

# 2

## Couples without children at home



# Contents

## 2 Couples without children at home

<b>Different types of child free couples</b>	<b>18</b>
The post-child couple	18
Pre-child couples	18
Childless couples	20
<b>Why are couples without children in the home becoming more common?</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>Who are the child free couples?</b>	<b>21</b>
Have they ever had children?	21
Are child free couples dual earner couples?	21
How much do child free couples earn?	22
Are child free couples highly educated professionals?	22
Are they married or cohabiting?	23
<b>Are child free families wealthy families?</b>	<b>23</b>
Poverty	24
<b>Are child free couples a cost to government?</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>Highlights</b>	<b>26</b>

## List of tables

---

2.1	Childbearing history of women in couple-only households by age	18
2.2	Desire to have children by gender and age, child free couples where female partner is aged 20-39, 2001	19
2.3	Do partnered women aged 20-39 who want children have reluctant partners?	20
2.4	Childbearing history of child free couples by age	21
2.5	Employment of child free couples by age of female partner	22
2.6	Per cent of partnered adults employed in professional occupations by age, gender and whether children are in household, 2001	23
2.7	Educational profile of partnered adults by age and whether children in household	23
2.8	Marital status of couples by whether or not couple has children in household	24
2.9	Wealth distribution of couple-only households, 1986-1998	24
2.10	Estimates of people in poverty by family type, 1982-1999	25
2.11	Child free couples (weekly household incomes, benefits and taxes), 1998-1999	25

## List of figures

---

2.1	Partnered individuals without children in household by age, 2001	18
2.2	Agreement between childless partners regarding the desire to have children, 2001 (female partner aged 20-39)	20
2.3	Mean combined annual income from all sources of couples by male partner's age and children in home	22

## 2

## Couples without children at home

This chapter focuses on what the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) classifies as couple only families – that is, couples who do not have children living with them. In this chapter these families will be called *child free* couples. As will be indicated below, these couples include those who have never had children and those whose children no longer live with them.

Child free couples are becoming an increasingly common feature of Australian households. In 2001 there were 1.8 million such couples – a substantial increase from 1.3 million couple only families in 1986. In 2001, 35.7 per cent of *all families* consisted of a couple with no children compared with 28.7 per cent in 1982. Of *couple families* in 2001, 43.2 per cent had no children living with them – up from 37 per cent in 1982.

### Different types of child free couples

It is important not to equate child free couples with couples who have never had children. There are five types of child free couples: those who have not yet had children (pre-child couples); those whose children have left the household (post-child couples);

couples who are and will remain childless (p. 190); couples in which either partner has a dependent child who lives elsewhere; and couples who have had a child who has subsequently died.

### The post-child couple

The post-child couple is the most common type of child free family. In the 2001 Census the bulk of men and women in child free family households were aged 55 and over (Figure 2.1). Most of these older couples will be couples whose children have left home or died.

The 2001 HILDA survey indicates that in child free couples in which the female partner was aged 45 or over, just 7 per cent of these couples consisted of both partners who were childless. However, some other older child free couples will not have had a child together – some have had their children in a previous relationship. Both partners had had children in 88.8 per cent of the couples where the female partner was aged 45 or older.

Although census figures on this matter are not available for 2001<sup>1</sup>, the 1996 Census gives details of the parental background of the older partnered, child free women (Table 2.1). Of partnered, child free women aged 45 and over, most (95.1 per cent) had previously had children and just 4.9 per cent had never had a child.

### Pre-child couples

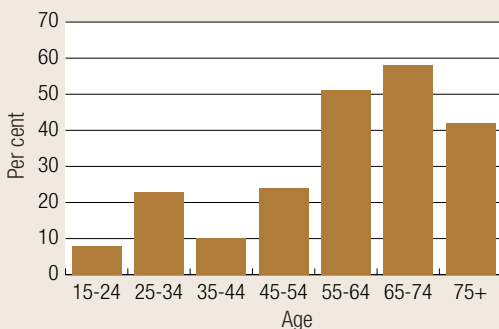
Figure 2.1 shows a cluster of partnered but child free people aged 25 to 34. Almost a quarter of partnered people in this age group have no children living with them. While we do not know how many of these couples will eventually have children we can establish whether they want to have children and whether they expect to have children.

