

We need to address root causes, not just symptoms

It's easy to see the absurdity of giving a cartoon koala a prescription for anti-anxiety meds rather than addressing the destruction of their habitats; it's not always so obvious to notice when we are repeating the same pattern elsewhere.



There are complex human stories beneath the tip of the iceberg

In a Human Services context, people might show up because they need to find a place to live, or a job, or care for their kids. And so, our services help them with that thing, doing what we can with the tools we have available. Access to the right supports at the right time can be crucial, and a rapid response can be vital in times of crisis. However, as we are making these calls, we're just seeing the tip of the iceberg; one part of a complex mass of things that make up someone's life. What this can mean is that this presentation might be just the first of many we're likely to see, as the underlying drivers shaping someone's life continue to result in significant challenges in other areas.

Too often, an initial assessment and response is just the start of a merry-go-round (without the 'merry') for people as they are shuffled between services – none of which are able to provide the something that would truly make a difference. As a well-documented illustration in a similar system, [Changing Futures Northumbria's Liberated Method](#) approach captures the story of "Brian" whose life was in crisis. Over 14 years this led to over 3,000 interactions with the system and more than £2 million in costs.

If we seek to understand people a little more deeply, we might start to uncover the unique set of goals and motivations they have, or the very real and personal things that are getting in the way – like trauma, mental health challenges, or social isolation.

At a human level, this matters a great deal. When we treat only the symptom, and don't address root causes, we risk prolonging harm and failing to enable people to access the things that matter to them in living a [good](#) life. For "Brian", a new approach, starting by understanding what was really going on and what mattered to him, resulted in a pathway out of crisis and toward self-reliance, tapping into his own strengths. For him, writing played a significant role; something that traditional service assessments would never have uncovered.

At a systemic level, a failure to prioritise root causes adds predictable and significant cost and lost productivity. A recent [CPD report](#) unpacks this in detail. It [shows](#), for example, that Australian governments currently spend around \$16bn annually as a result of childhood poverty, and more than \$18bn on potentially preventable diseases. If we also consider the broader impacts to the economy, the numbers get rapidly worse. [NCOSS's 2024 Impact Economics and Policy report](#) found that the full costs of child poverty could be as high as \$60bn in NSW alone. That's about \$180k per child living in poverty in NSW today. If we're going to seriously look at shifting outcomes both for people and for the broader economy, shifting investments over time from crisis response into early intervention is an important step. As [SEED Future's](#) CEO Bernadette Black says, "Prevention is almost always cheaper, almost always more effective and always more humane than repairing".

The law of unintended consequences

Going even further we can see where failing to understand a root cause issue leads us not only to fail to improve a situation but can actively make it worse. Harsher prison sentences are typically more likely to [increase recidivism rates](#) than to act as a disincentive for crime. America's "War on Drugs" did little to address the illegal drugs trade, and ultimately [increased drug-related violence](#). And let's not forget the [cobra effect](#).

People, and the world we inhabit are complex. Simple and direct solutions are appealing to us in a very natural and human way, but as these examples show, simple solutions to complex problems we do not understand can lead us into a world of unintentional harm.

Acknowledging complexity and uncertainty doesn't mean that we shouldn't act at all for fear of erring. The challenges we face are too important and too urgent for that. However, it does mean that we need to ensure that we are taking time to understand context, answering the right questions and defining the right problems to solve.

Look upstream

Faced with increasing levels of crisis, it's a natural and very human response to divert more attention and resources to addressing the harm that we see. That's exactly what's happening. As [CPD write](#), "...across Australia, there is a growing demand for acute services such as hospitals, prisons, family violence and homelessness services. In every state and federal budget in the last decade the growth in funding for these services has outpaced revenue growth". It can be uncomfortable to take the time we need to *understand*, when we're conditioned to preference activity, quick wins, visible 'progress' and metrics. However, unless we're able to do just that, every year will see a continued rise in crisis spending, with no turning point in sight.

