

Spatial Inequality

The nature of Spatial Inequality

There is a great deal of inequality in Australian society. Inequality refers to differences in the quality of life people enjoy. If you live in the eastern suburbs of Sydney, you have access to a range of things that positively improve your quality of life; the average income is high and the housing is affluent. People who live in the eastern suburbs also have easy access to a wide range of recreational facilities including the beach. There are adequate health facilities, transport services and the widest range of shopping experiences.

On the other hand if you live in some of the western and southern suburbs of Sydney you will have more limited access to a similar standard of facilities. In many rural towns there is a similar lack of basic services, such as hospitals. Higher levels of unemployment, welfare dependency and single-parent families characterise these areas. The simple fact is that there is a marked difference in the standard of living between people depending on where they live. This is what we mean by **spatial inequality**.

Spatial inequality: *the uneven distribution of resources across space, which may mean between urban and rural areas or between suburbs in a city.*

The appropriate location of state housing for disadvantaged people is an important issue. In the past, state-owned housing for disadvantaged people was concentrated in one area and quickly became known as 'housing commission'. The disadvantage affected every aspect of community life. What would you do to effectively locate disadvantaged housing? How would you go about it?

Getting homeless people off the streets and into housing is an issue the Australian Government has decided to make a priority. The government's aim is to halve the number of homeless people by 2020. The reasons for homelessness are very complex but the worrying trend is the increase in the number of young people and children who are homeless. What would you do to ensure young children and families with young children were not homeless?

The issue of infrastructure, such as country hospitals, is very important for people who live in rural Australia. It is more costly to run smaller country hospitals and there is the ever-present threat to close them down and expand regional hospitals. The problem, however, is the enormous distances people are required to travel to get to the regional hospitals. Country people do not have the same access as city people to a wide range of services. Should the federal government subsidise services for people who live in small regional centres? What do you think?

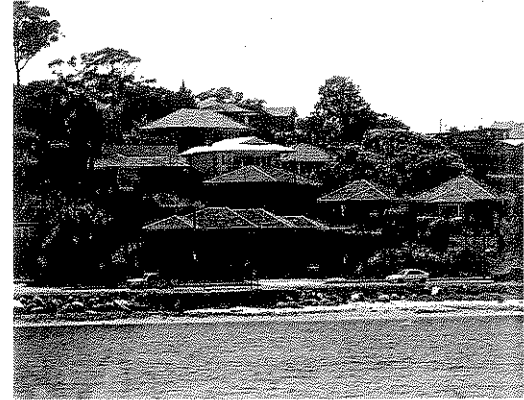


Fig 1.41 Houses in the eastern suburbs of Sydney.



Fig 1.42 Houses in the western suburbs of Sydney.

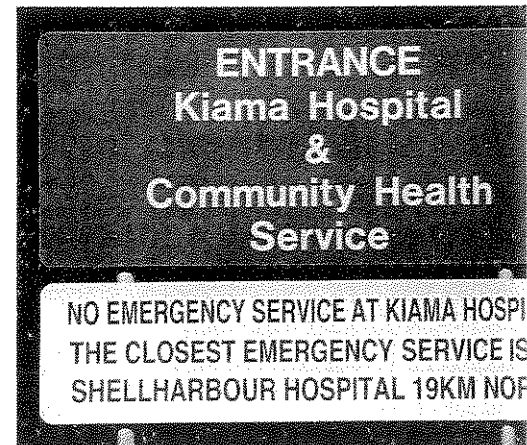


Fig 1.43 Hospitals can no longer maintain all of their services.

The impact of Spatial Inequality

Many people believe that Australia is an egalitarian society. An **egalitarian society** is where all people are equal and enjoy equal rights and opportunities. Nothing could be further from the truth. Spatial inequality is a feature of Australian life. This is particularly so in the cities but also in rural Australia. The impact of spatial inequality is significant. It means that large numbers of people are deprived of services that are essential to their quality of life.

Perhaps the most important impact of spatial inequality is social exclusion. **Social exclusion** occurs when people are unable to effectively participate in society. There is a variety of reasons for this. The most noticeable is the obvious poverty associated with drug and alcohol abuse, crime, homelessness and other forms of social dysfunction. Chronic unemployment is one of the most important causes of social exclusion. It is usually associated with low levels of education and this often leads to welfare dependence. Sometimes it can go from generation to generation. This is particularly the case with Indigenous people living in some of the communities in central Australia. It is very difficult for unemployed people to effectively participate in society.

Another factor to consider is access to appropriate affordable housing. In cities such as Sydney housing is increasingly unaffordable and people are often forced to move to areas of public housing away from the support of friends and relatives.