### Do younger couples plan to have children?

Of partnered men and women where the female partner is aged 20-39 and neither partner has had children, three quarters of both males and females indicated in the HILDA survey that they very much or probably wanted to have a child. Just 12 per cent of females and males definitely did not want to have a child (Table 2.2). Childless, partnered men and women in this age range had identical levels of wanting or not wanting children (not necessarily within the one couple but across all such couples in the HILDA survey).

The desire to have a child is strongly linked to age. More than 80 per cent of partnered, childless women in their twenties definitely or probably

**Figure 2.1** Partnered individuals without children in household by age, 2001



Source: 2001 Census, customised data cube.

Note: Partnered includes those who are married or cohabiting in a de facto relationship.

**Table 2.1** Child bearing history of women in couple only households by age

Woman has ever had children	Age of woman	
	Less than 45 years	45 and over
No	45.2	4.9
Yes	54.8	95.1
Total	9,987	21,487

Source: 1996 Census 1 per cent sample file (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1996a).

wanted a child, but the enthusiasm for a child is lower among those in their thirties. Of those in their early thirties three quarters wanted a child while 43 per cent of those in their late thirties definitely or probably wanted a child. Similar levels of enthusiasm for children were evident among men in each age group.

Less than 10 per cent of partnered but childless women or men where the woman was in her early twenties definitely or probably did not want a child. Among those where the female partner was in her early thirties, 18 per cent of women and 13 per cent of men did not want a child. Of childless but partnered men and women where the female partner was in her late thirties, almost 40 per cent did not want to have children.

The fact that partnered men and women where the female partner was in her late thirties were less enthusiastic about having children is hardly surprising. Unlike the younger group, many women who want children will already have had a child by their early thirties, so childless women in their thirties are more likely to be those who do not want to have children.

#### Do young couples agree about having children?

One of the factors that can contribute to a couple not having children is that partners do not share the same views about having children.

In couples without children where the female partner was aged between 20-39, almost three quarters (77.8 per cent) had similar views regarding wanting children. In just 7 per cent of couples there was a fundamental disagreement between partners where one partner wanted a child and the other did not want a child.

By far the most common situation was where both childless partners wanted to have children (67.9 per cent). Only 7 per cent of these childless couples agreed that they did not want to have a child (Figure 2.2).

It is sometimes argued that men are more reluctant than their partners to have children. Is there evidence to support this view? Table 2.3 shows the extent to which women who want children have partners who share the same desire. The evidence in this table does not support the reluctant male partner view. It shows that in 88.8 per cent of cases where the female partner wanted a child, her male partner also wanted a child. In only 3.6 per cent of cases he did not want a child. Where female partners definitely did not want a child, there were fewer male partners who were equally determined not to have children (59.6 per cent). Many male partners (21.3 per cent) of these childless women who did not want children were ambivalent about not having children. It appears that rather than women having their maternal desires thwarted by a reluctant partner, women and their partners who want children are largely in agreement with each other. Similarly, there is no evidence to indicate that reluctant female partners are thwarting the wishes of men to have children. Where childless men wanted children, 88.5 per cent of their female partners also wanted children (Table 2.3).

#### Do fertility desires match fertility expectations?

Overall, two thirds of childless, partnered people, aged 20-39, expected to have the number of children they wanted to have. However, there was some mismatch between *wanting* to have children and *expecting* to have children. This mismatch is

**Table 2.2** Desire to have children by gender and age, child free couples where female partner is aged 20-39, 2001

	20-24 %	25-29 %	30-34 %	35-39 %	Total %
<b>Does female partner want child?</b>					
Definitely not	2.5	2.1	10.0	27.0	6.6
Probably not	5.1	2.1	8.0	10.8	5.3
Ambivalent	11.9	11.3	8.0	18.9	11.4
Probably want	23.7	22.0	22.0	18.9	22.2
Very much want a child	56.8	62.4	52.0	24.3	54.5
<i>Total (couples)</i>	<i>118</i>	<i>141</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>37</i>	<i>396</i>
<b>Does male partner want child?</b>					
Definitely not	3.4	4.3	9.0	21.6	6.8
Probably not	4.2	3.5	4.0	16.2	5.1
Ambivalent	11.0	6.4	18.0	13.5	11.4
Probably want	15.3	16.3	11.0	10.8	14.1
Very much want a child	66.1	69.5	58.0	37.8	62.6
<i>Total (couples)</i>	<i>118</i>	<i>141</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>37</i>	<i>396</i>

Source: HILDA, 2001 (FaCS 2002a).

Couples without children in household and female is aged between 20-39 where neither partner has previously had a child.

