

This issue of *Family Matters* gathers together articles concerning young people in Australia. Some examine the nature of 'youth'; others discuss issues concerning young people. Included are reports of new Institute research, papers written by Institute researchers, and papers by writers independent of the Institute, contributing their own research and opinion. The articles are supported by our regular column presenting selected references from the Institute's *Australian Family & Society Abstracts* database, in this case a Bibliography on Young People in Australia.

It is difficult to imagine a society which does not categorise people by age; our own certainly does in numerous ways. Age is often a very important element in our social and legal framework; assumptions about it are embedded in our language and our personal interactions. It is frequently the basis of expectations about what people are capable of and how they should lead their lives. Perhaps nowhere is this more apparent than in the case of young people. Yet even the most cursory analysis shows how diverse young people are, in their opportunities, their capabilities, their approaches to life, their backgrounds and experiences.

It is important to remember that the concepts of 'youth' and 'adolescence' have not always been with us. Such concepts are socially constructed or invented. Once, the only distinction was between infancy and adulthood. Now, some hundreds of years later, society distinguishes a range of distinct developmental and life stages — for example, early and late childhood and early and late adolescence. The main contributors to increasing age distinctions were industrialisation and the increased differentiation of jobs, together with the advent of schools to prepare, train, and 'make literate' the workforce required for new occupations. How the category of 'young people' is defined and what is expected of them changes significantly over time and differs according to social, cultural and economic factors.

Judith Bessant's article in this issue's Opinion/Comment/Analysis column touches on this theme. She argues that the tendency of adults to view young people as different and 'other' has had serious negative effects on our capacity to relate to and care for young people, and to be helpful in solving problems. The media perpetuate the myth of difference, but Bessant identifies academic theorists and professionals as contributing significantly to the view of youth as a 'rare and peculiar species'. She suggests that the starting point for change is for adults to recognise the commonalities between themselves and their children.

Focusing mainly on the Italian experience, Ellie Vasta discusses the ways in which the identities of a particular group of young people — non-English-speaking background immigrant youth — were constructed under earlier policies of assimilation, and in more recent times under multiculturalism. She examines the effect of racism, not only on individual lives, but also on the models which were used to explain youth identities, and concludes that the research questions we ask in the future are likely to be different from those generated by a culture of assimilation.

Youth Today

Some of the Issues



Picture: Don Weston

Dave Palmer and Len Collard are also concerned about inappropriate models. They call for a re-examination of research frameworks that tend to generate and perpetuate stereotypes about Aboriginal youth, and do not allow for other interpretations. They report on work with Nyungar young people in Western Australia which challenges conceptions of Aboriginal youth as predominantly deviant and culturally impoverished.

Not surprisingly, current Institute research concerning youth has an emphasis on young people and *families*. This is reflected in the paper by Robyn Hartley and Ilene Wolcott which summarises the key points from a recent publication completed for the National Youth Affairs Research Scheme. The full report reviews recent trends in the position of young people in relation to family and discusses some of the problems of striking the most appropriate balance between government, community, family and individual responsibility for young people.

Income support provisions for young people are closely linked to questions about responsibility. The Federal Government's May 1994 White Paper included some significant changes to current arrangements, which are nevertheless in line with trends over the last decade. Anthony King tackles the complex job of analysing the gains and losses for young people, and the possible effects on their moves towards independence. He sees some potential for positive

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outcomes but suggests that the 'big question-mark' is the fundamental philosophy about solutions to unemployment underlying the White Paper.

A quite striking example of shifts in the way in which the period of youth is conceived is reflected in increases in educational participation over recent decades. In the past, the majority of 15–19 year olds were not in education; now the great majority of under-19 year olds, and a high proportion of under-24 year olds are in education or training. Data from the Institute's Australian Living Standards Study are used by Peter McDonald, Helen Brownlee and Evelyn Greenblat in their discussion of the determinants of young people's participation in education and training.

Ian Winter also takes up the education and training theme in his article. However, the main focus is on young people's access to services in the outer urban fringe areas of Australian cities, compared with the inner-city areas, an issue which has major implications for urban planning.

There are multiple causes of tensions in relationships between parents and young people (including Bessant's point that a 'them' and 'us' mentality has been established). The need families have for assistance

in resolving problems is clearly demonstrated by the use made of the (relatively few) existing Parent-Adolescent Mediation and Family Therapy Programs funded by the Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department. Ilene Wolcott and Ruth Weston identify some positive outcomes from mediation in the Institute's evaluation of this program.

In her report of research in progress, Kate Funder describes a study which is exploring links between young people's family experience and sexual risk-taking behaviour — a major issue of concern for young people and for families.

This edition of *Family Matters* discusses some aspects of the changing institutional structure and competing value structures which young people in Australia face in the 1990s. However, the issues raised — as well as others not included, such as the unprecedented high levels of youth suicide, youth homelessness, and the need for appropriate health services for young people — are not just 'youth' issues. They are concerns that have an impact on families, society, and the nature of research about young people.

Robyn Hartley, who helped coordinate this issue of *Family Matters*, is a Fellow at the Australian Institute of Family Studies. Her special research interests include youth policy and cultural diversity in Australia.