



THE SOCIAL
RESEARCH CENTRE

CUSTOMER AND COMMUNITY ATTITUDES TO WORKING AGE PARTICIPATION REQUIREMENTS

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RESEARCH REPORT

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1 Introduction

1.1 Overview

The Department of Family and Community Services (FaCS)¹ commissioned the Social Research Centre to undertake a survey of customer and community attitudes to participation requirements for working aged people on income support.

This study involved a nation-wide telephone survey of 1,500 members of the general community aged 16 years and over and 1,500 working age income support customers. This report summarises the main findings from these surveys and, where appropriate, makes comparisons with previous research undertaken by FaCS and the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR).

The objectives of this research are to gauge customer and community views regarding:

- the appropriateness and effectiveness of welfare programs;
- the appropriateness of the participation requirements and penalties placed on certain groups of income support customers;
- the effectiveness of welfare program changes and measures specific to Australians Working Together (AWT); and
- whether activity requirements have a deterrent effect on people registering as unemployed.

The research also aimed to determine, where possible, if there had been any change in community or customer attitudes to the above issues since 2000.

1.2 About the Surveys

The same questionnaire was used for both the customer and community samples, with an additional module of questions asked of customers. This allowed for comparisons between the two groups.

Focus groups and cognitive interviews were conducted to inform the development of the questionnaire (Appendix 3). The average interview length was 22 minutes.

¹ The area commissioning this research was transferred to the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR) in December 2004 as part of the machinery of government changes.

The sampling frame used for the general community survey was the latest version of the Electronic White Pages. A disproportionate quota sample design was used to ensure a representative number of interviews were obtained in urban and rural areas². The 'next birthday' method of respondent selection was used as a means of randomly selecting the person to be interviewed in households with more than one in-scope sample member. This resulted in a 43:57 male:female ratio which is typical for a survey of this nature.

The sample listing for the customer survey was drawn from Centrelink administrative records and provided to the Social Research Centre by FaCS³. A disproportionate stratified sample design was used to ensure sufficient interviews were obtained across the various customer groups of interest (Disability Support Pension, Newstart Allowance, Parenting Payment Partnered, Parenting Payment Single, Youth Allowance and Other⁴) and across urban and regional areas.

Summary fieldwork statistics and methodological notes for each component of the survey are provided in the Technical and Methodological Notes appended to this report.

1.3 Main Findings

General Support for Participation Requirements

- The prevailing view among customers and the general community is that income support payments should be available to working aged people for *as long as required* (77% of the general community and 90% of customers) **but** that continued receipt should be conditional upon *trying to get off payments* (75% general community / 65% customers).
- Just under half of all customers (48%) and 44% of the general community felt that participation requirements had increased in recent years.
- Forty two per cent of the general community and 28% of income support customers believe participation requirements for working aged income support customers should increase further with 34% of the general community and 54% of customers supporting the current participation requirements (at December 2004).

² The classification of areas as either capital cities, other metropolitan areas or rural / remote was undertaken on a postcode basis by matching the Accessibility Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA) back to the classifications used in the Rural, Remote and Metropolitan Areas Classification (RRMAC) in order to maintain comparability with previous research.

³ After machinery of government changes in October 2004, the survey moved to DEWR.

⁴ Mainly comprised of Carers, Special Allowance, Widow Allowance customers, etc.

- There has been a reduction in the proportion of the community who think that it is entirely an individual's responsibility to find work (down from 63% in 2000 to 49% in 2004) and an increase in the proportion of the community who believe that more needs to be done to help unemployed people into work (from 74% to 79%).

Attitudes Towards Participation Requirements for Specific Customer Groups

Unemployed People:

- There is almost universal support among income support customers and the general community (around 95%) for participation requirements for unemployed people aged less than 50 years. Support for participation requirements for unemployed people aged 50 years or more is considerably lower (46% among the general community and 35% among income support customers).

Parents:

- A higher proportion of the community now, compared with 2000, expect Parenting Payment customers, whether partnered or single, to have to meet participation requirements in order to remain eligible for Centrelink payments.
- The vast majority of the community believes that once a parent's youngest child starts **secondary school** that parent should have to actively look for work (85%), participate in activities that improve their job search prospects (86%) and / or participate in activities of benefit to the community (78%).
- The majority of the community (varying between about two thirds and three quarters) support participation requirements for parents with **primary school** aged children.

People with Disabilities:

- The community generally has lower participation expectations of Disability Support Pension customers compared to other working age income support recipients, with:
 - 51% of the view that Disability Support Pension customers should have to actively look for work
 - 73% of the view that they should participate in activities to improve their job prospects, and
 - 60% supporting participation in activities of benefit to the community.

Support for Sanctions

There is community support for penalties being applied when people don't meet Centrelink requirements, however there is much more support for penalties being applied to younger unemployed people (73%) than to mature aged unemployed people (35%), parents (around 40%), people living in remote communities (35%) or people with disabilities (just over 20%).

This suggests that while customers and the community at large support the concept of participation they are less comfortable with the imposition of sanctions.

1.4 About this Report

The results presented in this report are based on "weighted" survey data. This means they have been adjusted to reflect the total population of in-scope respondents. The impact of this weighting is to correct for the disproportionate stratified sample design and to adjust for any variations in response patterns across the target groups.

The General Community Survey estimates are weighted by age, sex and location (urban, rural) in accordance with ABS 2001 census population counts. The Customer Survey estimates are weighted to customer population statistics provided by DEWR.

The main focus in this report is on identifying underlying customer and community attitudes to the social welfare system and participation requirements for working age income support customers. A secondary consideration is to gauge to what extent, if any, there have been changes in customer and community perceptions in recent years. A series of time series tables enabling indicative comparisons with previous research is provided in Appendix 1.

The comments presented in this report are those of the author and do not represent the views of the Australian Government Department of Employment and Workplace Relations.

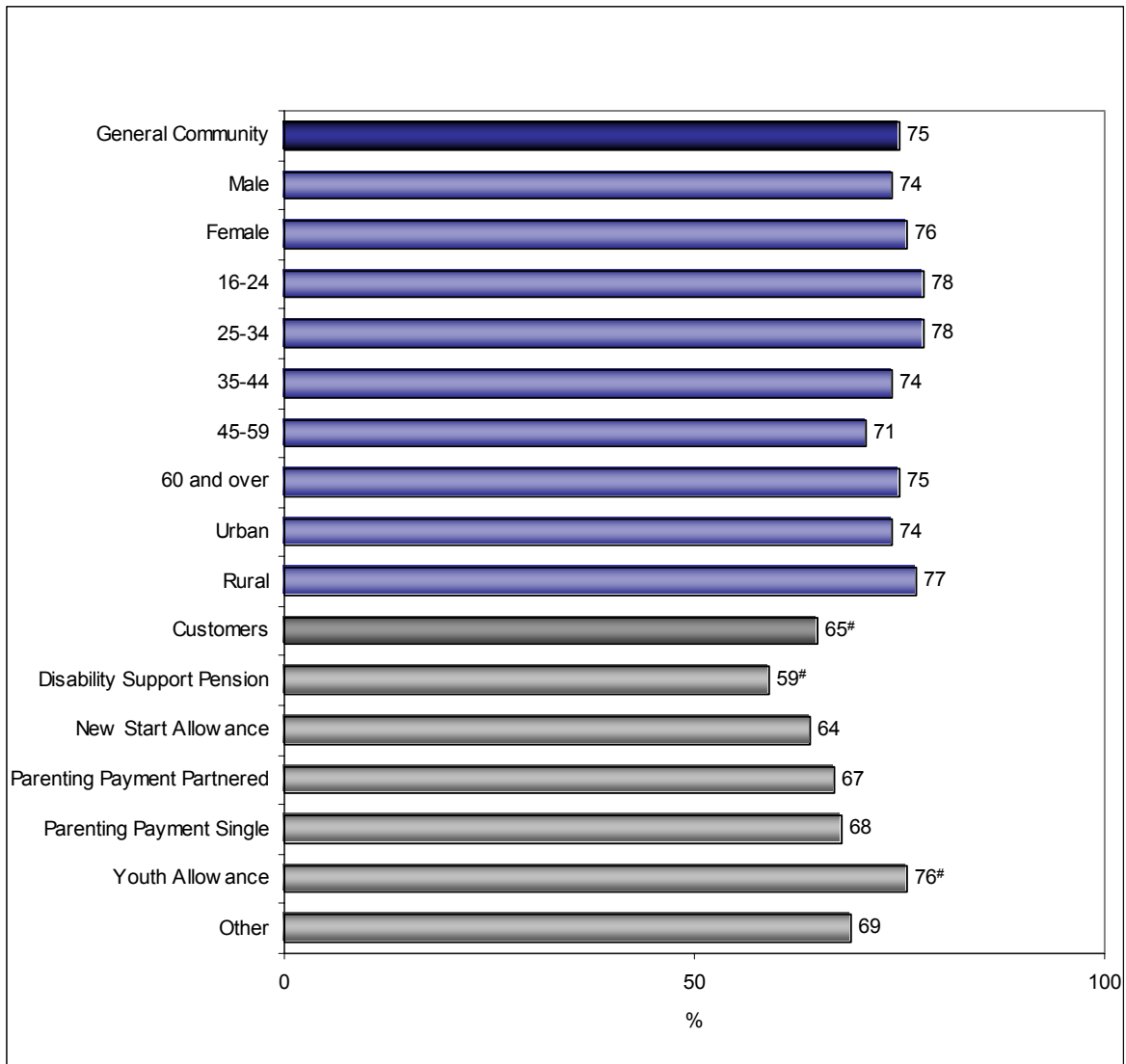
2 The Role of the Social Security System and Perceptions of General Participation Requirements