Note: Desire to have a child was measured on a scale of 0-10. In this table scores of 0-1 were classified as definitely not; 2-3 as probably not; 4-6 as ambivalent; 7-8 as probably want and 9-10 as very much want.

more in the direction of people saying that they expected to have fewer children than they wanted.

Overall, partnered childless adults aged 20-39 were more likely to expect to *underachieve* than *overachieve* their fertility desires. Twenty-two per cent of partnered but childless adults expected to have fewer children than they wanted while 14 per cent expected to have more children than they wanted.

Of the partnered but childless adults, women in their thirties and men whose partner was in their thirties were the most likely to feel that they would have fewer children than they wanted. Overall, a third of these men and women expected to have fewer children than they wanted. This was especially evident among those in their late thirties (35-39) where half (49 per cent) expected to have fewer children than they wanted.

These *expectations* of having fewer children than desired is consistent with the reality – that is, women do tend to have fewer children than they say they want (p. 191).

**Childless couples**

Other couples without children in the home never have children. Such childlessness may be due to voluntary or involuntary factors although the line between these two routes to childlessness can be rather blurred. Although it is difficult to know whether childlessness is voluntary or involuntary it is estimated that approximately 7 per cent of couples are infertile. Naturally, the rate of involuntary infertility increases with age.

It is relatively simple to estimate the levels of childlessness among older couples where women are no longer of reproductive age (usually taken to be 45 or older). According to the 1996 Census, 10.7 per cent of women aged 45-49 had never had a child. Of *partnered* women of the same age 6.1 per cent had never had a child. The 2001 HILDA survey found that in less than 7 per cent of couples in which the female partner was aged 45-59 were both partners childless.

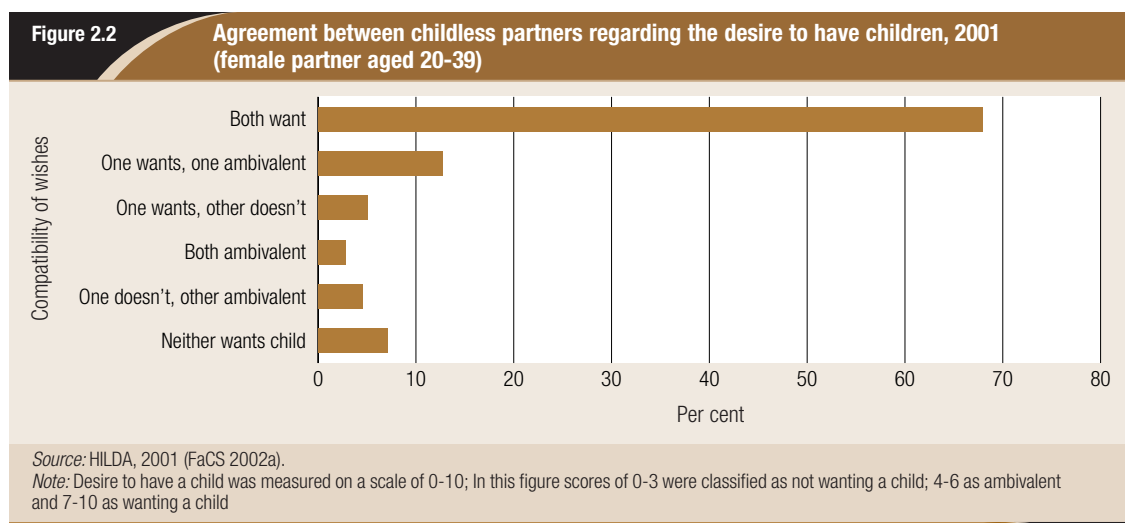
However, it is much more difficult to estimate the proportion of younger, child free couples who will remain childless. Many younger child free couples may simply be waiting before having children. Indeed, many women are not having their first child until they are in their thirties (p. 195-99). For example, according to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), in 2000 a quarter of all births to women aged 35 and over were the woman's first child and almost 23 per cent of births to women aged over 40 were first births (AIHW 2003a).

While estimates of eventual childlessness among women still of reproductive age vary depending on the estimation method used, most methods produce figures of between 22 and 28 per cent (p. 190).

