

# *Family Networks in Rural and Urban Settings*

*CHRISTINE MILLWARD discusses  
findings from a major Institute study  
that examined the effect of residential  
locality and gender on involvement  
with extended family.*

**D**oes access to extended family members vary by where people live? In the past, sociologists have contrasted social relationships in urban localities with those in more traditional rural communities. Urban families have been described as having weaker family ties and more impersonal social relations. Rural communities have been described as having stronger family ties and closer social relations (Tonnie 1957 in Roberts, Richards and Bengstonn 1991).

These notions of 'rural idyll', where residents are bound together by smaller community size and closer family ties, and of 'suburban isolation', with social and occupational mobility and looser family ties, may or may not apply today.

There are reasons for thinking that modern rural areas will not exhibit the stronger family ties described by Tonnie. McKenzie (1994) notes that differences in employment and education opportunities between the city and country lead many young Australians to leave rural areas, and that such rural depopulation is increasingly occurring. The unemployment problem and general rural-urban drift of young



adults may mean that rural communities are less close-knit than in the past.

Any sense of isolation in urban areas may depend largely on distance from the metropolitan hub. Richards (1990) found that women living in the suburban fringe

felt more socially isolated than men. She reported that this gendered isolation was due mainly to geographic location, poor public transport and the tendency for most adults to be away from the suburb during the day. In this regard, Richards

emphasised that the 'suburban ideology' of private (nuclear) family life can lead to loneliness in new suburbs, but she did not necessarily equate this with isolation from wider family.

Some sense of suburban isolation may be felt by nuclear families settling in suburban fringe areas where land is cheap, or in satellite towns servicing industries located beyond the urban fringe. These families may therefore be more removed from their extended family networks (with resulting weaker family ties) than families living in older, more established middle and inner suburbs.

An understanding of community differences in terms of availability of support from wider family members is important in the context of current policy debates about the place of family support versus government supports for families in general. Elsewhere in this issue of *Family Matters*, David de Vaus points out that family members often provide inter-generational care, and that this caring role alleviates the strain on government and community services. However, if family resources are weaker in some types of communities than others, then additional family support services may be required, and this should be taken into account in arriving at the level of government-provided support services as against family-provided support for families.

Little has been written in a comparative way about density of kin distribution or the rates of contact with extended family members across various urban 'rings' of the same metropolis, or between urban and rural locations. The Australian Living Standards Study allowed for just such comparisons.

### Australian Living Standards Study

During 1991–92, the Institute's Australian Living Standards Study surveyed over 5000 households in four distinct types of geographic location around Australia. The study was thus able to examine locational differences in family

networks, and to compare outer urban or rural residents with inner or middle urban residents regarding available levels of government services and family support.

Information provided by respondents about proximity of and contact with

relatives allows for examination of the extent of various types of suburban and rural kin networks.

In the study, local government areas were chosen to represent either outer, middle or inner metropolitan areas of large cities, or rural communities. In this way, various types of localities were available for comparison, including five outer urban, two middle urban, two inner urban and two rural locations. It should be noted that although some of the rural residents surveyed were farmers, the majority lived in rural towns.

Resident parents with at least one child under the age of 20 years were interviewed. If there were two parents living in the household, both were included. Respondents' ages ranged from 19 to 70 years, and just over half of them (53 per cent) were female. The 9179 adults involved were individually asked questions about the proximity of and contact with their own family members. Thus it is the situation of individual adults, not couples, being considered – a strategy that also allows for later gender comparisons.

The proximity question of interest here was: 'How far away does your (relative) live?' Response options ranged from 'same house or street' through to 'overseas'. For the present analysis, discussion focuses on the proportion of adult parents whose mothers, fathers or nearest siblings lived within a 30-minute drive of their homes. With the high car ownership in Australia, this distance was considered to be within an effective range from which to provide support. Many parents and siblings actually lived in the same suburb/town or local government area.

