

Diversity and change in Australian families

S T A T I S T I C A L P R O F I L E S

David de Vaus



Australian Institute of Family Studies

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Foreword

This book is testament to the scale of changes that families have experienced over the last century and over the last 25 years in particular. There is hardly any aspect of family life that has not changed in one way or another. Relationship patterns, fertility, gender roles, relationship breakdown, the work and family interface, and the growth of particular family types are but a few of the major changes to families that we have seen in recent decades.

In the face of so much change it is easy for myths to develop and for misunderstandings to emerge. It is easy to dwell on the dramatic and eye-catching changes – the changes that might suggest crisis – and to ignore the ongoing strengths of families. Statistics are frequently quoted about families and family change. As we know, statistics can easily be misinterpreted and used to mislead.

Thus, as author David de Vaus points out, one of the main purposes of *Diversity and Change in Australian Families* is to provide statistical information about Australian families and family change from reliable sources, and to place these statistics within a context that makes them easier to interpret accurately.

The extent to which families are changing and the “mainstreaming” of family forms that were once regarded as marginal has led to concerns in some quarters about the decline of the family. There is certainly reason for concern about some of the changes and the difficulties that family members can face. There can be no doubt that even in these relatively prosperous times families face enormous pressures. Some families manage these pressures but other families struggle, and do so against the odds.

Frequently, at least in the public discourse, the failings in families are attributed to the moral failings of the individuals involved. But families and individual family members do not live in a vacuum. Family change is, in part, a function of changes in the wider society. As a fundamental institution in society, the family cannot escape the impact of these broader social changes. Where families struggle it is important to attend to the structural factors that contribute to these difficulties and not simply blame the individuals.

While it is easy to dwell on troubles in families, there are a number of areas where families are doing well, and where family lives are, on average, improving. David de Vaus has been at pains not to attend only to the negatives, but also to document the strengths of families and the improvements in family lives.

Diversity and Change in Australian Families covers a very wide range of topics. Yet inevitably there will be topics that have been left out. The book does not aim to be a microscope through which to view the inner workings of families or the daily lives of individuals who live in families. Rather it aims to provide windows through which to catch glimpses of the landscape of Australian families and family change. It is our hope that it will contribute to informed debate about family diversity and change and will inform family policy development.

Alan Hayes

Director

Australian Institute of Family Studies

About the author

David de Vaus is Professor of Sociology and Head of the School of Social Sciences at La Trobe University and former Research Manager and Senior Research Advisor at the Australian Institute of Family Studies. He has written or edited 14 books, mainly on methods of social research and in family studies. He is author of *Letting Go: Relationships Between Adults and their Parents*, published by Oxford University Press, 1994; and co-editor (with Ilene Wolcott) of *Australian Family Profiles: Social and Demographic Patterns*, published by the Australian Institute of Family Studies, 1997. He has published research on cohabitation, fertility patterns, changing patterns of partnering, the changing living arrangements of children, intergenerational transfers, families and ageing, retirement, family values, and on many other areas of family life.

Acknowledgements

I have been assisted by many people in preparing this work. I owe special thanks to the Australian Institute of Family Studies for publishing the book. As Institute Director, David Stanton supported the book, as has Ann Sanson more recently, as Acting Director. The Institute's demographic trends analyst Lixia Qu helped with the data sets and some of the analysis. And Ruth Weston, Matthew Gray and Bruce Smyth, Institute researchers, have been both encouraging and helpful by reading drafts of chapters and making numerous suggestions for improving the analysis and avoiding simplistic conclusions. Institute publisher Meredith Michie and editor Dianne Frey have improved the book by their expert advice and editing.

In particular, I am indebted to Peter McDonald, Head of the Demography and Sociology Program at the Australian National University, who read and reviewed the entire manuscript. I am particularly grateful for the time he spent on it, for his valuable comments, and for suggesting how to improve the analysis – picking up mistakes and pointing out where my interpretations were too simple. However, it is the case that I am entirely responsible for the faults that may remain.

