

A photograph of a family of four walking through a forest. The ground is covered in fallen leaves, and the trees are tall and thin. The family consists of a man, a woman, and two children. The man is on the left, the woman is on the right, and the two children are in the middle, holding hands. The entire image has a warm, reddish-orange tint.

Director's review

DIRECTOR'S REVIEW

This has been a year of further growth in the Institute's programs of research and dissemination. Communication of the Institute's work remained a priority, with considerable growth in publications, Internet downloads, media mentions and clearinghouse information resources. Throughout the year, collaborative links were strengthened with the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C), Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA), Attorney-General's Department (AGD), Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) and a range of other Australian Government departments and agencies, as well as with state and territory government bodies and the community sector. International links were also strengthened both in the region and beyond, with national and international research partnerships remaining a priority.

The impact of the global financial crisis on children, families and communities was a major focus for the Institute in 2008-09. Financial stress tends to exacerbate mental health problems and relationship difficulties within families, and the negative effects can flow on to children. The Institute was called upon by several government agencies to provide analyses for policy consideration of the ramifications of the downturn for Australian families.

Planning for the future

Through 2008-09, a major review of our strategic direction and research priorities took place. Once again, an extensive program of consultations was undertaken to help shape our next research plan. Meetings in capital cities and regional centres across the country sought the views of a diverse range of stakeholders, from community sector organisations through to Australian Government central agencies.

The new Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) Research Plan 2009-12, *Sustaining Families in Challenging Times*, builds upon and extends the themes of the previous research plan and reflects the Australian Government's policy priorities, including in the spheres of work and family and social inclusion. Among other priorities, the three-year research plan will help track the social and economic implications for Australian families of the global recession and its aftermath.

The 2008-09 reporting period was also the last year of operation of the strategic and research plans 2006-08. Our new plans were developed amidst a rapidly changing policy landscape and the core strategic goals of the Institute will be to:

- conduct high-quality research, relevant to policy and practice, on a broad range of issues regarding families in Australia;
- expand, through collaborative partnerships, understanding of factors affecting families;
- increase the effectiveness of our communications to foster greater understanding about factors that affect families; and
- build our organisational capability to achieve research and communications objectives.

The new plans align with the financial year, rather than calendar year, consistent with our statutory reporting requirements.

Research highlights

Social inclusion and exclusion, financial disadvantage and the impacts of unemployment on families

A focus of the Institute's research was in the areas of disadvantage, social inclusion and the impact of unemployment and joblessness on families. A key area of research related to the effects of unemployment on families and their children. This work was conducted in response to the issues emerging from the global recession and its emerging impacts on the Australian economy.

The national evaluation of the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy (SFCS) was completed. The SFCS is an area-based intervention aimed at improving outcomes for Australian young children and their families who are living in disadvantaged communities. This evaluation was undertaken for FaHCSIA through a partnership between the Institute and the lead agency, the Social Policy Research Centre (SPRC). The evaluation found that there had been positive impacts for young children and their families in the short run, particularly of the Communities for Children initiative. The results of this evaluation are valuable in considering the potential of community-based area-level interventions in addressing disadvantage.

The Institute also conducted research into the impact of growing up in a financially disadvantaged family on the extent to which children successfully make the transition from home to school. The research evidence focused on the influences on and practices of Australian children and their families (particularly those in disadvantaged circumstances) in preparing for school and during the first years of school. The key findings from analyses of data from *Growing up in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC)* were that disadvantage has significant consequences for children prior to school, especially in terms of language development. While the effects are mediated and moderated by a range of parental and family factors, there is a greater burden of risk among those from disadvantaged families. This work was commissioned by the Smith Family, a major community sector organisation.

Despite the prevalence of drought in Australia, there have been few large-scale studies that examine the effect of drought upon families and communities in regional and rural Australia. In order to begin to fill this gap, the Institute has completed an extensive study of the impact of drought on families. The initial findings from this study were published during the year. This work highlighted the impacts on health, financial wellbeing, employment, family relationships, community social cohesion and the availability of services. The research was able to demonstrate the flow-on effects of drought beyond farmers themselves to families living in drought-affected regional and rural areas. The Institute's work on the effects of drought was extensively referred to in the report of the Drought Policy Review Expert Social Panel and the Productivity Commission Inquiry into Government Drought Support. This study is already providing information that will assist in the development of policies that better respond to the needs of families in rural and regional areas.

