

# Unwanted Christmas Presents

## Getting the Most Out of Christmas

Australia Institute Webpaper December 2005

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### Summary

Gift giving is an inseparable part of Christmas, yet evidence from previous research indicates that people buy things for themselves and others that are never used. This paper reports the results of a specially commissioned Newspoll survey of 1200 Australians to assess the extent to which Australians receive Christmas presents they don't want, and feel obliged to give presents to others even though they don't want to.

The survey results show that more than half (53 per cent) of Australians receive Christmas presents they don't use or later give away. While there is no difference between men and women, richer households are much more likely to receive unwanted presents than poorer households (68 per cent of households with incomes over \$70,000 compared to 38 per cent for households with incomes less than \$30,000).

Surprisingly, only 21 per cent of Australians expect to give a Christmas present to someone they don't want to, although younger people are much more likely to feel pressure to give (35 per cent of 18 to 24 year olds) than older people (only 13 per cent of people 50 and over say they will give presents this year to people they don't want to). People in high-income households are more likely to give presents to people they don't want to than those in low-income households (26 per cent compared to 14 per cent). Perhaps reflecting differences in income levels, NSW residents (24 per cent) are more likely to feel the pressure to give to than those in South Australia (14 per cent).

Given the widespread prevalence of unwanted gifts and unwanted giving, the survey also asked Australians if they would be happy if somebody made a donation to a charity on their behalf rather than giving them a present for Christmas. Nearly three quarters (73 per cent) said they would be happy, with women in particular (83 per cent) pleased to see a charity benefit (only 63 per cent of men feel the same way). Oddly, Tasmanians appear to be much more reluctant than other Australians to accept a charitable donation instead of a present.

Given the role that gift-giving plays in creating and maintaining social bonds, and the apparent extent of the wasteful consumption on Christmas presents, encouraging people to donate more to charities as a substitute for personal presents seems to be an effective way of increasing social welfare without taking away any of the enjoyment of the festive season.

## **1. Introduction**

National Christmas spending in 2005 – on food, drink and Christmas presents – is expected to be in the realm of \$14 billion (Holmes 2005). Most Australians participate in some kind of celebration with their family and friends over this period and gift giving is a common part of these celebrations. At the same time, a large number of charities struggle to find resources that are essential for providing goods and services to disadvantaged groups and promoting the public good.

Previous research undertaken by The Australia Institute found that wasteful consumption in Australia (spending on goods and services that are not used or only partly used) exceeds \$10.5 billion each year (Hamilton, Denniss and Baker 2005). Anecdotal evidence suggests that a significant proportion of this wasted expenditure occurs during the Christmas period. For example, op-shops and recycling facilities report sharp increases in donated goods immediately after Christmas. However, no detailed research has been carried out to confirm this. The diversion of even a small proportion of Christmas-related wasteful consumption towards charities could assist in alleviating some of the economic, social and environmental problems that are deserving of attention and thus contribute to greater overall wellbeing.

The aim of this paper is to assess the extent to which Australians receive unwanted Christmas presents. It also assesses the willingness of Australians to accept a donation given to a charity as a substitute for a Christmas present.

The Australia Institute commissioned Newspoll to conduct a national phone survey to evaluate these issues. The survey of 1200 Australians aged 18 and over was carried out between 25 - 27 November 2005. The respondents were selected by means of a randomly selected sample. Demographic information was collected to enable the results to be correlated with relevant factors, including income, sex and place of residence.

Respondents were asked three questions:

- How often, if ever, have you personally received Christmas presents that you don't use or later give away? Would it be every year, most years, some years, never or don't know?
- Are there any people to whom you will give Christmas presents, even though you don't really want to? Yes, no, don't know.
- Would you personally be happy or unhappy if somebody made a donation to a charity on your behalf rather than giving you a present for Christmas? Very happy, somewhat happy, somewhat unhappy, very unhappy, neither/don't know.

## 2. Results

*How often, if ever, have you personally received Christmas presents that you don't use or later give away?*

The responses provided to this question are shown in Tables 1 and 2.

More than half of Australians (53 per cent) say they receive unwanted Christmas presents.

There is little variation in the responses provided by men and women – see Table 1. Women are slightly more likely than men to report receiving unwanted Christmas presents every year or most years, and men are slightly more likely to report receiving unwanted Christmas presents some years.