The responses of individuals, groups and government to the issue of Spatial Inequality

Individuals respond to inequality in a number of ways. Many people contribute to charities established to assist the disadvantaged. Often they may contribute their time as well as money by volunteering. For example, people help deliver meals to the infirm and elderly ('meals on wheels'). However, one of the most important ways individuals respond to spatial inequality is through lobbying the levels of government to do more to reduce it.

There is a range of **groups** effectively responding to spatial inequality. They include organisations such as the Salvation Army, St Vincent de Paul and Anglicare. Why not do some research on this topic? Find out which groups are involved. Find out what they do. Why not get involved and become a volunteer to really find out about the issues.

Levels of Government

One of the most important government responses to reducing spatial inequality is by providing public housing. This is because poor-quality housing affects every aspect of the way people live. It affects their health, access to jobs and particularly impacts on their children and their progress at school. At first the government response was poorly thought out. After World War II the rapid increases in population meant large numbers of cheap fibro houses were built very quickly on the fringes of the city. Public housing enclaves developed. They very quickly became places where only the poor and disadvantaged lived. The people who lived in wealthy suburbs strongly resisted public housing because they considered this type of housing would lower property values.



Fig 1.44 Infrastructure like fire stations are closed if there is no longer a population to support them.

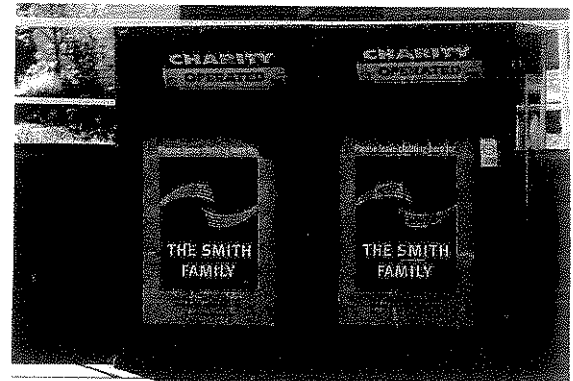
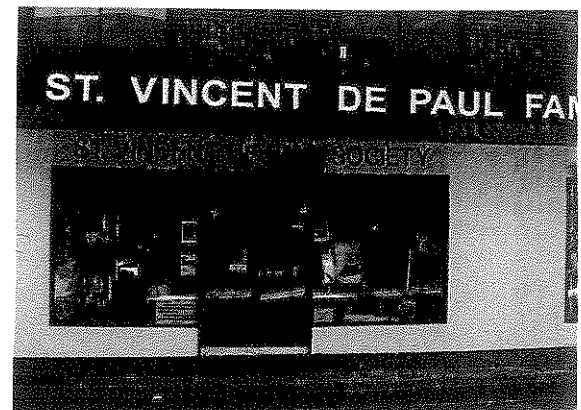


Fig 1.45 and Fig 1.46 Individuals respond by donating clothes or volunteering in charity-run shops.



Often the public housing enclaves became areas of high unemployment with high levels of crime and drug abuse. The inequality for these people was made worse by the government response.

The government response to spatial inequality has changed. The new approach is to disperse public housing more evenly throughout the community and to ensure public housing clients live close to their social support base. The government is also responding to the demand for different types of housing. Increasingly people want to live closer to the services, such as schools and transport, they need.

As a result, government policy now encourages the development of high-rise apartments near major **transport nodes**. There is also a greater demand for housing for single-parent households. At the same time there is less demand for 'big backyards' and this type of housing is rapidly changing to more consolidated 'townhouse' development.

Transport node: a central or connecting point that links the area with other major areas in the city – typical transport nodes are the major stations such as Chatswood, Parramatta and Strathfield.

At the other end of the spatial inequality spectrum there has been an increase in the number of 'walled estates'. Walled estates are housing developments where only the residents and their friends are allowed access to the estate. And it is not just walled estates that increase the spatial inequality. Poor people are forced out of many highly desirable inner city suburbs, such as Redfern, by high rents. This process has been made worse by the practice of selling public housing in the highly desirable inner city suburbs and forcing the residents into cheaper units in the western suburbs.

It is not easy for a government to respond effectively to spatial inequality and this is particularly the case in rural areas. Often, because of small populations and isolation, people have to travel large distances to access basic services such as obstetric services (ie. pregnancy related).

Local government

The focus of local government response is on providing and supporting services for the local community depending on the particular needs of the disadvantaged in that area. Community nurses, subsidised child care centres, community centres and leisure activities are all provided by councils at minimal or no cost to allow equal access for everyone in the community.