2.1 The Role of the Social Security System

Should receipt of Social Security Payments be linked to efforts to get off income support?

Three quarters of the general community (75%) and two thirds of customers (65%) support the concept that the receipt of social security payments by working aged people should be linked to efforts to get off income support. A slightly higher proportion of young people, including Youth Allowance customers, tend to hold this view. Disability Support Pension customers are the least likely of the income support customers (at 59%) to support this concept.

Figure 2.1a: Percentage agreement that the role of the Social Security System is to provide income support as long as people are trying to get off payments.

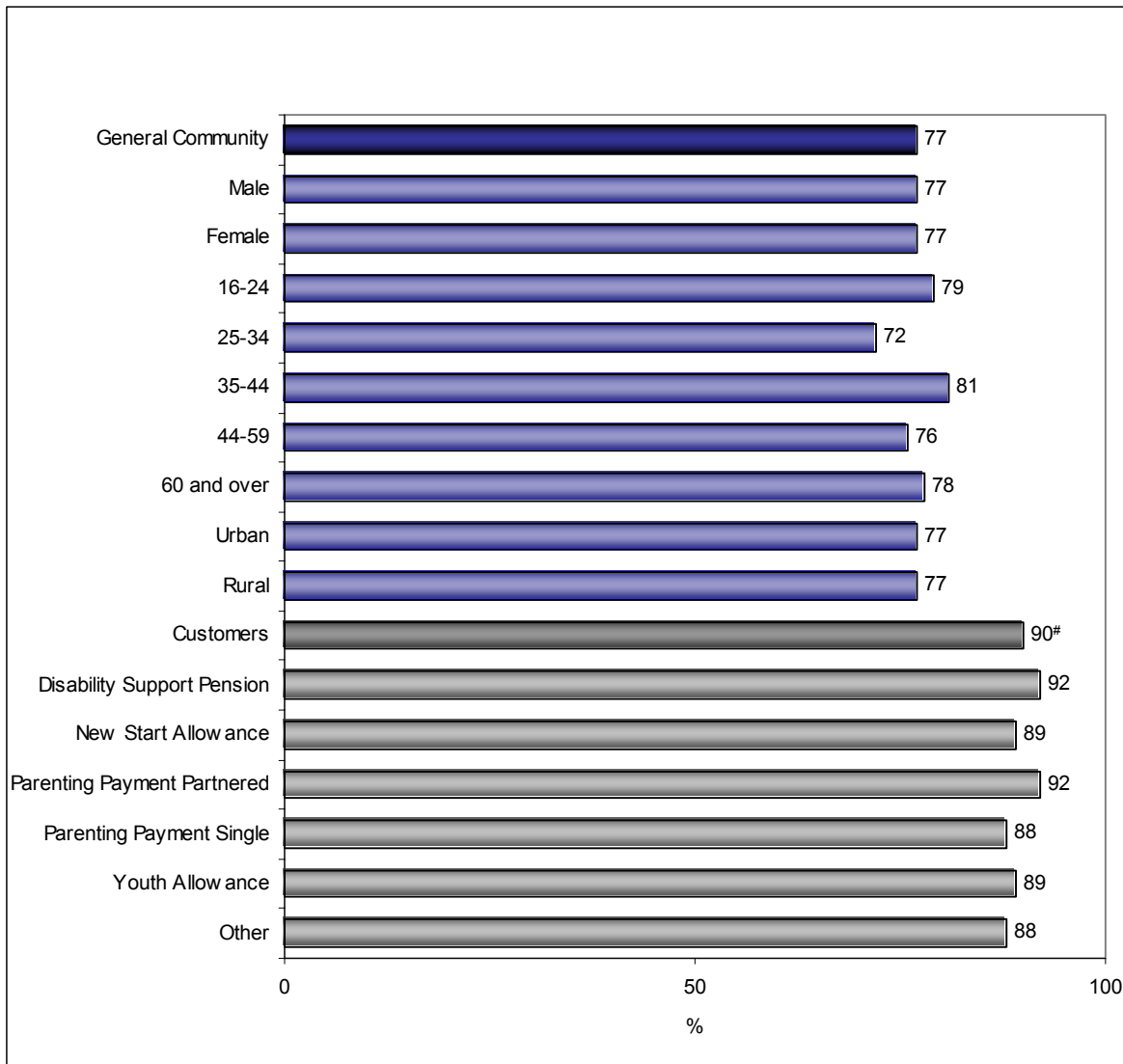


[#]Denotes statistically significant at the 95% confidence interval. Tests undertaken between the total customer and general community samples and by sub groups within the customer and general community samples.

Should Social Security Payments be available for as long as needed?

Support for payments being available for as long as needed was significantly higher among income support customers (90%) than among the general community (77%). The level of support did not differ significantly by age, sex or region but was higher among low income households, those that were currently or had recently been in receipt of income support and among people with tertiary qualifications.

Figure 2.1b: Percentage agreement that the role of the Social Security System is to provide income support as long as it is needed.



[#]Denotes statistically significant at the 95% confidence interval. Tests undertaken between the total customer and general community samples and by sub groups within the customer and general community samples.