**Table 1 How often, if ever, have you personally received Christmas presents that you don't use or later give away? By sex (%)**

	Male	Female	Total
Every year	10	12	11
Most years	9	11	10
Some years	33	30	32
Total ever	52	53	53
Never	46	45	46
Don't know	1	2	1

Figures may not add to 100 per cent due to rounding.

In contrast, as shown in Table 2, the results differ significantly according to household income. The wealthier the household, the more often people say they receive unwanted Christmas presents.

People from high-income households (greater than \$70000) are much more likely than people from low-income households (less than \$30000) to say they receive unwanted Christmas presents (68 per cent compared to 38 per cent).

People from middle-income households (between \$30000 and \$69999) are also significantly more likely than those from low-income households to say they receive unwanted Christmas presents (51 per cent compared to 38 per cent).

These trends may be due to the effects of income on the range of material goods that people have. Wealthier people tend to have more goods, which makes selecting an appropriate gift more difficult. Income and wealth also affect the levels of happiness that people derive from additional goods. In general, as income and wealth increase, the marginal happiness derived from an additional good is likely to decline, meaning

that a rich person who receives a gift will probably draw fewer benefits from it than a poor person would.

Income levels also influence the level of Christmas expenditure and how discerning people are when selecting presents and who to give them to. This may lead wealthy people to give poorly selected presents to other wealthy people, and to give presents to wealthy people who feel little emotional attachment to them (for example, because the gift was given by somebody they do not like).

**Table 2 How often, if ever, have you personally received Christmas presents that you don't use or later give away? By household income (%)**

	Household income			Total
	Less than \$30000	\$30000 to \$69999	\$70000 plus	
Every year	6	7	19	11
Most years	7	11	11	10
Some years	25	33	39	32
Total ever	38	51	68	53
Never	60	48	31	46
Don't know	2	0	1	1

Figures may not add to 100 per cent due to rounding.

*Are there any people to whom you will give Christmas presents, even though you don't really want to?*

The responses provided to this question are shown in Tables 3, 4, 5 and 6 below.

Approximately 21 per cent of Australians say they will give a Christmas present to somebody they do not really want to. There does not appear to be a significant difference in the response provided to this question from males and females – see Table 3.

**Table 3 Are there any people to whom you will give Christmas presents, even though you don't really want to? By sex (%)**

	Male	Female	Total
Yes	20	21	21
No	79	78	79
Don't know	1	1	1

Figures may not add to 100 per cent due to rounding.

There are however, significant differences in the responses provided according to age – see Table 4. As people get older, they are less likely to say they will give Christmas presents to people they do not want to. The difference between the youngest and the oldest Australians is the most stark: 35 per cent of those aged 18 to 24 say they will give a Christmas present to somebody they do not really want to, compared to 13 per cent of those aged over 49.

This trend may be a product of people becoming less concerned about pleasing people they do not like as they grow older, which may lead them to be more discerning about the people to whom they give presents. It could also be attributable to people becoming more caring and less judgmental in their older age.

**Table 4 Are there any people to whom you will give Christmas presents, even though you don't really want to? By age (%)**

	Age				Total
	18-24	25-34	35-49	50+	
Yes	35	26	22	13	21
No	65	73	77	86	79
Don't know	0	2	1	1	1

Figures may not add to 100 per cent due to rounding.

Table 5 shows that the results also differ by household income, the higher the income the greater the likelihood a person will say they will give a Christmas present to somebody they do not really want to.

Twenty-six per cent of Australians from high-income households say they will give Christmas presents to people they do not really want to, compared with only 14 per cent of those from low-income households.

This trend is likely to be due to the effects of income on Christmas expenditure. At lower income levels, people have less money to spend on presents and are therefore likely to be more selective when it comes to gift-giving.

**Table 5 Are there any people to whom you will give Christmas presents, even though you don't really want to? By household income (%)**

	Household income			Total
	Less than \$30000	\$30000 to \$69999	\$70000 plus	
Yes	14	20	26	21
No	85	78	74	79
Don't know	1	2	1	1

Figures may not add to 100 per cent due to rounding.