An important aspect of the Institute's work is to produce reports that can help guide conceptual thinking around major issues and how key concepts can be translated into policy. The Institute undertook work on the origins of the concept of social inclusion, and how it has been applied internationally, in order to help inform the work of the Australian Social Inclusion Board. The results of this work were published during the reporting period and have been widely used.

Family relationships and family law

Another focus of the Institute's work during 2008–09 was in the area of family relationships. The Institute is undertaking an evaluation of the 2006 changes to the family law system. The Institute's work on this major evaluation, which commenced in 2006, is nearing completion and will be finalised by the end of 2009. Other work in the family law area focused on the impacts of divorce on the wellbeing of older Australians and a longitudinal analysis of the impacts of divorce on income, poverty and social exclusion. The Australian Family Relationships Clearinghouse (AFRC) continued to collect and synthesise information relevant to the development and delivery of family relationship programs (ranging from prevention and early intervention through to post-separation services) for dissemination to practitioners, service providers and policy-makers. This work is important in ensuring the best possible outcomes for families experiencing relationship difficulties and breakdown.

Work and family

Issues of work and family have been prominent again in the work of the Institute. Research has been published on the effects on labour force participation of caring for a person who requires care because of a disability, long-term health problem or frail old age; the labour market participation of mothers in the period immediately following childbearing; use of leave; and the perceived value of a range of work–family policies. Another theme of the Institute's work in this area related to the impacts of different types of jobs and working conditions on family wellbeing and breastfeeding.

Longitudinal research

A feature of the Institute's work is the collection and analysis of longitudinal data. The Institute is responsible for the management of *Growing Up in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children*, in partnership with FaHCSIA and the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). Funding has been extended for a further 4 waves, with the 8th data collection to take place when the older children are 18 years of age. This will provide data from early childhood through to early adulthood. During 2008–09, discussions with the Millennium Cohort Study in London and at the OECD in Paris underscored the value of emerging longitudinal study networks and the prospect of harmonisation of longitudinal data across international studies. The Institute further consolidated its international collaborations with the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding with the Norwegian Institute of Public Health, an organisation that has particular expertise in the management of very large-scale longitudinal studies and the collection, storage and management of biomedical data.

The Institute also currently hosts the Australian Temperament Project (ATP), a longitudinal study of Victorian children that has been collecting data since 1983, and has been heavily involved in the design and analysis of the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey. The use of longitudinal data can greatly enhance the power of evaluations to identify the impacts of policy on families. The key plank of the evaluation of the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy was the collection of longitudinal data on families with young children (the Stronger Families in Australia [SFIA] study). Similarly, the evaluation of the 2006 family law changes involves the running of Australia's first longitudinal study of separated parents.

The availability of longitudinal data greatly increases the ability of researchers to understand the dynamic behaviour and experiences of families, look at the temporal pattern of events and identify the effects of policies and programs on outcomes for children and families.

Disseminating the evidence and informing practice

The Institute strives to be recognised as a centre for excellence in the development and delivery of clearinghouse services. Our goal is to increase the accessibility of research information and

to support people in making sense of the evidence base—“translating” and linking research findings into policy and practice. The role of the Institute’s four clearinghouses is to provide valid, reliable, current, accessible, comprehensible and usable research and information. The clearinghouses support evidence-informed decision-making in relation to specific areas of policy and professional practice for a range of government and non-government agencies by identifying, gathering and synthesising, and publishing research and resources.

The clearinghouses managed by the Institute are the Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault (ACSSA), the Australian Family Relationships Clearinghouse, the Communities and Families Clearinghouse Australia (CAFCA) and the National Child Protection Clearinghouse (NCPC). This financial year, the clearinghouses all experienced substantial increases in the use of their websites compared to the previous reporting period.

Social exclusion is experienced profoundly by too many Indigenous Australians. Late in 2008–09, the Institute successfully partnered with the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare to win the tender for establishing and operating a new national clearinghouse. It will provide research evidence to assist with closing the gap on Indigenous disadvantage. This clearinghouse, which will be hosted on the AIHW website, will be co-badged with AIHW and AIFS logos.