Finally, I want to thank my wife, June, for her support and patience as the writing of this book has, once again, challenged our work–family balance.

David de Vaus

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Much of the information in this book relies on information made available in national surveys conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), various universities and by the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS). Access to the unit record files for many of these surveys has enabled new analysis to be reported. Access to the unit record files of the ABS was made possible by the Agreement between the ABS and the Australian Vice Chancellors Committee. (Organised by year of survey. Multi year surveys are listed last.)

Evaluation of the Child Support Scheme

Conducted by	Australian Institute of Family Studies
Year conducted	1990
Sample size	14,000 parents registered with the Child Support Agency
Further information	Harrison, M., Snider, G. et al. (1990) Harrison, M., Snider, G. et al. (1991) http://www.aifs.gov.au/institute/pubs/fm1/fm29/mh.html

Australian Family Formation Study, Stage 2

Conducted by	Australian Institute of Family Studies
Year conducted	1990-1991
Sample size	1534 respondents, ranging in age from 27 to 44
Sample type	Follow up of sample initially surveyed in 1981
Further information	http://assda.anu.edu.au/studies/D1045.html

1992 Family Survey

Conducted by	Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS)
Year conducted	1992
Sample size	33,981 persons
Sample type	National probability survey of private dwellings
Further information	http://www.abs.gov.au

Australian Living Standards Survey

Conducted by	Australian Institute of Family Studies
Year conducted	1992
Sample size	5000 households (parents and all children of secondary school age were eligible to participate)
Sample type	5000 randomly selected households in 12 different Local Government Areas. Households were eligible for selection if they had responsibility for a child under the age of 20
Further information	http://www.aifs.gov.au/institute/pubs/fm/fm43dd.pdf

Australian Family Values Survey

Conducted by	David de Vaus
Year conducted	1995
Sample size	2,129 individuals
Sample type	National probability sample of people registered on the electoral roll

Later Life Families Survey, 1996

Conducted by	Australian Institute of Family Studies
Year conducted	1996
Sample size	721 respondents aged 50–70 years
Sample type	National random telephone survey of private dwellings
Further information	Wolcott, I. (1998)

1996 Women's Safety Survey

Conducted by	Australian Bureau of Statistics
Year conducted	1996
Sample size	6,333 women aged 18 years or more in private dwellings
Sample type	National probability survey of women in private dwellings
Further information	ABS (1996d)

Family Life Course Survey

Conducted by	Australian Institute of Family Studies
Year conducted	1996
Sample size	2000 households in which there was an in-scope member (a person aged 25-70 years, or for if under 25 years)
Sample type	National probability telephone survey of households containing
Further information	http://assda.anu.edu.au/studies/D1038.html

1997 Time Use Survey

Conducted by	Australian Bureau of Statistics
Year conducted	1997
Sample size	7,281
Sample type	Multistage area probability sample of private dwellings,
Further information	ABS (1998d)

National Survey of Mental Health and Well Being of Adults

Conducted by	Australian Bureau of Statistics
Year conducted	1997
Sample size	10,600 people aged 18 years or over
Sample type	Stratified, multistage probability sample of private dwellings
Further information	ABS (1999k)

Negotiating the Life Course Survey, 1997

Conducted by	Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University
Year conducted	1997
Sample size	2231 individuals
Sample type	National probability telephone survey. Persons in the household age 18-54 were eligible for selection. Only one eligible person was selected in each household. Since the initial wave of the survey the study has developed into an indefinite life panel survey
Further information	http://lifecourse.anu.edu.au/

1997 Family Characteristics Survey

Conducted by	Australian Bureau of Statistics
Year conducted	1997
Sample type	Supplement to the Monthly Population Survey (MPS) which is based on a multi-stage area sample of private dwellings (currently about 30,000 houses, flats, etc.) and a list-sample of non-private dwellings (hospitals, hotels, etc.). Family characteristics survey was based on households in which there was a child under the age of 18.
Further information	ABS (1998a)