Variations were also seen between states – see Table 6. South Australians are less likely than other Australians to say they will give Christmas presents to people they do not really want to, while people from New South Wales and Victoria are more likely to say they will give presents in these circumstances.<sup>1</sup>

**Table 6 Are there any people to whom you will give Christmas presents, even though you don't really want to? By state (%)**

	State						Total
	NSW	VIC	QLD	SA	WA	TAS	
Yes	24	21	17	14	20	20	20
No	75	77	82	86	80	80	79
Don't know	1	2	2	0	0	0	1

Figures may not add to 100 per cent due to rounding.

*Would you personally be happy or unhappy if somebody made a donation to a charity on your behalf rather than giving you a present for Christmas?*

The responses provided to this question are shown in Tables 7, 8 and 9 below.

As Table 7 shows, 73 per cent of Australians say they would be happy for somebody to make a donation to a charity on their behalf as a substitute for a Christmas present. A further 16 per cent say they do not know, or that they would be neither happy nor unhappy if this occurred. Only 11 per cent say they would be unhappy.

<sup>1</sup> These results may not be representative due to the small sample size in some states.

These results are consistent with the results of a Newspoll survey commissioned by the Smith Family earlier this year, which found that seven out of ten Australians plan on donating more money to charities at Christmas (Creer 2005).

Table 7 also shows a significant gender difference on this issue. Eighty-two per cent of women would be happy for somebody to give a donation to charity as a substitute for a Christmas present, compared with 63 per cent of men.

The gender difference may be due to women being more socially conscious and less selfish than men. Alternatively, it may be a product of women being more cautious about being seen to be selfish, and hence being more likely to say they would be happy in these circumstances.

**Table 7 Would you personally be happy or unhappy if somebody made a donation to a charity on your behalf rather than giving you a present for Christmas? By sex (%)**

	Male	Female	Total
Very happy	28	48	39
Somewhat happy	35	33	34
Total happy	63	82	73
Somewhat unhappy	10	6	8
Very unhappy	4	3	3
Total unhappy	14	9	11
Don't know/neither	22	10	16

Figures may not add to 100 per cent due to rounding.

There were also significant differences between states on this issue – see Table 8.<sup>2</sup> Seventy-eight per cent of South Australians say they would be happy in these circumstances, compared with only 49 per cent of Tasmanians. But a surprisingly high percentage of Tasmanians (45 per cent as opposed to an average of 16 per cent) say they do not know if they would be happy or unhappy, or that they would be neither happy nor unhappy for this to occur.

The results may be due to the idea of giving a donation as a substitute present being unfamiliar in certain states, cultural differences between states concerning donations and charities or statistical anomalies caused by the sample size.

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<sup>2</sup> These results may not be representative due to the small sample size in some states.

**Table 8 Would you personally be happy or unhappy if somebody made a donation to a charity on your behalf rather than giving you a present for Christmas? By state (%)**

	State						Total
	NSW	VIC	QLD	SA	WA	TAS	
Total happy	70	75	76	78	71	49	73
Total unhappy	12	10	12	13	14	5	11
Don't know/neither	19	15	11	10	15	45	16

Figures may not add to 100 per cent due to rounding.

Income appears to play a relatively small role in determining whether a person will say they would be happy or unhappy if a donation is given on their behalf as a substitute for a Christmas present – see Table 9.

People from high-income households are slightly more likely to say they would be happy in these circumstances than those from low-income households. Sixty-nine per cent of Australians from low-income households say they would be happy, compared with 77 per cent of respondents from high-income households.

In contrast, only nine per cent of Australians from low-income households say they would be unhappy for somebody to make a donation on their behalf as a substitute for a Christmas present, compared with 14 per cent of Australians from middle-income households and 11 per cent of Australians from high-income households.

More people from low-income households say they do not know if they would be happy or unhappy in these circumstances, or would be neither, when compared to those from middle and high-income households (22 per cent, 16 per cent and 12 per cent respectively). This may be because people from low-income households are less familiar with this concept than are those from wealthier households.

**Table 9 Would you personally be happy or unhappy if somebody made a donation to a charity on your behalf rather than giving you a present for Christmas? By income (%)**

	Household income			Total
	Less than \$30000	\$30000 to \$69999	\$70000 plus	
Very happy	36	33	43	39
Somewhat happy	33	37	34	34
Total happy	69	70	77	73
Somewhat unhappy	8	8	9	8
Very unhappy	2	6	2	3
Total unhappy	9	14	11	11
Don't know/neither	22	16	12	16

Figures may not add to 100 per cent due to rounding.