2.2 Awareness of participation activities, participation levels and specific AWT initiatives

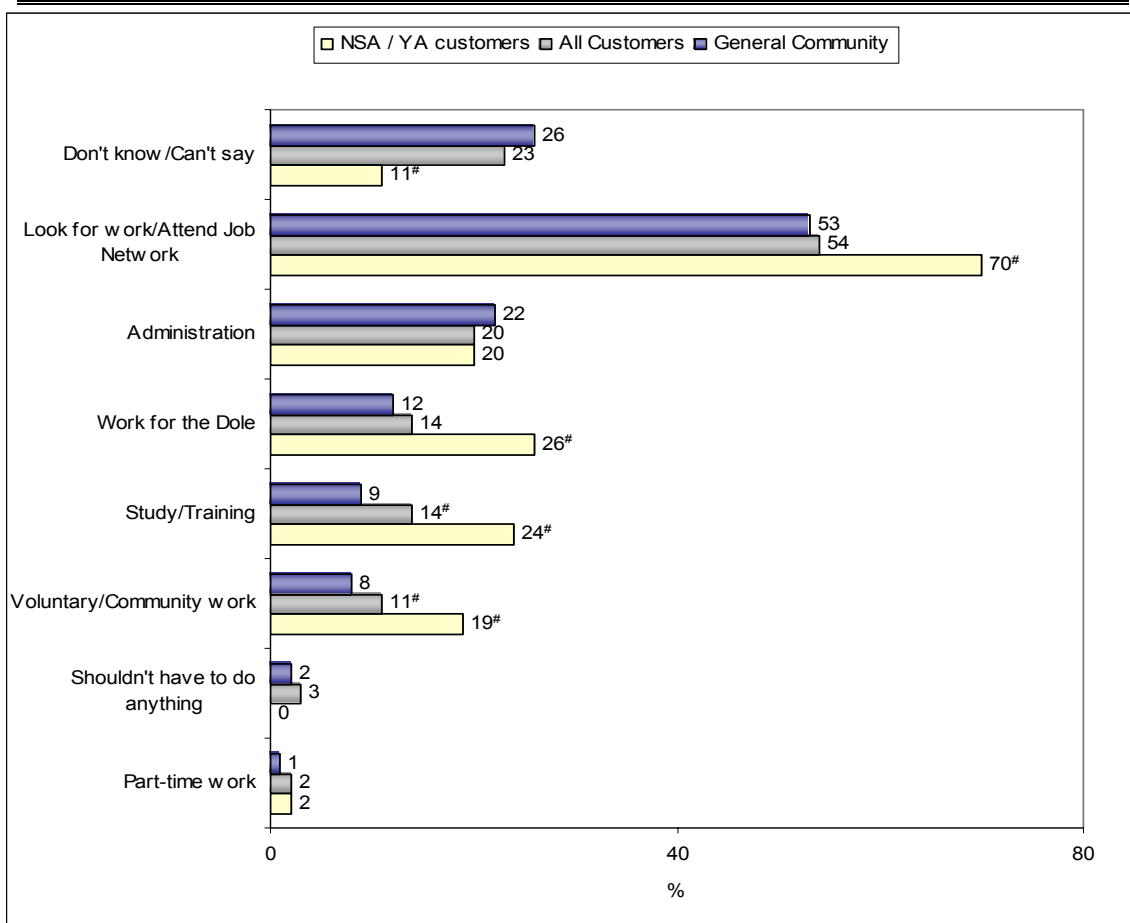
2.2.1 Awareness of participation activities

The results presented in Figure 2.2.1 show that customers and the community have a reasonably good grasp of the participation requirements facing working age income support customers.

More than half of both groups mentioned the requirement to actively look for work in order stay on payments (54% of the general community and 53% of customers). Other commonly mentioned participation requirements were the need to fulfil administrative requirements (e.g. keep address details up-to-date, report earned income, etc), Work for the Dole, study/training and voluntary work.

Customers with participation requirements (i.e. those receiving Newstart Allowance and Youth Allowance) generally demonstrated higher levels of awareness of participation requirements than customer groups that did not have participation requirements.

Figure 2.2.1: Perceptions of actual participation requirements for working age people on income support.



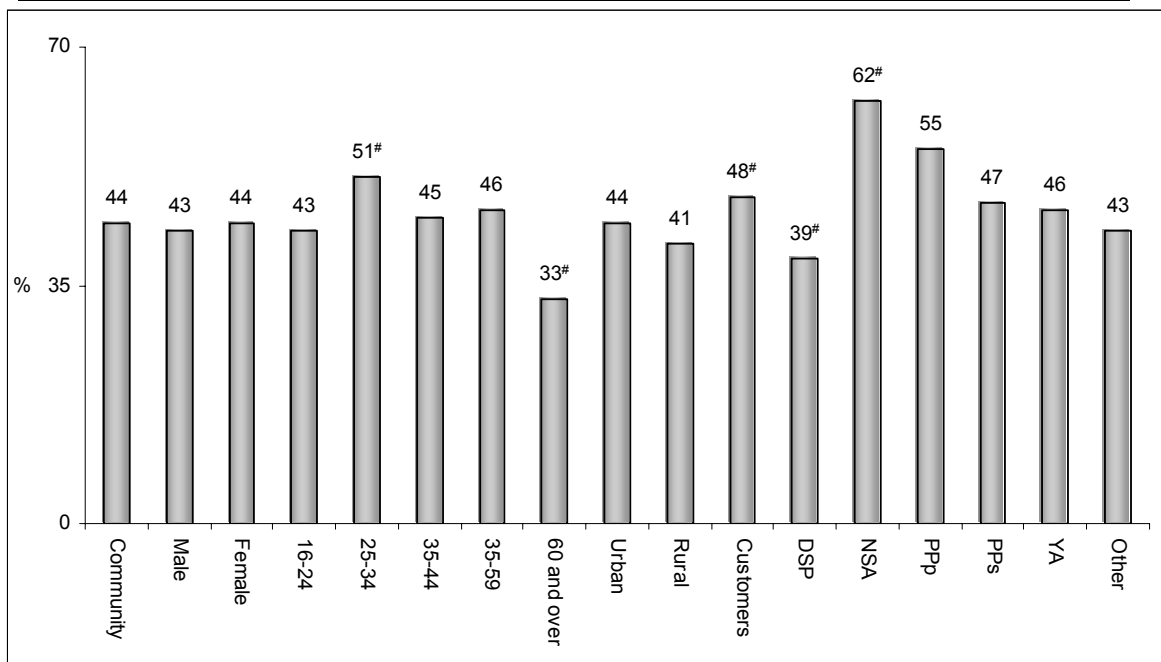
[#]Denotes statistically significant at the 95% confidence interval.

2.2.2 Perceived changes in the level of participation required of working age people on income support

Both the community and customers had fairly high levels of awareness of increased participation requirements for working age income support recipients. Just under half of the income support customers interviewed (48%) and 44% of the community felt that income support customers were required to do more now than a few years ago (Figure 2.2.2).

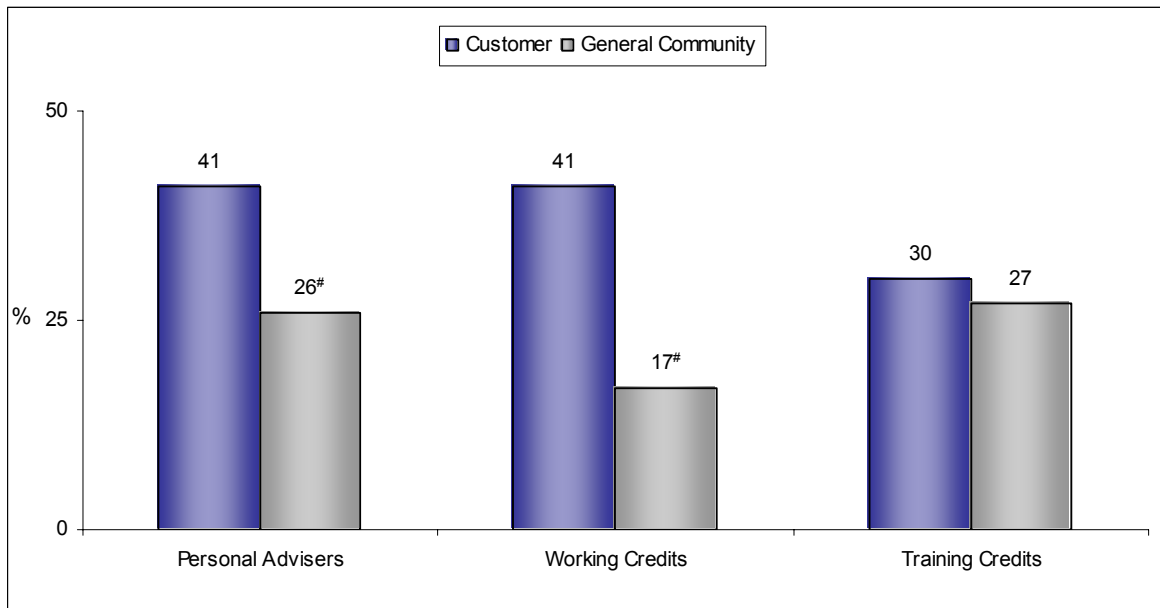
There was understandably less awareness among customers and the community of specific AWT measures (Figure 2.2.3)

Figure 2.2.2: Working aged people on Centrelink payments are now required to do more in order to remain on payments.