Australian Divorce Transitions Project

Conducted by	Australian Institute of Family Studies
Year conducted	1997
Sample size	650 divorced Australians
Sample type	National random telephone survey of private dwellings
Further information	Smyth, B. & Weston, R. (2000) http://assda.anu.edu.au/studies/D1042.html

Men's Role in Parenting

Conducted by	G. Russell et al. for Australian Government Department of Family and Community Services
Year conducted	1998
Sample size	1,000 men and 250 partners of the sampled men
Sample type	National random sample of men who had responsibility for children under the age of 18 years (whether they lived with them or not). Of the sample of men interviewed, partners of 25 per cent were also interviewed
Further information	Russell, G., Barclay, L. et al. (1999)

Young Adults Aspirations Survey

Conducted by	Australian Institute of Family Studies
Year conducted	1998
Sample size	580 young adults aged 20–29 years
Sample type	National probability telephone survey
Further information	Kilmartin, C. (2000) http://assda.anu.edu.au/studies/D1064.html

1998 Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers

Conducted by	Australian Bureau of Statistics
Year conducted	1998
Sample size	36,951 persons were included in the household component and 5,716 persons for the cared accommodation component.
Sample type	The survey consisted of two components—the household component and the cared accommodation component. The household component covered people in private dwellings and non private dwellings that were not classified as cared accommodation. The Cared accommodation consisted of people in hospitals, nursing homes, hostels and the like. A probability sample of households was selected. From the selected households interviews were conducted in households in which there was a person aged 60 or over or there was a person with a disability
Further information	ABS (1999i)

Household Expenditure Survey, 1998-1999

Conducted by	Australian Bureau of Statistics
Year conducted	1998-1999
Sample size	6093 households
Sample type	National probability sample of Australian households
Further information	ABS (2001k)

National Gambling Survey

Conducted by	Productivity Commission
Year conducted	1999
Sample size	A detailed questionnaire was administered to randomly selected sub-samples which yielded completed interviews of sub-samples of 1,225 regular gamblers, 1,290 non-regular gamblers and 983 non gamblers
Sample type	National telephone survey of the general adult population (18 years or older) covering all states and territories. The sampling strategy consisted of two phases. The first phase involved the administration of a brief screener questionnaire to 10,500 adults.
Further information	http://www.pc.gov.au/inquiry/gambling/finalreport/appendixf.pdf

1999–2000 Survey of Income and Housing Costs

Conducted by	Australian Bureau of Statistics
Year conducted	1999-2000
Sample size	15,500 persons from 8,289 income units
Sample type	National probability survey of usual residents of private dwellings
Further information	ABS (2001l)

National Health Survey 2001

Conducted by	Australian Bureau of Statistics
Year conducted	2001
Sample size	26,862 persons in private dwellings
Sample type	National probability sample of people in private dwellings. Within each selected household, a random sub-sample was selected as follows: <ul style="list-style-type: none">- one adult (18 years of age and over)- all children aged 0-6 years- one child aged 7-17 years.
Further information	ABS (2002n)

Transition from Education to Work survey

Conducted by	Australian Bureau of Statistics
Year conducted	2001
Sample size	Eligible households (containing a person aged 15-64) in the 30,000 households in the Labour Force Survey
Sample type	Supplement to monthly Labour Force Survey. The population survey is based on a multi-stage area sample of private dwellings (currently about 30,000 houses, flats, etc.) and a list sample of non-private dwellings (hotels, motels, etc.), and covers about 0.45 per cent of the population of Australia.
Further information	ABS (2002f) ABS (2003k)

Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia

Conducted by	Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research under contract from the Australian Government Department of Family and Community Services
Year conducted	2001 (Wave 1)
Sample size	13,969 individuals from 7682 households
Sample type	National multistage cluster probability sample of private dwellings
Further information	http://www.melbourneinstitute.com/hilda/

