people, recent immigrants and refugees'. Thus, the racial based characteristics of lower socio-economic classes contradict Australia's egalitarian reputation. Socio-economic class is a 'hierarchical and multi-dimensional system comprising a range of factors encompassing economic resources, power and/or prestige'. Hence, socio-economic class is determined through the social and economic assets attained. Due to Australia's western values, diverse cultures and skills are stagnated within the lower sectors of Australia's social stratification; 'the historical and current social, political, and cultural processes that result in a society's hierarchy of groups'. Thus, resulting in the creation of non-western racial and cultural groups with socio-economic disadvantage. This chapter will investigate socio-economic disadvantage for Australia's underclasses and the lack of resources and opportunities they encounter to foster a quality of life.

The widening divide in Australia between classes manufactures an increased intensity of socio-economic inequality. Socio-economic inequality is intensely present in Australia's Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander population. Currently, 'Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander Australians make up a large percentage of Australia's lowest socio-economic groups compared to white Australian who make up a large percentage of the highest'. This statistic is supported in my questionnaire as the two Indigenous respondents identified as coming from a lower class. However, this is a small pool of respondents and 39% of respondents were uncertain about their class standing, limiting the reliability of this source. Furthermore, Australia's social stratification throughout history has reflected the oppression of Indigenous Australians in society. The beginnings of social stratification concerning race in Australia can be dated back to the 1788 invasion of Europeans in Indigenous Australia, where the 'categorization of social groups into races has reflected oppression, exploitation and social inequality'. This reality is closely linked with theorist Karl Marx and his theory of Class Struggle. He determines; 'individuals and groups (social classes) within society interact based on conflict rather than consensus...More powerful groups will tend to use their power to retain power and exploit groups with less power.'. This theory's validity in Australian Society is strengthened through my focus group as all four participants agreed with its existence in their personal experiences. However, as all participants resided in the same geographic region, the focus group is skewed to revealing a one-dimensional perspective that cannot account for the entire nation. The segregation of Indigenous Australians into the lowest socio-economic class combined with stolen generations, discrimination and removal from land, culture and heritage catalysed the generational cycle of poverty of this group into the contemporary world. In my questionnaire, the same two indigenous respondents identifying as lower class, scored the lowest records of housing and health quality. This is problematic as poor housing and health have larger implications for one's ability to become socially mobile and attain economic stability.