[#]Denotes statistically significant at the 95% confidence interval.

Figure 2.2.3: Percent awareness of specific AWT initiatives

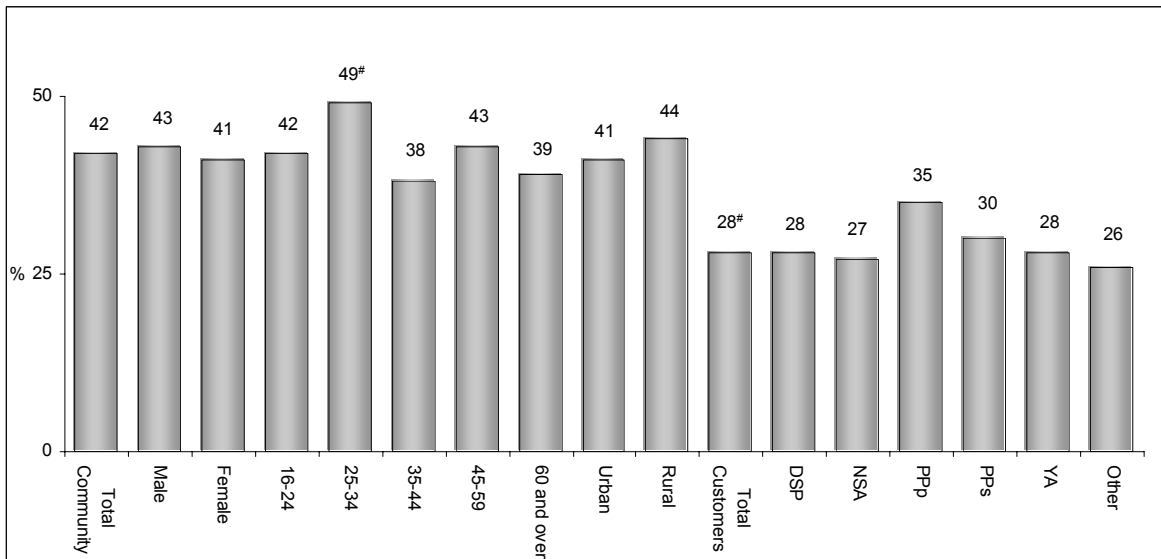


#Denotes statistically significant at the 95% confidence interval.

2.3 Should current participation requirements be increased, decreased or remain the same

The level of support for increasing the current participation requirements (at December 2004) for working age people on Centrelink payments varied between the general community and customers, with 42% of the community supporting an increase in participation requirements, compared to 28% of customers.

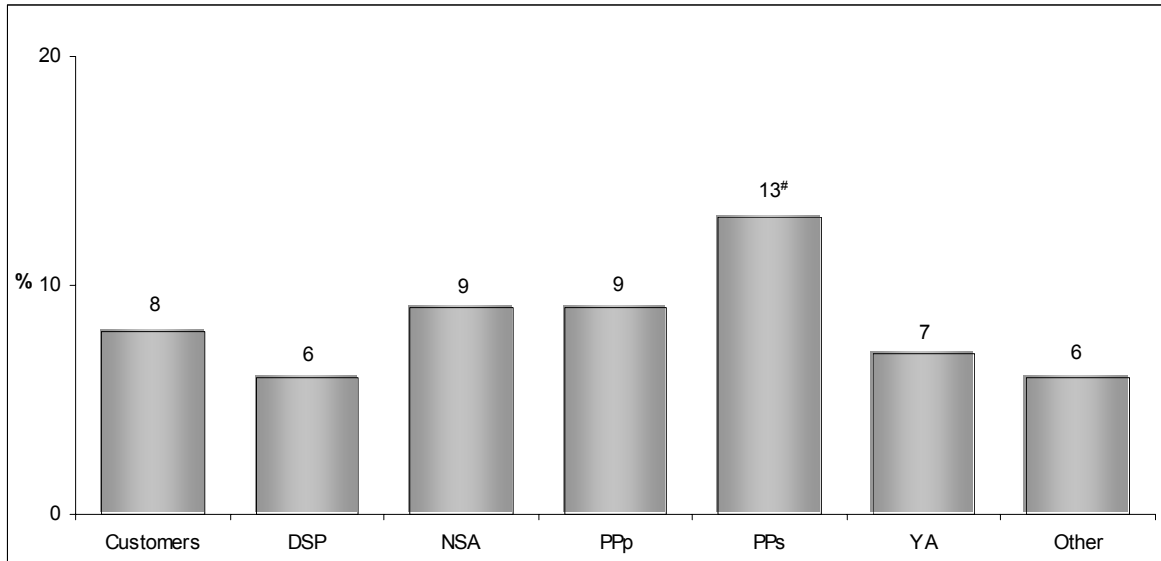
Figure 2.3a: Percentage agreement that working aged people on Centrelink payments should have to do more in order to remain on payments.



[#]Denotes statistically significant at the 95% confidence interval.

The customer sample was also asked whether they personally “should have to do more, less or about the same as they currently have to in order to remain on payments?” When the issue was personalised, just 8% of customers felt they should have to do more than they currently have to in order to stay on payments (with 83% supporting the status quo, 6% feeling that they should have to do less and 3% don’t know / can’t say).

Figure 2.3b: Percentage agreement that you personally should have to do to do more in order to remain on payments: Customers Only.

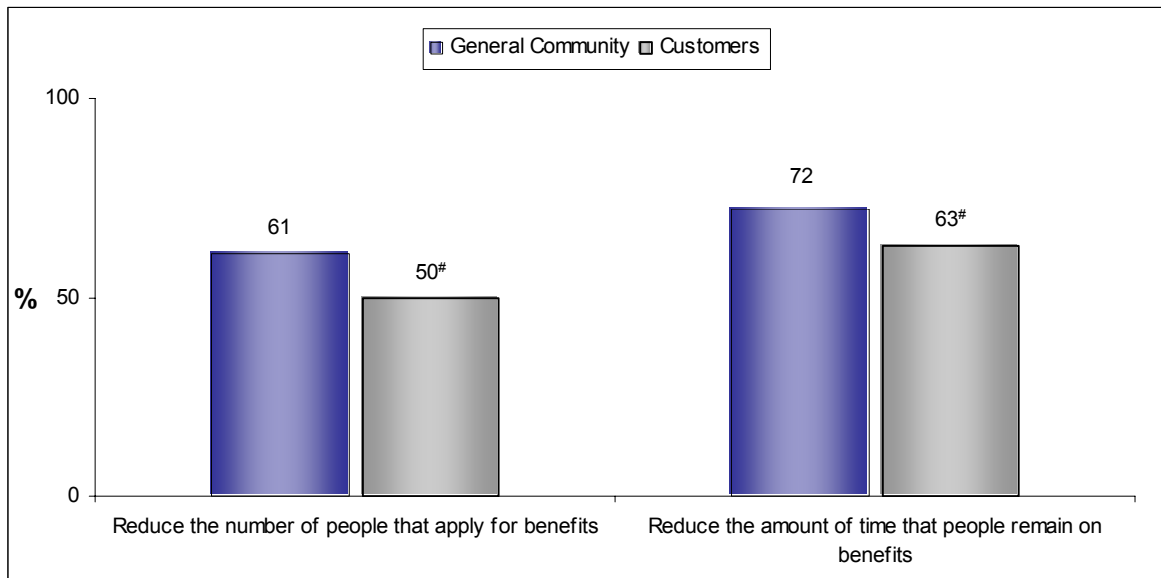


[#]Denotes statistically significant at the 95% confidence interval.