Australian Study of Health and Relationships

Conducted by	Funded by the Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, and the National Health and Medical Research Council
Year conducted	2001-2002
Sample size	19,307
Sample type	Telephone interviews were conducted with a disproportionate stratified two-phase sample of men and women aged 16 to 59 from across Australia. The sample was stratified by sex and then into 14 geographic regions for the female sample and 15 geographic regions for the male sample.
Further information	http://www.latrobe.edu.au/ashr

2002 General Social Survey

Conducted by	Australian Bureau of Statistics
Year conducted	2002
Sample size	15,500 households
Sample type	National probability sample of households. One person aged over 18 in selected private dwellings was interviewed.
Further information	ABS (2003f) ABS (2004)

Child Care Surveys

Conducted by	Australian Bureau of Statistics
Year conducted	Normally every 3 years
Sample size	Varies but based on sample of 30,000 households
Sample type	Supplement to the monthly Labour Force Surveys. Information is collected from private dwellings with children under 12 years of age.
Further information	ABS (2003k)

International Social Science Survey

Conducted by	Jonathan Kelley and MDR Evans for the ISSP
Year conducted	Annual
Sample size	Varies by survey
Sample type	National probability sample
Further information	http://www.issp.org/surveys.htm

1 per cent sample files from the National Census

Conducted by	Australian Bureau of Statistics
Year conducted	1981, 1986, 1991, 1996, 2001
Sample size	1 per cent of households
Sample type	Random sample of households enumerated in the census
Further information	ABS http://www.abs.gov.au

Australian Temperament Project

Conducted by	Currently conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies
Year conducted	13 waves of data have been collected since 1982
Sample size	The initial sample comprised 2443 families from urban and rural areas of the state. Approximately two-thirds of the families are still participating in the study after 21 years.
Sample type	Longitudinal study of children born in Victoria, Australia September, 1982 and January 1983.
Further information	http://www.aifs.gov.au/atp/home.html and Prior, Sanson, Smart and Oberklaid (2000)

World Values Survey (Australian component) (1981 and 1995)

Conducted by	Consortium (1981 survey) Alan Black (Principal Investigator) (1995 survey)
Year conducted	1981 and 1995
Sample size	1,228 (1981 survey), 2,048 (1995 survey)
Sample type	Repeated cross sectional surveys. National probability sample of individuals in private dwellings.
Further information	Inglehart (2000) http://assda.anu.edu.au/studies/D0422.html (1981 survey)

Longitudinal Study of Australian Youth

Conducted by	Australian Council of Educational Research
Year conducted	Annually
Sample size	Approximately 13,000
Sample type	Annual telephone interviews of a number of cohorts of Australian youth. Cohorts consist of approximately 13,000-14,000 year 9 students who are then tracked until the age of 25.
Further information	http://www.acer.edu.au/research/LSAY/overview.html

Labour Force Survey

Conducted by	Australian Bureau of Statistics
Year conducted	Monthly
Sample size	30,000 households
Sample type	National probability sample
Further information	ABS (2003)

Preface

Families are often talked about as if there was only one ideal template from which they are and should be shaped. But even a fleeting familiarity with family history, family demography and other family research makes it clear that families come in many shapes and sizes – they always have and always will. Not only does the nature of families change over historical time, any person's family changes over their life course.

Families are embedded in the broader society. Inevitably, as social and economic structures change, so too will families. Although some people might decry this, it is critical that families do change. For were they to remain unresponsive to broad social influences then families would end up playing an increasingly marginal role in people's lives, and in helping them live in an increasingly complex world.

Some of the new family forms work well while others are problematic. Family structures rarely work equally well for everyone so the changes often mean that there are winners and losers. Some family members benefit from new family forms while others struggle. The challenge for family policy is to assist families as they seek to find ways of adapting to the complex demands of the contemporary world.

