

**Australian Institute of Family Studies**  
**ANNUAL REPORT 2007-08**



**Australian Government**  

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**Australian Institute of Family Studies**

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Printed by CanPrint Communications Pty Ltd

ISSN 7726-9870



Australian Government  
Australian Institute of Family Studies

30 September 2008

The Hon. Anthony Byrne MP  
Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister  
Parliament House Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Sir

It is with pleasure that I present to you the twenty-eighth *Annual Report* of the Australian Institute of Family Studies, for presentation to Parliament in accordance with Section 114LC of the *Family Law Act 1975*.

This report has been prepared pursuant to the Requirements for Annual Reports approved by the Joint Committee of Public Accounts and Audit.

The report relates to the period 1 July 2007 to 30 June 2008.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Alan Hayes".

Professor Alan Hayes  
Director

## **Mission**

### **Who we are**

The Australian Institute of Family Studies is a national and international leader in identifying, developing and providing timely and reliable information about issues affecting families in Australia.

## **Vision**

### **What we do now and in the future**

The Australian Institute of Family Studies will contribute to family wellbeing in Australia by undertaking high-quality research that informs the Australian Government and the community and influences policy, services and support for families.

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## CONTENTS

<b>1. DIRECTOR'S REVIEW</b>	<b>1</b>
Research achievements	3
Dissemination and communication	6
Public Service Medal award	7
Machinery of government change	7
Looking forward	7
<b>2. AGENCY OVERVIEW</b>	<b>9</b>
Institute overview	10
Role and functions	10
Organisational structure	11
Outcome and output structure	11
<b>3. REPORT ON PERFORMANCE</b>	<b>15</b>
Summary performance information for Outcome 1	16
KPI 1. Conduct high-quality research regarding families in Australia	19
KPI 2. Inform and influence policy development	81
KPI 3. Promote and lead public understanding about families	83
KPI 4. Communicate key issues in family research	89
KPI 5. Maintain and strengthen our role as a national centre	92
Social justice and equity impacts	93
<b>4. MANAGEMENT ACCOUNTABILITY</b>	<b>95</b>
Corporate governance	96
External scrutiny	104
Management of human resources	105
Commonwealth Disability Strategy	109
Assets management	111
Purchasing	111
Consultants	111
<b>5. FINANCIAL STATEMENTS</b>	<b>115</b>
<b>APPENDICES</b>	<b>151</b>
Appendix A: Legislative requirements	152
Appendix B: Compliance index	154
Appendix C: Glossary	158
<b>INDEX</b>	<b>161</b>

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## LIST OF TABLES

Table 3.1	Summary performance information for Outcome 1	16
Table 3.2	Categories of Institute research projects	20
Table 3.3	Statistics of use of all Institute websites	88
Table 3.4	Page download statistics for clearinghouse and project websites	88
Table 3.5	Subscribers to email lists	89
Table 3.6	Resources for Outcome 1: Inform government, policy makers and other stakeholders on factors influencing how families function	93
Table 4.1	Staffing overview: Actual ongoing and non-ongoing full-time and part-time staff, by gender, at 30 June 2008	107
Table 4.2	Staffing overview: Actual ongoing and non-ongoing full-time and part-time staff, by gender, at 30 June 2007	107
Table 4.3	Staffing overview: Actual ongoing and non-ongoing staff, by classification level and gender, at 30 June 2008	107
Table 4.4	Number of staff covered by AIFS Certified Agreement or AWA, at 30 June 2008	108
Table 4.5	Non-salary benefits by employment category and classification level	108
Table 4.6	Staffing overview: Salary ranges by classification	109
Table 4.7	Performance pay	109
Table 4.8	Commonwealth Disability Strategy: Performance requirements of the provider role	109
Table 4.9	Commonwealth Disability Strategy: Performance requirements of the employer role	110
Table 4.10	New consultancies let to the value of \$10,000 or more, 2007–08	112
Table A.1	Institute expenditure on direct mail organisations, 2007–08	153

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 2.1	Structure of the Australian Institute of Family Studies at 30 June 2008	12
Figure 2.2	Contributions to outcomes framework	13

# 1

## DIRECTOR'S REVIEW



## DIRECTOR'S REVIEW

During this year, the Institute has continued to undertake innovative, high-quality, rigorous, relevant and responsive research. Commonwealth and state government agencies, family service providers, courts, researchers and the public sought Institute information and advice across a wide range of topics. Institute work has been used to help provide an evidence base for a number of major policy debates during the year, including those relating to fertility and family policy, maternity leave, child protection issues, child care and work and family balance.