2.4 The deterrent effect of participation requirements

The majority of the general community and customer samples felt that compulsory participation requirements contributed to a reduction in the number of people applying for Centrelink payments (61% general community, 50% customers) and the length of time people remain on payments (72% general community, 63% customers).

Figure 2.4: Perceived deterrent effect of compulsory participation requirements for working age people receiving Centrelink payments.



[#]Denotes statistically significant at the 95% confidence interval.

3 Perceptions of Unemployment

The 2004 survey directly replicated a number of questions from a 2000 survey commissioned by FaCS⁵ in order to identify any change in community attitudes to unemployment. Figures 3a to 3c compare results from the 2000 survey to those from the current survey.

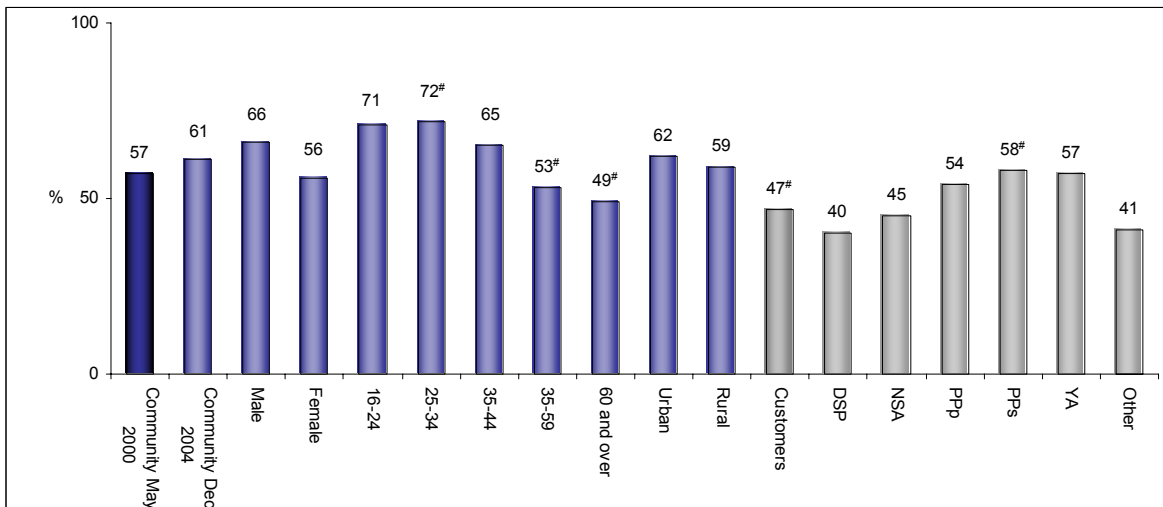
In 2000, 57% of the community believed most unemployed people in their area could find a job if they really wanted to. In 2004, 61% of the general community and 47% of customers agreed with this statement.

The main change in general community attitudes to unemployment between 2000 and 2004 is the decline in the extent to which the general community feel it is *entirely* the individual's responsibility to find work (down from 63% in 2000 to 49% in 2004).

This change in community perceptions coincides with a slight increase in the proportion of the community holding the view that more needs to be done to help people find work (up from 74% in 2000 to 79% in 2004).

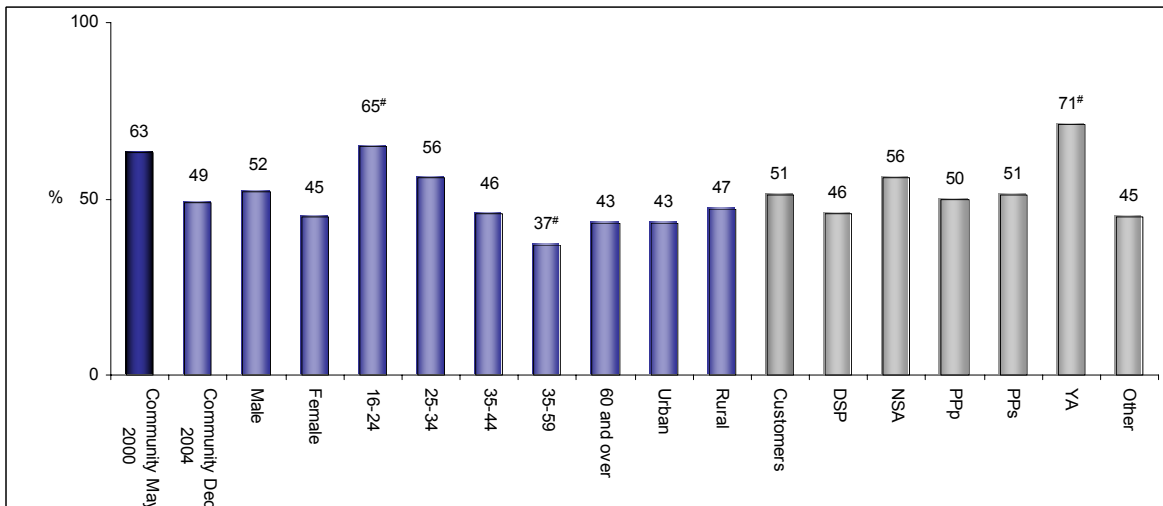
⁵ Community Attitudes to Unemployed People of Workforce Age, Roy Morgan Research, July-August, 2000.

Figure 3a: Percentage agreement that most unemployed people in your area could find a job if they really wanted to.



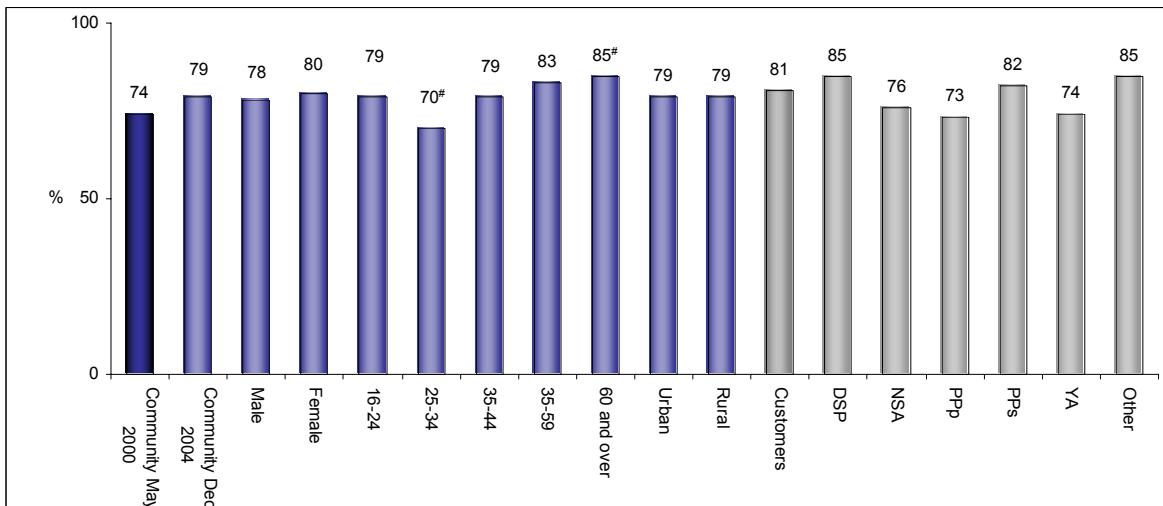
[#]Denotes statistically significant at the 95% confidence interval.

Figure 3b: Percentage agreement that it is entirely the individuals' responsibility to find work.



[#]Denotes statistically significant at the 95% confidence interval.

Figure 3c: Percentage agreement that more needs to be done to help unemployed people back to work.



[#]Denotes statistically significant at the 95% confidence interval.

4 Perceptions of Participation Requirements for Specific Income Support Groups

4.1 Attitudes towards participation requirements for unemployed people receiving Centrelink payments

The requirement to actively look for work

There was almost universal acceptance among income support customers and the general community (see Figure 4.1a) that unemployed people **aged less than 50 years** should have to actively look for work in order to remain eligible for income support. However, support for mandatory job search for people aged 50 years and over was lower (47% among the general community and 35% among customers).