Research plan

Together, all of the Institute’s activities and outputs—from major research papers and presentations at international conferences to Promising Practice Profiles (PPPs) and the distribution of electronic newsletters—were directed towards fulfilling the objectives of the Research Plan 2006–08, *Families Through Life: Diversity, Change and Context*. Reflecting upon what the Institute has delivered under the four research themes—family relationships; children, youth and patterns of care; families and work; and families and community life—I am struck by the diversity of social policy issues that we address. From family law reform to neighbourhood demographics, from childhood development to the drought, and from sexual assault to strong families, the scope and scale of our research is far greater than the organisation’s size would suggest. The “Report on Performance” in Chapter 3 of this report surveys the wealth of research projects and communications outputs delivered under the Research Plan 2006–08.

Significant events

The Institute began 2008–09 with the 10th Australian Institute of Family Studies Conference, Families Through Life. The conference, held 9–11 July in Melbourne, attracted an audience of nearly 500 delegates to hear international keynote speakers Professor Andrew Cherlin of the Johns Hopkins University, USA, and Professor Peter Whiteford of the SPRC (formerly of the OECD), alongside the Institute’s own keynote speaker, Ruth Weston, and specialists across a range of areas relevant to family studies. Two panel sessions—one on Social Inclusion and the other on Work and Family—canvassed some of the most pressing contemporary family and social issues. By the end of this reporting period, planning was well underway for the next AIFS conference, scheduled for 7–9 July 2010, a major event that will coincide with the Institute’s 30th year.

Having moved to the portfolio of the Prime Minister and Cabinet in December 2007, another milestone was achieved in 2008–09 with the official opening of the Institute’s new premises by the Hon. Jenny Macklin, Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs and the Hon. Anthony Byrne, Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister.

The AIFS Seminar Series continues to attract world-class speakers to the Institute's premises in La Trobe Street, Melbourne. In September 2008, the Institute expanded the scope of the series by hosting a seminar event at the State Library of Victoria.

After more than twelve years, the foundation Chair of the Institute's Human Research Ethics Committee, the Reverend Dr Philip Hughes, stepped down in December 2008. Reverend Dr Hughes has provided outstanding leadership to the committee and ever-wise guidance to the Institute. His diligence, judgement and insight are greatly appreciated. Dr Duncan Ironmonger was appointed Chair from January 2009. After many years as a committee member, Dr Ironmonger will bring a wealth of research experience and sound ethical judgement to the role.

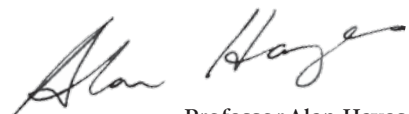
As the current reporting period drew to a close, so too did the terms of some members of the AIFS Advisory Council. The inaugural Chair of the Council, Ms Dianne Gibson, has generously shared her expertise and wise counsel with the Institute over many years, having also been the Presiding Member of the Institute's Board of Management. Her insights in the areas of family-related research and wealth of experience in the Family Court, social policy, and the development and implementation of family services has been greatly valued, and directly contributed to the calibre of the research outputs from the Institute.

Ms Thelma Gertz is also retiring from the Advisory Council. As Coordinator, Indigenous Education, Diocese of Townsville Catholic Education, Ms Gertz has brought to AIFS her leadership in developing policies and practices to improve outcomes for Indigenous children and young people. Again, Ms Gertz's contributions are greatly appreciated.

From the start of the next reporting period, Reverend the Hon. Professor Brian Howe AO will chair the council and Ms Muriel Bamblett AM will be another new member. The appointments to the council are for a three-year period, coinciding with the span of the new Research and Strategic Plans. With the advice and support of the Advisory Council, the Institute looks forward to a period of further growth in productivity, efficiency and effectiveness.

Summary

The positioning of the Institute within the portfolio of the Prime Minister and Cabinet strengthens its capacity to contribute evidence to inform key whole-of-government policy priorities in areas such as work and family and social inclusion. The Institute's research program emphasises leadership of flagship Australian Government longitudinal research initiatives such as *Growing Up in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children*; involvement in key evaluations related to community area-based interventions and family law reform; as well as cutting-edge projects in collaboration with governments, the community sector and international researchers. Priority is placed on dissemination via print and digital media, and its research-, policy- and practice-oriented clearinghouses. All these activities are unified by the objective of increasing understanding of Australian families, their functioning and the factors that facilitate their wellbeing.



Professor Alan Hayes
Director