The work undertaken by the Institute's four clearinghouses—the Australian Family Relationship Clearinghouse (AFRC), National Child Protection Clearinghouse (NCPC), Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault (ACSSA) and Communities and Families Clearinghouse Australia (CAFCA)—continued to expand significantly. Each of the clearinghouses acts as an “information hub” focusing on the needs of service providers, policy makers and researchers. An important activity within most of the clearinghouses this year has been the development of a series of Promising Practice Profiles, which provide examples of promising practice from a range of service providers and community organisations. These profiles have proved to be very popular and are widely used.

In recent years, the Institute has increasingly become involved in conducting major evaluations of government policies and programs. During the reporting period, an evaluation of the Magellan Project for the Family Court of Australia was completed. In addition, work on the National Evaluation of the Stronger Families and Community Strategy—undertaken in partnership with the Social Policy Research Centre at the University of New South Wales—neared completion in preparation for submission in the second half of 2008. Significant progress was made in implementing the major evaluation of the changes to the family law system that the Institute is undertaking for the Attorney-General's Department (AGD) and the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA).

Several contracted projects were completed during 2007–08, and a range of new contracts were negotiated and signed. Progress was made on the Institute's program of contracted research into work and family, social inclusion, and Indigenous families. Progress also continued in relation to Institute-initiated research into the analysis of family trends, the financial consequences of divorce, and the social and economic effects of drought and climate change on regional and rural families.

Now in its twenty-eighth year, the Institute has many longstanding collaborative partnerships and is continually forging new partnerships. In 2007–08, the Institute entered into Memoranda of Understanding with the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C) and the AGD. These links with government agencies are important to enable the Institute to engage policy makers, program managers and legislators working in family-focused social policy.

## Research achievements

Through 2007–08, the Institute again made significant progress in achieving the objectives of its Research Plan 2006–08, *Families Through Life: Diversity, Change and Context*. The plan focuses on four research themes: family relationships; children, youth and patterns of care; families and work; and families and community life. This review highlights some of the Institute's research achievements within each theme.

### Research theme: Family relationships

Work under the family relationships theme examines relationship transitions and wellbeing, and includes analysis of relationship and family formation pathways, factors that support strong and healthy relationships, the processes of relationship breakdown and post-separation family circumstances.

Since its establishment in 1980, the Institute has steadily built its capability to research and analyse the impact of the family law system on the lives of Australian families. This year, the Institute further strengthened its capacity to undertake work on family law and related areas. The Institute is responsible for the national evaluation of the new family law system, a reform initiative of significant scale and complexity that has involved changes to the law, the establishment of new service types, and the expansion of early intervention services and post-separation services.

The Institute's achievements at the nexus of legal analysis and social research are recognised in judicial, policy and academic circles. Our close links to the Attorney-General's Department, the Family Court of Australia and the Federal Magistrates' Court have been sustained during 2007–08 and our links with the Family Court of Western Australia have been strengthened. Examples of important work completed this year include the Allegations of Family Violence in the Context of Family Law Children's Proceedings project—funded by the Attorney-General's Department and involving participation of the Family Court of Australia and the Federal Magistrate's Court—and the Magellan Project Evaluation, which evaluated the effectiveness of the Magellan case management approach to responding to allegations of sexual or serious physical abuse of children in post-separation parenting matters before the Family Court of Australia. This evaluation was funded by the Family Court of Australia.

While the Institute provides focused specialist research concerning family law, its research about family relationships is broader. For example, the Australian Family Relationships Clearinghouse collects and synthesises the latest information on research, policy and practice, and disseminates this work to providers of family relationship and support services, policy makers and members of the wider community. During 2007–08, the AFRC produced four issues of *Family Relationships Quarterly*, seven Briefing papers and two Issues papers. Its website had over 228,000 page downloads in 2007–08, a 182% increase on the previous year. The clearinghouse also provides a forum for the publications of the Institute's Building Healthy Couple Relationships research project. In June 2008, the Institute received funding from FaHCSIA and AGD to continue the work of the AFRC through to June 2010.