### 3. What Does it Mean?

The survey results are consistent with earlier work done by The Australia Institute examining affluence, wasteful consumption and psychological relationships to material goods (Hamilton 2002; 2003; Hamilton, Denniss and Baker, 2005; Hamilton and Denniss 2005). In short, increasing affluence results in large amounts of wasteful consumption and most Australians are now wealthy enough for more material goods not to make a substantial difference to their wellbeing.

That the tradition of giving presents at Christmas has been so enduring in an affluent society, even during an era when only a small minority of the Australian population attend a Christian church each week (less than ten per cent, see ABS 2003 and NCLS 2004), is probably attributable to the functions that gift-giving has served and continues to serve in other less-affluent communities: the creation and maintenance of social bonds. Effective marketing also reinforces, and transforms, the tradition.

A crucial aspect of the role of gift-giving in creating and maintaining social bonds is that gifts demonstrate the giver's understanding of the recipient's needs and interests. Put simply, the perfect gift should be something the recipient needs or wants. Conversely, providing an unwanted gift can backfire, illustrating a lack of connection with the recipient. As Vreeland (1998) has expressed:

unsuccessful givers ... hear the silent cry: If you don't understand me, how well can you love me?

But in affluent societies, most people already have everything they need as well as many of the things they want. In these circumstances, finding the ideal gift becomes much more difficult. What do you give the person who already has everything?

Providing a donation to a charity rather than giving a Christmas present offers an attractive way of fulfilling the needs of givers and recipients alike while promoting the public good. The survey results demonstrate that a large proportion of Australians would be happy for a charitable donation to be made as a substitute for a Christmas present. This may be due to people recognising that a gift to the poor or the environment is likely to produce greater happiness than a gift to themselves. By giving a donation, a giver can signal not only that they have noticed the recipient's concern for broader social and environmental issues, but also affirm those concerns. In doing so, the giver can satisfy the needs of the recipient, signal that they understand the recipient, reduce wasteful consumption and help charities to provide goods and services that are truly needed.

Given the role that gift-giving plays in creating and maintaining social bonds, and the apparent extent of the wasteful consumption on Christmas presents, encouraging people to donate more to charities as a substitute for standard presents seems to be an effective way of increasing social welfare without taking away any of the enjoyment of the festive season.

## References

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- Vreeland, L. 1998, 'Tick, tick, tick... - choosing and giving Christmas gifts', *Psychology Today*, Nov-Dec, pp. 38 – 41.

## Appendix

Most charities do not have a *specific* Christmas program set up for receiving donations that are given as an alternative to purchasing Christmas presents.

Charities that do have a specific Christmas program set up offer a small package of information about the use of the donation received (sometimes in the form of a card for the person on whose behalf the donor has made the donation).

Links for charities that offer specific Christmas programs are given below.

CARE Australia

<http://caregifts.careaustralia.org.au/>

Fred Hollows

<http://www.hollows.org/content/TextOnly.aspx?s=134>

Oxfam Australia

<http://www.oxfamunwrapped.com.au/>

TEAR Australia

<http://www.tear.org.au/giftcatalogue/index.shtml>

The Wilderness Society

Freecall 1800 030 641 and ask for the 'In celebration' package

World Vision Australia

<http://www.worldvision.com.au/smiles/>

List of specific Christmas Appeals

<http://www.ourcommunity.com.au/christmasgiving>

Any charity that offers a specific Christmas program but is not included on this list is encouraged to send their details to [emma@tai.org.au](mailto:emma@tai.org.au)

It is, of course, perfectly possible to simply make a donation to your preferred charity and then create your own package of information to give the person or people to whom you would normally have given standard Christmas presents. Prospective donors are therefore encouraged to contact their own preferred charities. Extensive (but not necessarily complete) listings of organisations that have charitable status in Australia, organised by category, can be found at:

[http://www.ourcommunity.com.au/giving/appeal\\_search.form](http://www.ourcommunity.com.au/giving/appeal_search.form)

<http://www.donations.com.au/browsecat.asp>