This pattern of response was also evident in the 2000 research undertaken by Roy Morgan Research which showed almost universal general community support for job seekers up to the age of 44 years having their income support payments tied to active job search with support declining to 70% when it came to job seekers aged 45 to 54 years and 36% for job seekers aged 55 years and over.

The requirement to participate in activities to improve job prospects

There was also widespread support for job seekers aged less than 50 years having to undertake activities that will improve their employment prospects (96% of the general community and 95% of income support customers). This result is in line with the 2000 result which showed 92% of the general community⁶ agreed that unemployed people should be involved in activities to improve their job prospects in order to stay on Centrelink payments.

Once again, there is less support for job seekers aged 50 years and over having to undertake such activities (54% of the general community and 41% of income support customers).

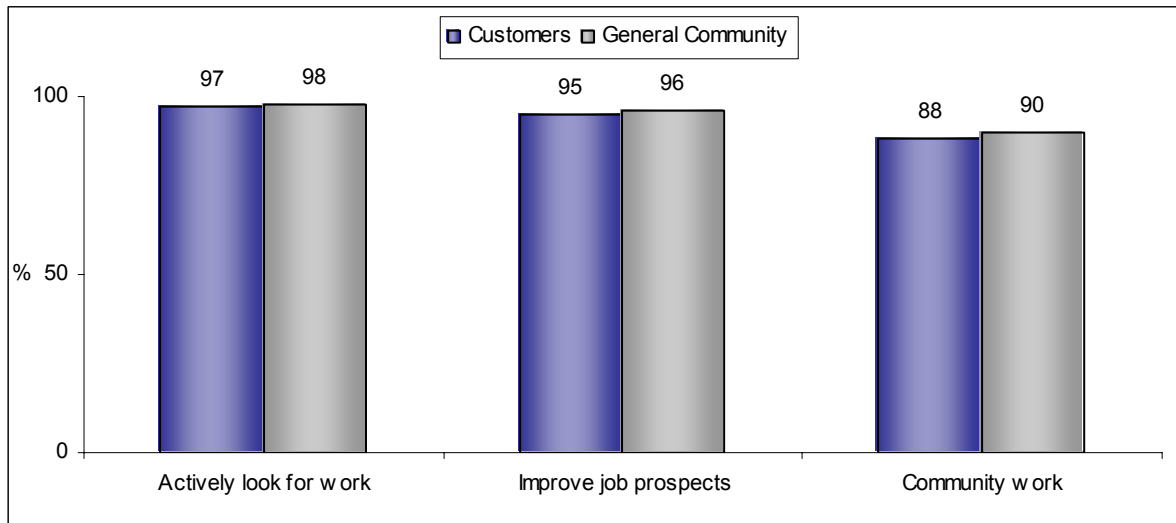
The requirement to undertake activities of benefit to the community

The level of customer (88%) and community (90%) support for unemployed people aged less than 50 years having to undertake activities of benefit to the community, while still high, was slightly lower than support for other participation requirements.

Support for those aged 50 years or more having to participate in activities of benefit to the community was higher than support for that group having to undertake other participation activities (62% of the general community and 51% of customers).

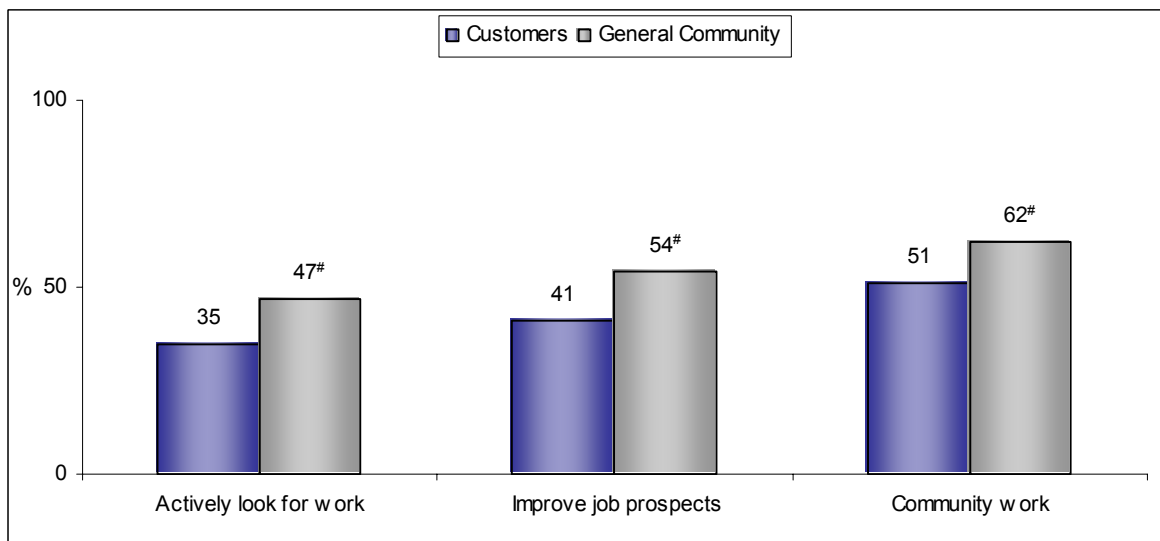
⁶ Morgans, 2000.

Figure 4.1a: Percentage agreement that unemployed people aged less than 50 years should have to participate in selected activities in order to remain on benefits.



#Denotes statistically significant at the 95% confidence interval.

Figure 4.1b: Percentage agreement that unemployed people aged over 50 years should have to participate in selected activities in order to remain on benefits.



#Denotes statistically significant at the 95% confidence interval.

The requirement to accept any job

There has been little change in the extent to which the community feel that an unemployed person should have to accept any job offer (Centrelink thinks is reasonable)⁷ or risk losing their payments (57% in 2000 compared with 53% in 2004).

4.2 Attitudes towards participation requirements for parents receiving Centrelink payments

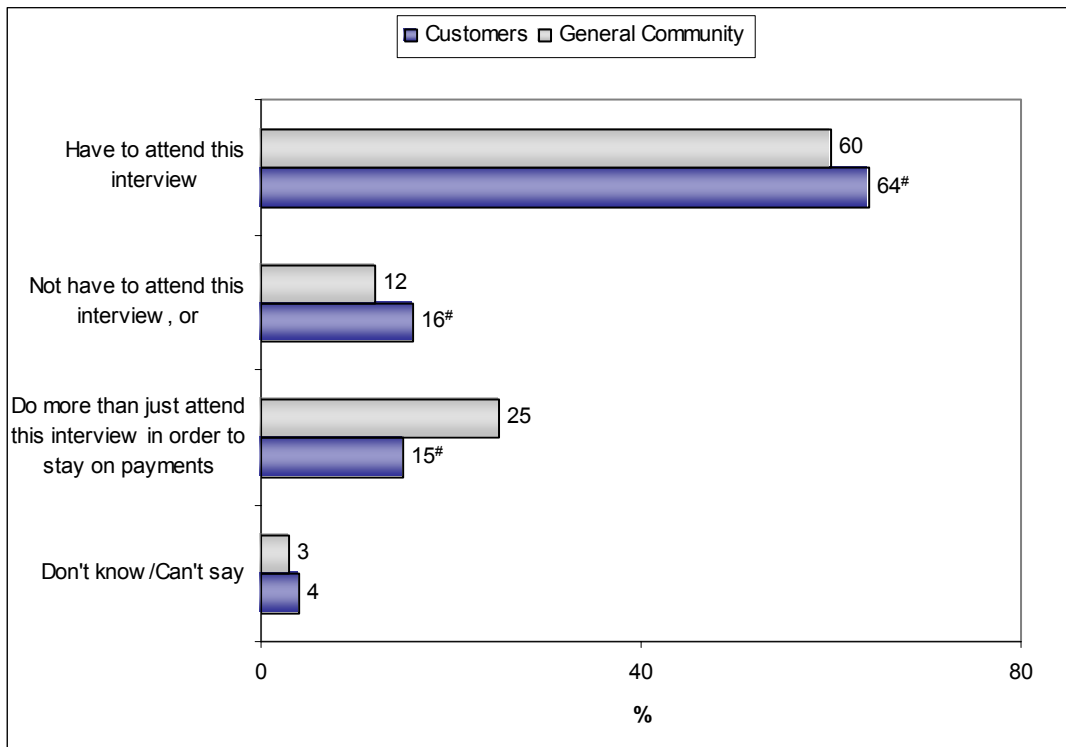
The majority of customers (64%) and the community (60%) support the current requirement (at December 2004) for parents whose youngest child is aged 6 years or over to attend an annual participation planning interview. A further 25% of the general community and 15% of customers felt that this group of parents should have to do more than just attend an annual participation planning interview. Only 12% of the general community and 16% of customers did not support mandatory participation planning interviews (Figure 4.2a).