The Institute's contribution to Australian demographic analysis are further evidenced in Family Trends and Transitions, a project that includes the widely accessed Family Facts and Figures database. Along with tracking a wide range of trends in Australian families, provision of information on couple and family formation and dissolution is a major priority.

### **Research theme: Children, youth and patterns of care**

As a theme, children, youth and patterns of care provides a focus for our research on family influences on children's development and social engagement, including the impact of non-parental care on children.

The year was a particularly salient one for *Growing Up in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC)*; the study became truly longitudinal with the public release of its second wave of data. This FaHCSIA-funded project has been managed by the Institute on behalf of the Australian Government since its inception in 2003. The study is now beginning to realise its potential, with a growing number of data users. Increasingly, evidence-based policy-making and practice relating to child wellbeing are informed by the data derived from *Growing Up in Australia*.

In December 2007, the Institute hosted the inaugural LSAC Conference, which involved the presentation of 35 papers to a capacity audience of over 150 delegates and the identification of priorities and issues for future data waves. A pleasing feature of the conference was the interest in cross-national comparisons of the LSAC data, with analyses presented comparing and contrasting the LSAC results with the data from the UK Millennium Cohort Study. The response to the conference, the growth in registered data users and the steady increase in publications based on LSAC data show the value of the study to Australian and international policy makers, service providers and researchers.

The Institute's other longitudinal study of children's development, the Australian Temperament Project—now in its 25th year—continued to provide new insights into the paths participants have taken through life. Key issues currently being addressed include the quality of relationships between the study's young people (now in their mid-twenties) and their parents, their expectations and aspirations for marriage and parenthood, their risk-taking behaviours and their adjustment from adolescence to early adulthood.

Through the work of the National Child Protection Clearinghouse, the Institute continued its focus on child abuse prevention, child protection and family violence. Demand for the clearinghouse's resources was high. The website attracted over 574,000 page downloads, including over 314,000 pages from NCPublications. In 2007–08, NCPublications staff also examined the extent to which research evidence informed policy developments in the child protection sector, a project funded by the Australian Research Council and undertaken in collaboration with the Australian Centre for Child Protection. Major work in mapping approaches to child protection, nationally and internationally, was completed during the year.

In 2007–08, NCPublications published 11 Promising Practice Profiles in four booklets, conducted four workshops and delivered several conference papers and presentations outlining culturally appropriate promising practices for out-of-home care for

Aboriginal children. These outputs have the potential to enhance outcomes for Indigenous children and to improve the social inclusion of their families.

### Research theme: Families and work

Research in this area has focused on the ways in which families combine caring responsibilities and paid employment. A particular emphasis has been on labour market policy issues for families with young children. The Institute's research has contributed to the debate around whether Australia should introduce a scheme of universal paid maternity and parental leave. This has included a submission to the Productivity Commission Inquiry into Paid Maternity, Paternity and Parental Leave. The paper, *Timing of Mothers' Return to Work After Childbearing: Variations by Job Characteristics and Leave Use*, was prepared for publication in July 2008.

The Institute's paper, *Fertility and Family Policy in Australia*, contributed to public policy debate about possible reasons for and strategies to redress Australia's fertility rate, which has fallen to a level below that required for population replacement. Work and family policies, as well as financial assistance to families with children, appear to be important factors.

The study on carers of people with a disability was a salient initiative completed during the year. A collaboration with FaHCSIA, the project investigated the impact on carers and their families of caring for a person with a disability. Computer-assisted telephone interviews were conducted with 1,002 carers from around Australia who were in receipt of government payments for their caring roles. The final report was published in June 2008, with a number of journal articles, conference paper publications, and media mentions emanating from this project. In addition to information on the health and wellbeing of carers, the study highlighted the difficulties of balancing caring responsibilities and the desire to work.

These Institute-initiated projects, papers and other publications, including *Mothers and Fathers with Young Children: Paid Employment, Caring and Wellbeing* and *Work and Family Responsibilities Through Life*, are examples of the Institute's capacity to generate policy-relevant information.

### Research theme: Families and community life

Interconnections between the health and wellbeing of families and the characteristics of their residential communities are explored in depth in the fourth and final theme of the current Research Plan.

Two examples of the work from this stream illustrate the diverse research methodologies utilised by the Institute, as well as the diversity of stakeholders to whom outputs are delivered.

The Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault is Australia's sole centre for collating, synthesising and disseminating current information and research on sexual assault. The clearinghouse delivered a suite of services, ranging from in-depth research papers, short resource papers or "wraps" for practitioners and other stakeholders, to specialist research advisory services and online links for sexual assault crisis centres. In 2007, ACSSA expanded its outputs further by developing the Promising Practice Programs and Responses for Sexual Assault Database, aimed

at those who design or deliver programs to prevent or improve responses to sexual assault. To a significant degree, the success of ACSSA, like the Institute's other clearinghouses, lies in their ability to simultaneously meet the diverse information needs of service providers, other sectors (such as policing, law, medicine and education), the research community and government policy makers.

In addition to responding to longstanding social issues such as child protection and sexual assault, the Institute has also sought to target emerging policy issues. In August 2007, the Institute, in collaboration with the Australian National University and La Trobe University, embarked on a major research project examining the impact of drought on families. Drawing on the Institute's experience in conducting large-scale primary research surveys, data were drawn from interviews with over 8,000 respondents. The research has already informed the Commonwealth Government's National Review of Drought policy.

### Dissemination and communication

In fulfilling its aim to conduct rigorous, relevant and responsive research on families in Australia, the Institute places high priority on the communication of the products of its own and others' research in the field of family studies. To this end, the Strategic Plan 2006–08 identified the importance of transferring the knowledge that the Institute creates; promoting and leading public understanding and debate; and identifying and communicating current and emerging issues.

Publications remain an important vehicle for the dissemination of the Institute's research, nationally and internationally, and include the flagship research publication, *Family Matters*, as well as research papers and reports, an extensive range of newsletters, issues papers and other clearinghouse publications.

While the Institute maintains an extensive print publication program, dissemination through its websites continues to assume increasing importance. Distribution of Institute publications through our websites continues to expand at an impressive rate, while electronic alert and discussion list subscriptions have also increased significantly.

The Seminar Series is another vehicle for dissemination, networking and generating debate about current social policy research. In 2007–08, a particularly successful series of monthly seminars was held, with presentations by a range of invited researchers and Institute staff. Topics covered a broad range of current issues relating to Australian families and the seminars continued to be well attended by Institute staff, stakeholders and community members.

The Institute maintains substantial specialist resources, including one of the most comprehensive collections of family-related materials in Australia, housed in the Institute's library. Researchers, policy makers, practitioners and the general public access the Institute's reference, research and bibliographic services.

Media coverage of the Institute's research also increased substantially during 2007–08, with approximately 1,900 items in the print, radio and television media that referred to Institute research. This represents a doubling of the media coverage of the previous year.

### Public Service Medal award

Ruth Weston, one of the Institute's most senior and experienced researchers, was awarded the Public Service Medal in the 2008 Australia Day Honours in recognition of her many outstanding contributions. The announcement stated:

For outstanding public service as a researcher and contributor to policy development, particularly in the areas of separation and divorce, family law, family relationships, fertility decision-making and child support.

Mrs Weston has worked at the Institute since 1982 and has significantly advanced the understanding of long-term demographic trends in couple and family formation, dissolution and reformation, the emotional and financial consequences of divorce, and the factors that influence decisions about having children. Most recently, her research was central to the outcome of the Ministerial Task Force on Child Support. The Institute congratulates Mrs Weston on her achievement.

### Machinery of government change

The year 2007–08 saw a significant change for the Australian Institute of Family Studies. In December 2007, the Institute moved from the Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs portfolio to that of the Prime Minister and Cabinet.

On 16 May 2008, the Secretary of the PM&C, Mr Terry Moran AO, made a first visit to the Institute. Signing of a Memorandum of Understanding with PM&C further cemented the strong working relationship of the two agencies, and facilitates working with the Department's Office of Work and Family and other areas, including the Social Inclusion Unit. The Institute retains strong links with a range of Australian government agencies, particularly FaHCSIA and the AGD.

### Looking forward

With the current Research Plan nearing completion, the Institute is now focused on its emerging priorities for the coming years. Planning for the development of our new strategic and research plans has begun. As we approach our thirtieth year in 2010, we are now in a position to further extend the Institute's activities as a national and international centre of excellence in family studies, ultimately working to advance the wellbeing of families. In addition, a priority will be to further strengthen our ability to contribute to family research, policy and practice in the Asia–Pacific Region.



Professor Alan Hayes  
Director