**Table 2.3 Do partnered women aged 20-39 who want children have reluctant partners?**

		Female partner wants children?		
Male partner wants children?	No %	Ambivalent %	Yes %	
No	59.6	17.8	3.6	
Ambivalent	21.3	24.1	7.9	
Yes	19.1	57.8	88.8	
<i>N (couples)</i>	47	45	307	
		Male partner wants children?		
Female partner wants children?	No %	Ambivalent %	Yes %	
No	59.6	22.2	3.0	
Ambivalent	17.0	24.4	8.6	
Yes	23.4	53.3	88.5	
<i>N (couples)</i>	47	45	307	

Source: HILDA, 2001 (FaCS 2002a).  
Couples without children in household and female is aged between 20-39.  
Note: Desire to have a child was measured on a scale of 0-10. In this table scores of 0-3 were classified as not wanting a child; 4-6 as ambivalent and 7-10 as wanting a child.



However, these figures do not provide estimates of the level of childlessness among *partnered* women.

Of childless couples where the female partner is still of reproductive age, we have seen above that 7 per cent consist of both partners who do not want children and a further 9.6 per cent consist of one partner who definitely does not want children (Figure 2.2). In addition, a significant number of couples (20 per cent) contain at least one partner who is ambivalent about having children. While it is impossible to estimate with any certainty how many of these couples will eventually remain childless, these figures suggest that a substantial proportion will remain child free (assuming they stay together in a relationship).

**Why are couples without children in the home becoming more common?**

Between 1976 and 2001, the percentage of child free couples increased from 28 per cent of all families to 35.7 per cent. This increase has occurred for a number of reasons. These include:

- Delays in childbearing (p. 195-99).
- An increase in childlessness (p. 190).
- Increased life expectancy which means that there are more older couples whose children have left home.
- Divorce and repartnering following divorce where children are in a different household.
- An increase in cohabitation and the related reluctance to have children in cohabiting relationships (see Chapter 10).

**Who are the child free couples?**

**Have they ever had children?**

As indicated above, most older child free couples have, at some point, had children. The HILDA survey indicates that 84 per cent of couples where the female partner was aged between 45-59, consisted of two partners who had had children. Among child free couples where the female partner was aged 60 or over both partners had had children in 93 per cent of cases (Table 2.4).

Conversely, of those couples in the 45-59 age range without children in the home, 6.7 per cent consisted of both partners who had never had children. Of those where the woman was aged 60 or older, just 2.6 per cent of child free couples had never had any children.

Of the child free couples in the HILDA survey, where the female partner was aged between 20-34, almost 88 per cent consisted of both partners who had never had children. However, over 12 per cent of these younger child free couples contained a least one partner who had previously had a child but the child was no longer living with them (Table

2.4). Most of these couples are those in which the male partner has had a child that is not living with him. It is likely that many of these children will have been born in a previous relationship and the child is living with his or her mother. Just 2 per cent of these younger child free couples contained a female partner who has a child living elsewhere.

**Are child free couples dual earner couples?**

The employment profile of younger couples without children is very different to that of older couples without children.

Younger, child free couples (aged 20-34) have a high level of dual, full time employment. In 61.4 per cent of younger child free couples, both partners work full time – double that of older child free couples aged 45-59 (Table 2.5).

The lower rate of dual full time employment among the older (45-59) child free couples is due to three main factors. Firstly, it will reflect the lower rate of workforce participation among women in earlier generations. Second, it stems from the pattern of part time rather than full time return to work of many mothers after rearing children (p. 302). Finally, it is an indication of the declining full time workforce participation of many men in their fifties whereby they either retire early or shift to part time employment (p. 306).

While very few (2.7 per cent) younger child free couples without children had no jobs at all, almost a quarter (22.8 per cent) of the child free couples aged 45-59 were jobless (Table 2.5). While there will be various reasons for the lower workforce participation rate among the older child free couples, one factor will be that such couples can afford to reduce their work commitments as the costs of raising children are no longer as big an issue. Younger child free couples may still be planning to have children and may be still establishing themselves financially.

Almost two thirds of younger child free couples consist of both partners having the same level of workforce participation. In the other third of cases the traditional pattern of the male partner working

Fertility history of couple	Age of female partner			
	20-34 %	35-44 %	45-59 %	60+ %
Neither ever had children	87.8	46.9	6.7	2.6
Male had children female not	10.3	24.2	4.6	1.6
Male never had children female has	1.0	10.2	5.1	2.6
Both previously had children	1.0	18.8	83.5	93.3
<i>Total</i>	<i>409</i>	<i>128</i>	<i>583</i>	<i>697</i>

*Source: HILDA, 2001 (FaCS 2002a).*

more than the female partner predominated, even though no children were present in the household. In 22.9 per cent of child free couples where the female partner was aged 20-34, the male was employed more than the female partner. However, in 9.8 per cent of cases the female partner worked more than her male partner. While the traditional pattern of the male working more than the female predominated among the younger child free couples, this pattern was more pronounced among the older couples (Table 2.6).