NSW Government

The NSW Government is providing \$1 billion to build over 3000 social housing homes in NSW by June 2012. They are also spending almost \$500 million on the maintenance of existing housing in the same period. Again, it is important to remember that Housing NSW no longer builds large concentrations of social housing. Rather, it disperses the housing throughout the community and architecturally designs the housing so that it will blend into the neighbourhood. The NSW Government also has policies designed to 'increase the amount and diversity of affordable rental housing' in NSW. Of course, the state government is also responsible for a wide range of additional social welfare policies designed to reduce inequality. These policies range from things like access to education and job training to seniors' travel assistance.

Australian Government

The goal of the Australian Government is to reduce homelessness by 50% by 2020. As part of the Nation Building Economic Stimulus Plan the Australian Government is spending some \$2 billion to build 6000 social housing homes. The Australian Government has policies designed to reduce spatial inequality in a number of areas beside housing assistance. These include education, job training and traineeships, and family tax benefits. There is special assistance for Indigenous people, particularly those living in the central Australian communities. The focus of this assistance is on housing, education, health, and training for employment.

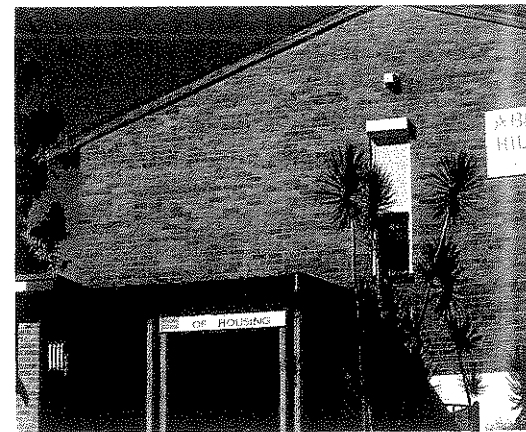
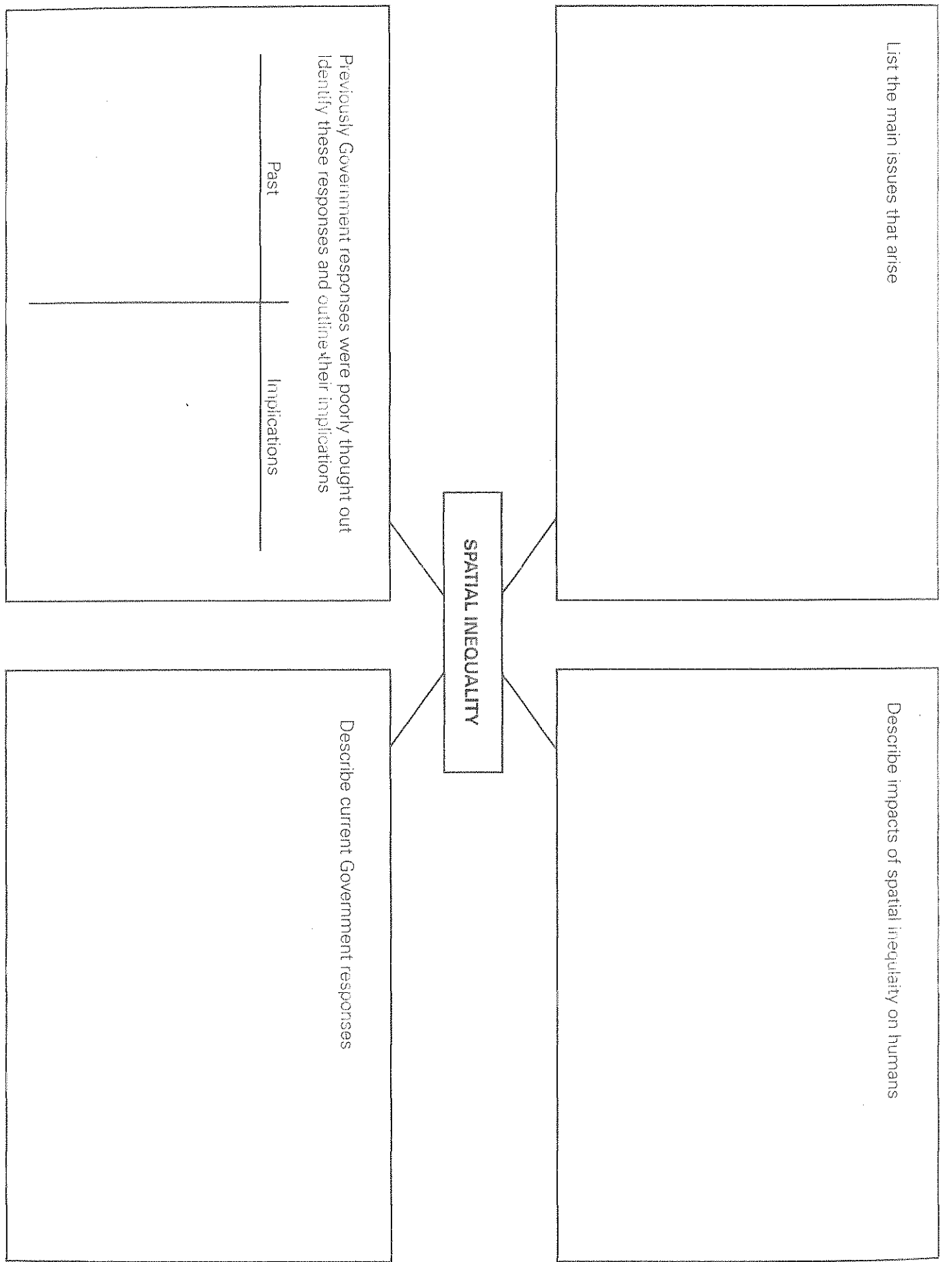