Females and people aged 60 years and over were the strongest general community supporters of the Participation Planning interview for parents with a youngest child aged 6 or over whereas there was no significant difference in the level of support across the various customer groups.

There was also significant support for Parenting Payment customers with a youngest aged child 13 to 15 years to undertake some kind of part time activity to improve their job prospects. Over half of the general community (55%) and 58% of customers agreed that parents should 'have to do these activities'. A further 26% of the general community and 18% of customers felt that this group of parents should be required to do more. Only about 17% of respondents felt that these parents should not have to undertake these activities (Figure 4.2b).

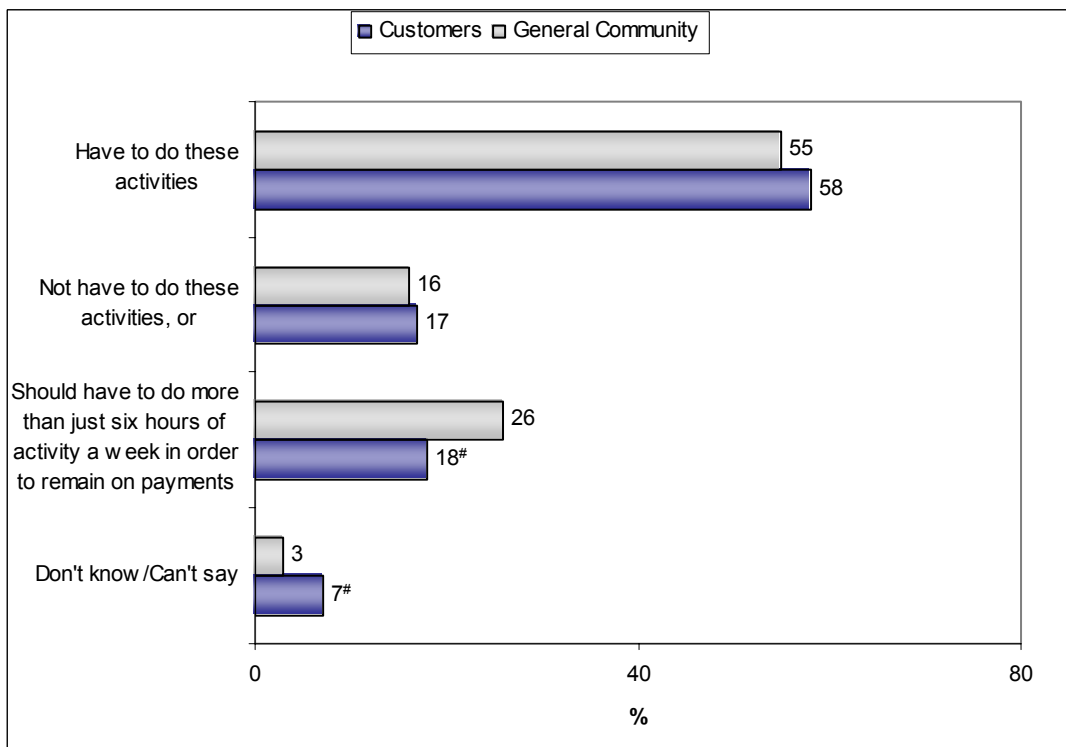
⁷ Wording added to 2004 question. It is possible that the altered question wording contributed to the change in the survey results between 2000 and 2004.

Figure 4.2a: Customer and community attitudes to the annual participation interview requirement for Parenting Payment customers with a youngest child aged 6 or more.



#Denotes statistically significant at the 95% confidence interval.

Figure 4.2b: Customer and community attitudes to the part-time participation requirements for Parenting Payment customers with a youngest child aged 13 to 15 years.



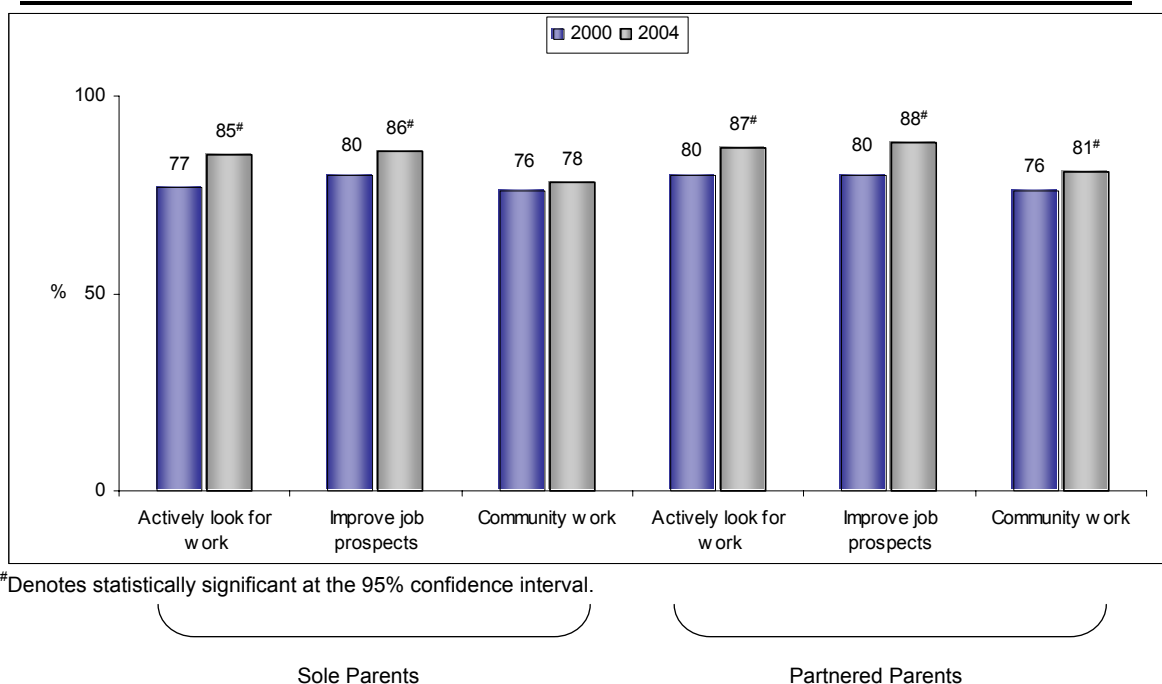
#Denotes statistically significant at the 95% confidence interval.

There were high levels of community support for Parenting Payment customers, both partnered and single, to have to actively look for work, participate in activities to improve their job search prospects and /or participate in activities of benefit to the community in order to remain on Centrelink payments. There was a significant increase between 2000 and 2004 in community support for participation requirements for Parenting Payment customers.

As was the case in 2000, the community had higher participation expectations of parents as the age of their youngest child increases and higher participation expectations of partnered parents compared with sole parents.