**How much do child free couples earn?**

Since child free couples, especially those younger than 60 are freer to work, they have the potential to achieve relatively high household incomes. However, the income of child free couples varies between the younger and the older couples. Figure 2.3 contrasts the combined income of the younger and older child free couples. It shows that in 2001, child free couples of working age had an almost identical combined annual income of around \$70,000 per annum, regardless of age. This graph

also contrasts the income of child free couples with that of similarly aged couples with dependent children. This comparison shows that the child free younger couples have a considerably higher combined income than those with dependent children (an average of \$70,223 compared to \$50,500). However, for the older working age groups the couple income of the child free couples is very similar to that of those with dependent children. In other words, except for the younger couples, the absence of children in the home does not make much difference to the couple's total income.

**Are child free couples highly educated professionals?**

Do younger child free couples have a different educational and occupational profile than the older child free couples? Apart from frequently having two full time jobs and relatively high incomes do the younger couples have other characteristics typically associated with DINKS (Dual Income, No Kids)? In particular, do they also tend to be highly educated and come from professional backgrounds?

As far as occupation is concerned, younger partnered people without children were more likely than those with dependent children to have professional or associate professional occupations. For example, of child free, partnered women aged 20-34, 32.9 per cent had a professional occupation compared to 23.1 of their counterparts with children. The same pattern applied among younger men.

The opposite pattern applied among older couples aged 45-59. Among these couples the child free couples were *less* likely than those with dependent children to have a professional occupation. For example, only 19.3 per cent of partnered, child free women in this age group had a professional occupation compared to 34.3 per cent of those with dependent children who were professionals. In other words, the younger child free couples tended to be professionals while the older child free couples tended not to be professionals.

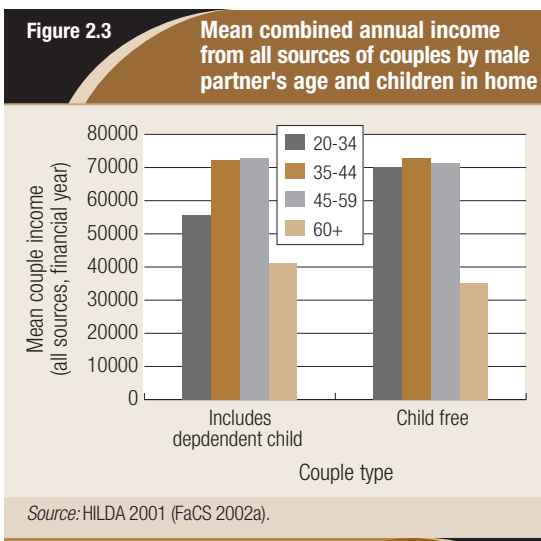
A likely reason for this pattern is that those from lower level occupations tend to have children at a younger age and are thus more likely to be child free at an earlier age. Those undertaking professional training are more likely to delay having children which means that fewer of the 45-59 age group will be child free.

The educational profile of child free couples indicates that younger, child free partnered people were more highly educated than younger couples with children (Table 2.7). For example, 39.3 per cent of child free, partnered women aged 20-34 had at least a university degree compared to just 19.7 per cent of younger partnered women with children. Younger, child free partnered people were also more highly educated than older people who

**Table 2.5 Employment of child free couples by age of female partner**

Employment profile of couple	Age of female partner			
	20-34 %	35-44 %	45-59 %	60+ %
Both employed full time	61.4	38.3	25.7	3.0
Both employed part time	3.2	1.6	4.1	2.4
Neither employed	2.7	8.6	22.8	78.9
Male partner has <i>higher</i> level of workforce participation than female partner	22.9	39.8	36.6	12.3
Male partner has <i>lower</i> level of workforce participation than female partner	9.8	11.7	10.8	3.3
<i>Total</i>	<i>409</i>	<i>128</i>	<i>583</i>	<i>697</i>

Source: HILDA, 2001 (FaCS 2002a).



had no children at home. The young, child free and partnered women were more than twice as likely as their older (aged 45-59) counterparts to have a university degree (39.3 per cent compared with 15.9 per cent).