One of the features of contemporary society has been the process of what Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) have called institutional individualisation. By this they mean that the traditional social institutions (family, gender, class, religion, community, ethnicity) that once provided the script for living and governed behaviour have lost much of their prescriptive power. Without institutionalised guidance or prescriptions, individuals have to work out their own life script. Baumann (2002) describes the historical process of individualisation as "transforming human identity from a 'given' to a 'task'". While this means that people are freed from many of the old constraints, they face an enormous range of choices and decisions.

This broad cultural process has enormous implications for the way people now create families. Rather than simply following an agreed and well-established script for "doing family", individuals increasingly have to work out how they will form and develop their own family biography.

We all have to make so many more choices than in the past. Will we partner? When? Will we stay with the same person for life "for better or for worse"? Will the partner be the same sex or opposite sex? Will we have children? How many? When? Which sex? By what means? Will I have children without being married? Will I even have a partner when I have children? How will my partner and I arrange our roles when we marry? Will we both work? Whose employment takes priority? Who does the cooking?

The list of choices and decisions that must now be made as individuals build their families could go on and on – an outcome of the nature of contemporary society. Inevitably, the range of choice and the do-it-yourself character of family making mean that there will be an enormous diversity of family forms. Although poor choices will be made by some people some of the time, people are now freer to make better choices than the constraints of yesteryear may have allowed. The challenge is to enable people to make good choices.

While some people will regard some contemporary family changes and diversity as evidence of family decline, others will see these trends as evidence of the *resilience* of families as they seek to adapt to a changing world.

The purpose of this book is to provide solid information about both the extent and the ways in which families have been changing, and to document something of the diversity of contemporary family forms. No particular argument is developed throughout the book. Rather it is a collection of excursions covering a wide range of diverse issues. The only implicit argument is that which is captured in the title – that families are ever changing and diverse, and there is little point in talking about *the* family.

The selection of chapters and topics within chapters is necessarily selective and is inevitably somewhat idiosyncratic. A different author would have selected many different topics and

questions. Five main criteria have guided the choice of issues addressed in this book. These are: the availability of good quantitative data; the types of questions that are frequently asked of the author and other family researchers; common myths and misunderstandings evident both in questions and arguments often heard in the popular media; information that is relevant for the development of informed family policy; and information that bears on some of the ongoing debates among sociologists of the family.

Every effort has been made to ensure the material in the book is widely accessible. While statistical information is not always easy to read, the goal has been to keep the analysis and presentation simple. The challenge has been not to simplify to the extent of *over*-simplifying and presenting a misleading picture.

The book will be of value to a wide range of readers, and the material should be of use to students and teachers in secondary schools and universities, to the reading public, to journalists and commentators, family researchers, and to people who work in family policy and service delivery to families.

This book draws together in the one publication statistical information about families from a wide and diverse range of sources. In Australia we are fortunate in having some very high quality data about families. Some of the material is available in one form or another in existing publications such as the statistical catalogues of the Australian Bureau of Statistics. Other material has been obtained by a new analysis of existing surveys and from the census, and has not previously been available. I have been fortunate in having access to a wide range of surveys made available from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the Australian Institute of Family Studies, and the Australian Social Science Data Archive.

The value of this book depends on the quality of the data sources. Data reported in the book are restricted to quantitative data from large scale national surveys and data collections, and nearly always consist of complete data (for example, census or national data collections such as divorce, fertility statistics etc) or data that can be generalised to the population with a high degree of confidence. The data reported in this volume are from top quality sets of data and publications where the figures are both reliable and able to be generalised.

One of the difficulties in using data from such a wide range of sources has been that it has not been possible to impose uniformity on the way in which results are reported. Definitions and measures vary between surveys and the time periods for which data are available vary for different types of information. This means that for some issues we can examine trends over a very long period while for others we are restricted to just a few recent years. Methods of analysis and groupings (such as age groupings) are not always ideal but have been determined by the form in which the data are available.

David de Vaus
August 2004