

NEWS  
**we're drowning in debt**

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Families feel strain of millions in unpaid bills

**CAIRNS** has racked up the second highest bill in Queensland for unpaid **debt** and fines at \$11.6 million, while residents in the wider area from Palm Cove to Gordonvale owe a staggering \$20 million.

The debts and fines range from court orders, and parking and speeding fines, to unpaid electricity and medical bills.

"For a city the size of **Cairns**, that is frightening, especially when there's many people who won't be able to repay it," Centacare **Cairns** executive director Helga Biro said.

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Data released by the State Penalties Enforcement Registry shows the amount of unpaid fines and debts owed across the state, broken down by postcode.

The postcode 4870 - which covers **Cairns** city to Kamerunga, Earlville and Aeroglen - has the second **d e b t** levels in the state behind Logan, Woodridge and Kingston, which owe a combined \$12.5 million.

Across the Far North, including the Cape, Tableland and Cassowary Coast, the **debt** is \$39 million.

Ms Biro was not surprised by the **Cairns** figure because many people in the city were living on or below the poverty line and could not afford to pay basic bills.

"It's not that people don't want to pay their **debt**, it's just they can't," Ms Biro said.

"Then it leads to bankruptcy and that has implications on their lives for the future."

Christmas and back-to-school costs often compound people's **debt** problems, she added.

Dr Uri Scelwyn, co-owner of The Omega Medical Health Centre at Manoora, required most people to pay up front before seeing a doctor, but the centre was owed money on outstanding insurance claims.

Given the city's high unemployment rate, he was not shocked that **Cairns** had racked up such a figure in unpaid debts and fines.

"If you've got to make a choice between food and a fine, you choose food," he said.

The city's transient population and large number of tourists were are likely contributors to the figures, **Cairns** police acting Sgt Russell Parker said.

"There would be a percentage of those people who are tourists who may leave without paying," he said. "That makes it very, very difficult to recover the money."

Sgt Parker said **Cairns** residents who were hoping to dodge a police fine should think again.

"It's not a good practice to try and ignore it because with modern systems it's not going to go away. It'll probably just end up costing more in the long run," he said.

**Cairns** Regional Council has \$1.14 million in outstanding parking fines that have been referred to SPER for collection, a spokeswoman said.

Ms Biro recommended families drowning in **debt** consult a financial counsellor.

**"Debt** doesn't just disappear; it catches up with you in the end," she said.

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