Young, partnered parents (aged 20-34) were more than twice as likely as their child free peers to have left school at year 11 or lower (23.7 per cent compared with 11.3 per cent for males, and 27.8 per cent compared with 10.7 per cent for females). Similarly, older child free partnered adults had lower education than their age peers with dependent children. For example, of the older child free women (aged 45-59) 46.9 per cent had left school at year 11 or lower compared to just 26.7 per cent of those women with dependent children at home. Conversely, just 16.3 per cent of the older child free couples had a university degree compared to 31 per cent of partnered adults with dependent children (Table 2.7).

**Are they married or cohabiting?**

Younger childless couples have a very different marital status profile to younger couples with children. Child free younger couples (males aged 20-34) were more likely than those with children to be cohabiting (52.1 per cent compared with 23.4 per cent). Over three quarters (76.6 per cent) of those aged 20-34 with dependent children were married compared to less than half of those without children (47.9 per cent). Although the levels of cohabitation are lower among the older age groups a similar pattern holds – those with dependent children are more likely to be married than those without (Table 2.8).

**Are child free families wealthy families?**

Children represent a considerable expense to parents, especially in the child rearing years (p. 272-74). It is therefore reasonable to expect that child free couples will be relatively well off financially.

**Table 2.6 Per cent of partnered adults employed in professional occupations by age, gender and whether children are in household, 2001**

Household includes	20-34		35-44		45-59	
	Dependent children %	No children %	Dependent children %	No children %	Dependent children %	No children %
<b>Males</b>						
Professional	13.2	22.2	19.7	24.1	27.9	17.7
Associate professional	14.4	12.9	12.7	15.2	12.0	13.0
<i>N</i>	431	333	133	67	476	378
<b>Females</b>						
Professional	23.1	32.9	28.5	33.0	34.3	19.3
Associate professional	9.6	16.0	10.9	15.5	15.8	11.9
<i>N</i>	334	368	641	97	265	352

*Source:* HILDA 2001 (FaCS 2002a).  
For full details of occupations included in each category see Australian Bureau of Statistics (1997b).

**Table 2.7 Educational profile of partnered adults by age and whether children in household**

Age	20-39		35-44		45-59	
	With dependent children %	No children %	With dependent children %	No children %	With dependent children %	No children %
<b>Males</b>						
Degree or higher	15.0	29.6	25.2	27.7	30.9	16.3
Diploma or certificate	50.1	44.9	48.0	46.0	42.5	44.2
Year 12	11.2	14.1	6.0	5.6	6.0	7.5
Year 11 or lower	23.7	11.3	20.9	20.6	20.5	32.1
<i>Total</i>	473	354	890	126	536	480
<b>Females</b>						
Degree or higher	19.7	39.3	26.9	30.1	31.8	15.9
Diploma or certificate	38.7	32.8	34.1	30.9	30.9	31.8
Year 12	13.8	17.2	10.7	10.6	10.7	5.4
Year 11 or lower	27.8	10.7	28.4	28.5	26.7	46.9
<i>Total</i>	630	402	906	123	337	559

*Source:* HILDA, 2001 (FaCS 2002a).

**Table 2.8** Marital status of couples by whether or not couple has children in household

Age of male partner	20-34		35-44		45-59	
	Dependent children %	No children %	Dependent children %	No children %	Dependent children %	No children %
Household includes						
Married	76.6	47.9	90.7	64.9	93.9	85.7
Cohabiting	23.4	52.1	9.3	35.1	6.1	14.3
N	479	359	900	131	543	488

Source: Hilda, 2001 (FaCS 2002a).

One way of examining the relative affluence of any group is to divide the whole population into 10 equal sized groups (deciles). The first group (the first decile) contains the 10 per cent of the population with the lowest incomes (or wealth). The second group (second decile) contains the 10 per cent of the population with the next lowest income. The 10th decile contains the wealthiest 10 per cent of the population.

If child free couples are wealthier on average than other families they will be concentrated among the higher or wealthier deciles (for example, 6th decile up). If they are poorer than the average family then child free couples will be concentrated in the lower deciles. If child free couples are spread evenly across the income/wealth spectrum then 10 per cent of child free couples will be found in each decile.

Table 2.9 provides information about the relative wealth of child free couples in 1986 and in 1998. These data are based on the Australian Bureau of Statistics 1986 Income Distribution Survey and 1998 Survey of Income and Housing Costs. The table shows that on average, child free couples are relatively wealthy. In each of the lowest four deciles child free couples are under represented (that is, less than 10 per cent). For example, 10 per cent of all families are in the lowest wealth decile but only 2.7 per cent of child free couples are among the poorest 10 per cent of the population.