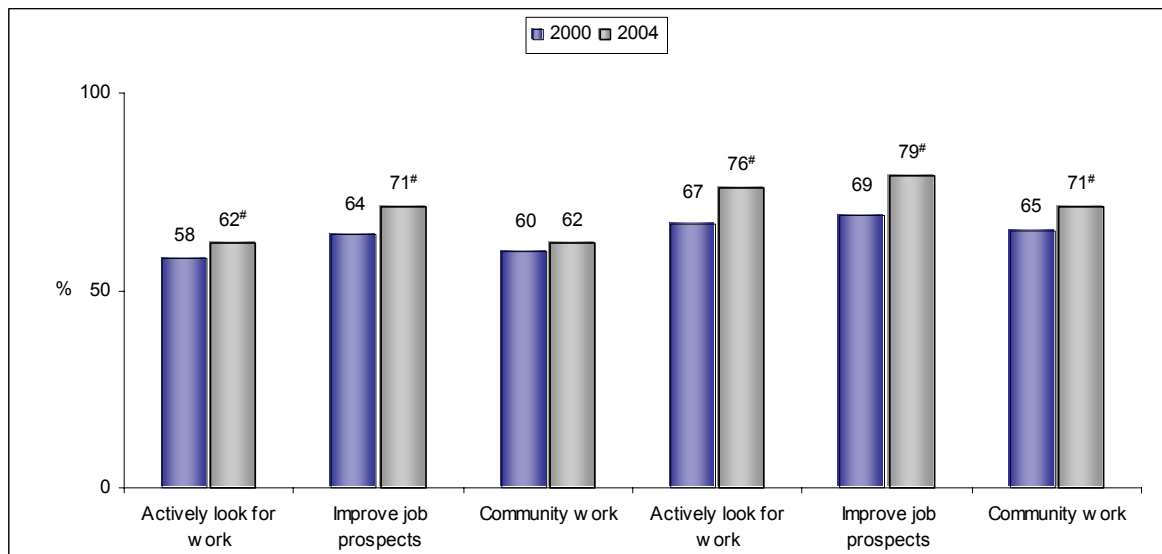
For parents with secondary school aged children, 85% of the general community supported sole parents, and 87% supported partnered parents having to actively look for work. As well, 86% believed that sole parents and 88% believed that partnered parents should have to participate in activities that improve their job search prospects. Community support for parents with secondary school children having to undertake activities of benefit to the community was slightly lower (78% for sole parents and 81% for partnered parents).

Table 4.2c: Participation requirements for parents with secondary school-aged children.



The majority of the community also supported participation requirements for parents whose youngest child is primary school aged, with 62% agreeing that sole parents and 76% agreeing that partnered parents should have to actively look for work. Levels of community support were even higher for parents with primary school children having to undertake activities to improve their job prospects.

Table 4.2d: Participation requirements for parents with primary school-aged children.



#Denotes statistically significant at the 95% confidence interval.

Sole Parents

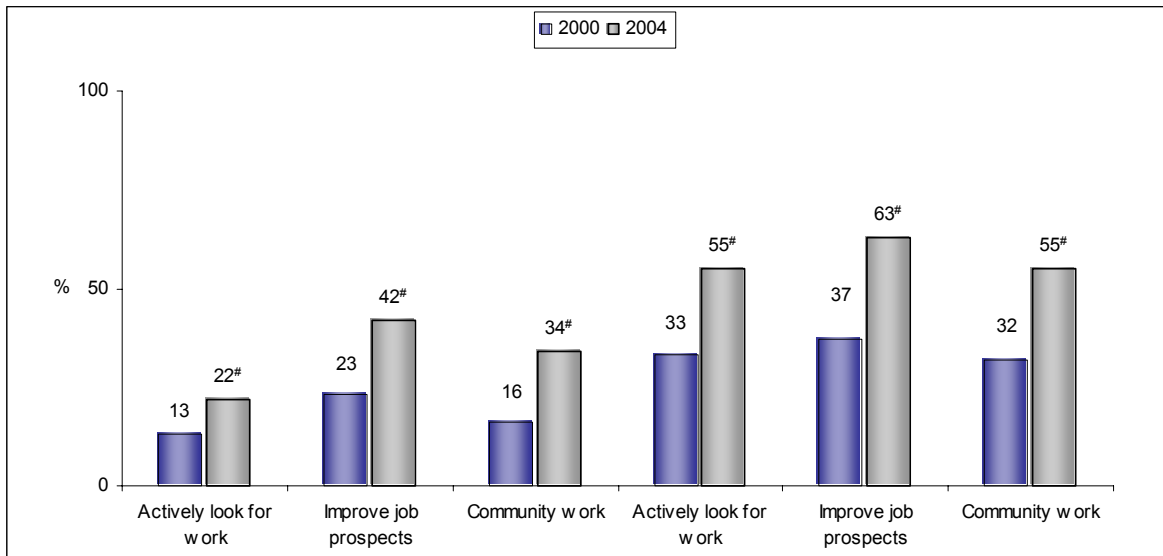
Partnered Parents

For partnered parents with pre-school aged children:

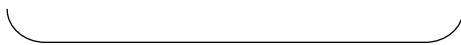
- 55% of the community believed that they should have to actively look for work (compared to 33% in 2000)
- 63% believed they should have to participate in activities that improve their employment prospects (compared to 37% in 2000), and
- 55% believed they should have to participate in activities of benefit to the community (32% in 2000).

There was less support for participation requirements for sole parents with pre-school aged children, although 42% of the community thought that these parents should undertake activities to improve their job prospects.

Table 4.2e: Participation requirements for parents with pre-school aged children.



[#]Denotes statistically significant at the 95% confidence interval.



Sole Parents



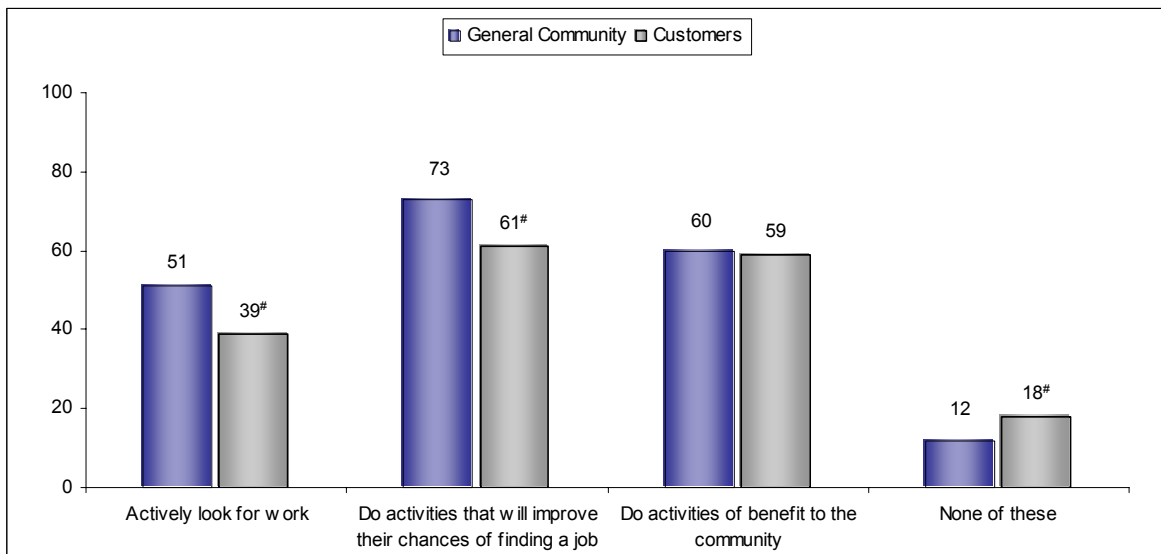
Partnered Parents

4.3 Attitudes towards participation requirements for people with disabilities

The majority of the community supported some form of participation for people receiving Disability Support Pension. Fifty one percent believed that they should have to actively look for work, 73% believed they should have to do activities that would improve their chances of finding a job and 60% thought they should have to undertake activities of benefit to the general community.

Only 12% of the community and 19% of customers believed that people receiving Disability Support Pension should not have to undertake any activities.

Figure 4.3: Participation requirements for people with disabilities receiving Centrelink payments.



[#]Denotes statistically significant at the 95% confidence interval.