When we start to map out complex systems in their fullness, they can quickly become overwhelming. It's hard to define where systems start and end, and finding the right leverage points can feel like finding a needle in a haystack. Looking upstream is a useful metaphor (recently repopularised by Dan Heath in his book, [Upstream](#)) to help us cut through the complexity of systems, by examining what happens in the journey of people and systems, prior to harms being experienced. More recently it is framing current conversations on the Australian economy, for example, through this [recent paper](#) by Dr. Katherine Trebeck and Julie Boulton.

To give a modest example, in Broken Hill, increasing numbers of community members were presenting to the hospital emergency room with mental health and other concerns. Through taking the time to listen to local people, [Mission Australia](#), working together with NSW Health were able to look upstream, and identify that a significant contributor to the numbers showing up to emergency was the combination of social isolation and loneliness, coupled with various mental health issues. Together, they established [Connections](#), which created social programs to enable community members to come together, connect and feel less alone. Since it opened in August 2017, the Connections program has helped over 180 people struggling with loneliness and mental health, with the number of emergency department presentations dropping dramatically as a result. A [2021 Curtin University report](#) found the costs associated with loneliness in Australia to be around \$2.7bn each year, highlighting the potential value of addressing this issue in new ways.

In another example, ANZ Bank, together with [Brotherhood of St Laurence](#), [The Smith Family](#), and [Berry Street](#) identified that low-income Australians faced growing levels of financial exclusion and insecurity. Through working together to understand the support that could make a sustainable difference to people, [Saver Plus](#) was developed. It's a program that works with people to create saving habits and improve financial literacy with the intent of building greater financial security and confidence over time. Since 2002, more than 61,000 participants have come through the program, with 84% of participants sustaining or growing their saving habit 3-7 years after completing the program. It's a great example of how investing in capability and agency, rather than just providing services, can keep providing benefit long after it finishes.

Moving forward through radical incrementalism

Whilst looking upstream is important, we must also acknowledge that there is always further upstream. Housing supply is failing to meet demand; increasingly jobs are not paying enough for people to live on; weather events are becoming increasingly volatile. If we keep going, we'll find a number of core issues such as economic inequality; divisive public discourse; struggling democracies; structural racism; climate change. Working on these deep issues is a lifelong labour, and we can't expect every solution to tackle all of them in a meaningful way. In 2023, New York Times journalist Ezra Klein introduced the idea of ["Everything-Bagel Liberalism"](#), which warned that by always trying to solve everything, we tie ourselves up in knots and risk achieving nothing. However, if we keep putting off, or ignoring, the incredibly important, until it becomes urgent, we'll always be too late.

David Halpern (Founding Director of the Behavioural Insights Team, originating in UK government) helped to popularise the idea of [radical incrementalism](#). It's an idea that is enjoying a recent resurgence, as many of us are seeking to progress

transformational and systemic agendas, without pushing beyond the boundaries of what the system can accept today. With each new proposal, tender, service, community initiative, there is an opportunity to embed an idea or approach that helps disrupt the status quo and helps us to learn collectively how to keep taking the next step upstream and towards a future that looks very different. For example:

- How can we work with people in ways that help them to access their own agency, as opposed to becoming dependent on an outside service?
- How can our organisation create new job opportunities and develop the local economy in the communities that we serve?
- How can we move from assessing someone based on deficit, to understanding what drives them, and what a good life looks like to them?
- How can we enable the creation of community assets and capabilities that can create sustainable value over time?
- How can we collaborate differently with governments, services and communities to design long term and flexibly funded programs that look at the full picture?

It might feel like we're working toward our own redundancy through this work. If we're successful in truly solving for the things that matter to people, perhaps they won't need us anymore? Whilst that might feel a little uncomfortable, that's a problem that we'd like to have, and besides, there is always a little further to look, upstream.

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