In contrast, in the higher or wealthier deciles (6 to 10) child free couples are over represented. For example, while 10 per cent of all families are in the highest wealth decile, 19.8 per cent of child free couples in 1998 were in this wealthiest 10 per cent of the population.

In other words couple families without children are wealthier, on average, than other families. This will be due to a number of factors. One important factor is that child free couples tend to be older than many other families and have had the chance to build up wealth over a lifetime (especially in the form of housing). The younger child free couples typically have two income earners and more than half have two full time incomes. Finally, since child free couple families do not have the day-to-day costs of child rearing they have a greater capacity to accumulate wealth.

Not only are child free couples wealthier than the average household but recent years have seen their relative position improve. This is especially evident among the wealthiest groups where the proportion of child free couples in the top two income deciles increased sharply from 1986-98. At the same time the proportion of child free couples in the poorest groups decreased a little.

### Poverty

Poverty is generally measured not in terms of wealth, but in terms of income relative to costs. One way of measuring poverty is to set a poverty line at 50 per cent of the family income of the average person (adjusted for family size and composition)<sup>2</sup>. Families with an income below this level are defined to be living in poverty (Harding and Szukalska 2000b).

Table 2.10 shows the percentage of people living in poverty for a range of family types. The figures compare the poverty levels in each family type for 1982 and 1999. Although the information regarding differences between family types would be

**Table 2.9** Wealth distribution of couple only households, 1986-1998

	Wealth decile										Total
	(Poorest)						(Wealthiest)				
	1 %	2 %	3 %	4 %	5 %	6 %	7 %	8 %	9 %	10 %	
Couple only 1986	2.7	2.3	3.2	7.1	10.4	13.3	15.0	15.1	13.5	17.3	99.9
Couple only 1998	1.9	2.0	3.3	6.9	8.5	12.3	13.4	15.1	16.9	19.8	100.1
% change 1986-98	-.8	-.3	+1	-2	-1.9	-1.0	-1.6	0	+3.4	+2.5	

Source: 1986 Income Distribution Survey and 1998 Survey of Income and Housing Costs. Figures extracted from Kelly (2001).

more useful if it had been provided for family types at different points of the life course (for example, pre-child couple only and post-child couple only) Table 2.10 nevertheless provides some interesting information regarding changes. However, it should be noted that some of this change in poverty levels between 1982 and 1999 could be due to the changing age profile within each family type.

In 1999 couples with no children in the home were relatively unlikely to be living in poverty with only 8.4 per cent in poverty, which compares favourably with the 18.5 per cent of single people in poverty, the 23.6 per cent of lone parents in poverty and the 11.6 per cent of couples with children in poverty.

However, over this 17 year period, couples without children became *relatively worse off in income terms*. While the poverty rate of two of the other three main family types declined, the percentage of poor people living in child free families increased by 2.1 per cent. This change probably reflects the redistribution of taxation and benefits to support families with children and lone parent families (p. 54-5) and may also reflect changes in the demographic make up of child free families between 1982-99.

### Are child free couples a cost to government?

Since child free households include families at very different stages of the life cycle, their needs for support, use of services and sources of income vary considerably. It is therefore useful to distinguish between younger and older child free households when examining income levels and government support for these families.

Table 2.11 reports the incomes earned by child free families (row one) at different stages of the life cycle. In addition to private income, individuals are eligible for a variety of direct income benefits

Family type of person	1982 %	1999 %	Difference %
Single persons	17.4	18.5	1.1
All lone parents	39.2	23.6	-15.6
Couple only	6.3	8.4	2.1
Couples with children	14.2	11.6	-2.6

*Source:* 1997-98 Survey of Income and Housing Costs, uprated by NATSEM to May 1999. Adapted from Harding and Szukalska (2000b).

from governments such as the aged pension (row two) to give them a total cash income (row three). This cash income is reduced by taxation (row four) to give a disposable income (row five). This disposable income is supplemented by non cash benefits such as education and health care. The average value of these non cash benefits is reported in row six and the value of indirect taxes is listed in row seven to yield a final income (row eight).

Row nine reports the value of benefits received by these families while row 10 reports the total taxes paid by child free couples. Row 11 indicates the difference between the value of taxes paid and the value of government benefits received by child free couples in each age group. The final row shows the value of benefits and taxes allocated to child free couples compared to families in general.