Fig 1.47 The provision of public housing gives low-income earners access to cheap housing.



Urban Growth and Decline

The nature of Urban Growth and Decline

The issue of urban growth and decline is one that affects vast numbers of Australians. Australia has become an increasingly urban society. An **urban area** is a settlement in which residents are not directly involved in the production of food and raw materials. The growth of our urban areas is driven by a number of factors:

- ★ Most migrants want to settle in urban centres.
- ★ Increasing numbers of people are moving from rural areas into larger urban centres. This process is called **rural-urban migration**.
- ★ **Natural growth** is also an important factor and refers to the children of residents in urban areas.

The issue is not only how to best manage an increasing or decreasing urban population, but also how to ensure sustainability. Population growth in urban centres puts great pressure on infrastructure. Providing the increased population with water, electricity, telephone and public transport is very expensive. Often the expansion of urban areas into the surrounding rural areas (a process called **urban sprawl**) has led to car dependence because the state and federal governments have been unable to keep up with the expansion. As a result, people often spend significant amounts of time commuting to and from work.

Rapid urban growth has caused particular concern for a variety of groups. Commuters, for example, are troubled by traffic congestion on a daily basis. Residents in car-dependent suburbs are concerned about how a lack of adequate public transport and issues such as sustainability, in terms of water, energy and waste management, affect most people. Minority groups are also faced with gross inequality due to limited access to essential services, such as adequate health care.

On the other hand, however, the construction industry supports rapid population growth and provides employment opportunities in a range of areas.

As urban centres continue to grow, rural areas are faced with the challenge of significant population loss. In particular, large numbers of young people migrate to larger urban centres seeking jobs and an expanded social life.



WEB

Visit your local council's website to find the following information.

- a. What environmental issues appear to be of greatest concern for this area?
- b. What programs or methods do they have in place to manage these issues?
- c. What activities or programs can you become actively involved in to help protect or conserve the region's environment?
- d. Suggest improvements the council could undertake in terms of the environment (e.g. reporting data, greater promotion of current projects, or new projects).
- e. Find out the contact details that you would need to pass on this information.



Fig 1.48 The suburbs of Sydney have rapidly expanded as Australia's population has increased.

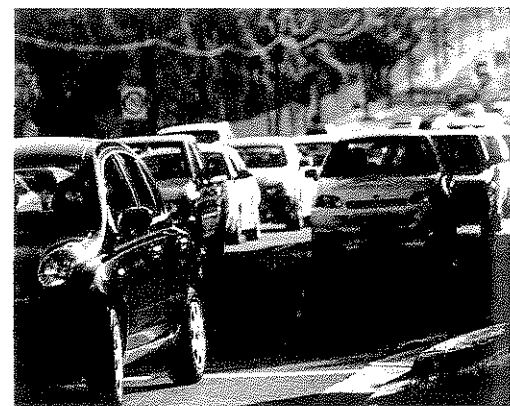


Fig 1.49 Commuters sitting in a queue of traffic.



Fig 1.50 Townhouses have allowed the growing populations to fit in a smaller space.

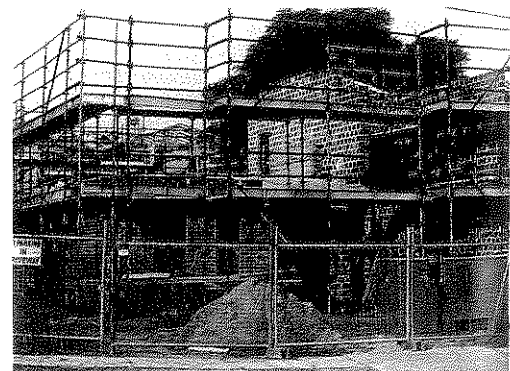


Fig 1.51 The construction industry benefits from the need to build new houses to fit growing populations.