These figures reveal a number of important points regarding government support and the impact of benefits on the financial position of child free couples at different points in the life course.

Although the younger, child free couples have a much higher private income than the older child free couples, the effect of taxation and benefits does a great deal to reduce these differences (compare row one with row eight).

Row		Age of reference person						All
		< 25	25 - 34	35 - 44	45 - 54	55 - 64	65+	
1	Private income	\$976	\$1266	\$1279	\$1087	\$557	\$232	\$727
2	Direct government benefits	\$25	\$10	\$19	\$26	\$93	\$197	\$95
3	Gross income	\$1001	\$1276	\$1299	\$1114	\$650	\$429	\$822
4	Direct tax <sup>a</sup>	\$200	\$307	\$317	\$274	\$111	\$30	\$163
5	Disposable income	\$801	\$969	\$982	\$841	\$539	\$399	\$659
6	Indirect benefits	\$88	\$82	\$64	\$75	\$115	\$224	\$135
7	Indirect taxes <sup>a</sup>	\$77	\$94	\$100	\$92	\$75	\$59	\$77
8	Final income	\$812	\$957	\$946	\$824	\$580	\$564	\$716
9	Total benefits allocated (row 2 plus row 6)	\$113	\$91	\$84	\$101	\$208	\$421	\$229
10	Total taxes allocated (row 4 plus row 7)	\$277	\$400	\$417	\$365	\$186	\$89	\$240
11	Net benefits allocated ( <i>child free couples</i> )	-\$164	-\$309	-\$333	-\$265	\$22	\$332	-\$11
12	Net benefits allocated ( <i>all household families</i> )	\$33	-\$35	\$13	-\$119	\$41	\$295	\$36

*Source:* Household Expenditure Survey, 1998-99 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2001b).  
<sup>a</sup> Since these figures were collected before the introduction of the GST they do not reflect the taxation changes as a result of this tax reform.

- Older child free families gain from the tax-benefit mix. On average couples aged 65 or older gain \$332 per week from government benefits and services. This is due to declining income and the receipt of direct and indirect government benefits (for example, age pension, health costs).
- Those aged 55-64 more or less break even.
- The child free couples aged 54 or younger contribute far more to governments through taxes than they gain from direct or indirect benefits.

Compared to families in general, child free couples where the reference person<sup>3</sup> is under the age of 55 are heavy net financial contributors to society. On a weekly basis these child free couples make a net contribution of between \$164-\$333 (row 11). In contrast, families in general in the same age range, are either net beneficiaries or make far fewer con-

tributions to government (row 12). This is due mainly to the fact that these child free couples have higher incomes because both partners typically are employed, do not receive government benefits for children (direct or indirect) and are not beneficiaries of lone parent allowances.

While child free couples where the reference person is aged under 55 are net contributors to government revenues, those who are older are net beneficiaries of government expenditures. Those aged 55-64 receive a net benefit of \$41 per week while those aged 65 and over receive an average of \$295 in benefits. The difference between the younger and older child free couples will be largely due to lower levels of workforce participation among the older couples, their access to the old age pension and greater benefits through subsidised health care.

### Endnotes

- 1 Unfortunately the 2001 census did not ask women if they had ever had children.
- 2 There are many ways of defining poverty in families and there is no agreement as to which method is best. Readers should be conscious of the fact that the different measures of poverty can produce quite different estimates of poverty levels and trends (Harding & Szukalska 2000b; ABS 1998b). The 50 per cent of the family income of the average person (adjusted for family size) is used here as the figures here rely on the analysis of Harding & Szukalska 2000b who use this measure.
- 3 The reference person is the first or second person in the household. In child free couple households this will be either the male or female partner.

### Highlights

- 36 per cent of all families consist of a couple with no children in the home.
- Child free couples are an increasingly common family type in Australia.
- Child free couples are a diverse family type and include younger couples before they have children, older couples after their children have left home and couples who never have children together. By far the largest proportion of child free couples are older people whose children have left home.
- Younger child free couples are far more likely to be cohabiting than their age peers who have children.
- The large majority of child free younger couples both want and expect to have children.
- Younger couples largely agree about whether or not they will have children. There was little evidence of the "reluctant father" syndrome.
- Younger, childless couples are a substantial net financial contributor to government funds while older child free couples gain substantial transfers from government.
- Young child free couples have higher education and higher incomes than their age peers who have children.
- Couples without children have low levels of poverty.