The contact question asked: 'How often do you have contact, in person, by phone or by mail, with your (relative)?' Because very few people wrote letters, only personal and telephone contact were considered. Response options ranged from 'never'

through to 'daily'. The contact measure reported here was the percentage of respondents who saw or telephoned their mothers, fathers or nearest siblings either daily, several times a week or at least weekly. This measure was considered to indicate regular family contact which, especially when coupled with close proximity, might indicate ongoing supportive relationships. It should be noted that the duration of personal visits and telephone calls was not recorded, so the actual amount of contact time could not be estimated.

Only the proximity of and contact with fathers, mothers and siblings is considered here, because these are relationships with members of the family of origin. In addition, research has shown that most assistance is forthcoming from closest relatives, especially from parents (Richards 1990; Finch 1989).

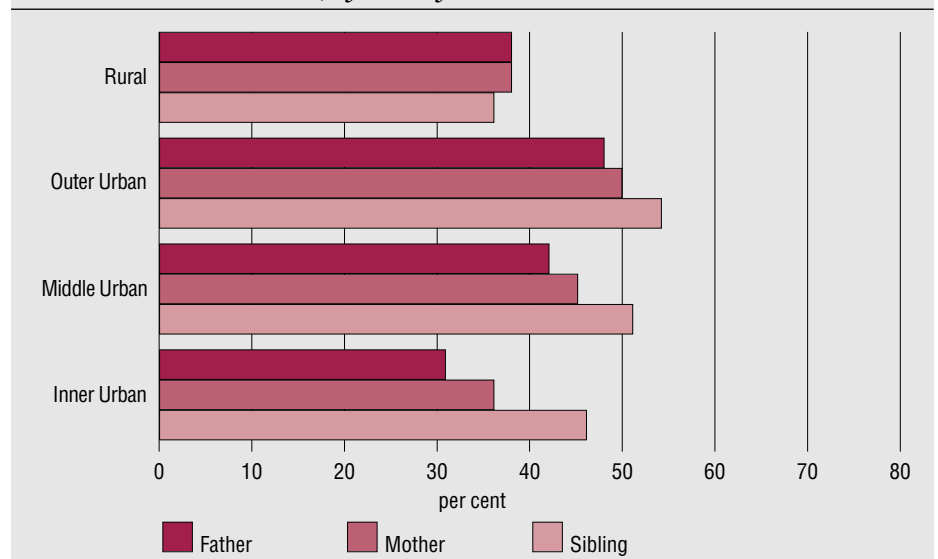
People who did not have a living relative in any particular category were excluded from the analysis regarding that relative. For example, if the father of a respondent was dead but the mother alive, then the respondent was excluded from the analysis regarding proximity and contact with father, but included in the analysis for mother. The important consideration here is the potential availability of individual relatives.

### Proximity of Relatives

Adults in rural, outer urban, middle urban and inner urban areas were compared in relation to how close their mothers, fathers and/or siblings lived (Figure 1). By virtue of the sample selected, these relatives were either grandparents or aunts/uncles of the respondents' children, which might increase the likelihood of involvement with them.

The likelihood of respondents' parents living within a 30-minute drive differed significantly with type of residential locality.

Figure 1: *Proportion of respondents with relatives living within a 30-minute drive, by locality*



The highest proportions of both fathers and mothers lived within this distance in the outer urban areas. The next highest proportion was in the middle urban localities, followed by rural localities, and then inner city localities (Figure 1).

For all locality types except the rural communities, a larger proportion of people reported having siblings than reported having parents living within a 30-minute drive. The fact that rural dwellers were the least likely to have a sibling nearby is consistent with the pattern of rural-urban drift of the younger generation away from rural communities. In rural areas, of course, lower population density means greater residential spread, and this could also imply less ready access to wider family networks.

In contrast, far from being the most isolated from kin, outer urban respondents lived nearest their parents (Figure 1), and were most likely to live within a 30-minute drive of at least one sibling. Therefore, it might be expected that this group had a higher potential for gaining assistance from their mothers, fathers or siblings than those living in the other three locality types, reflecting a more close-knit image of community than families living in rural areas.

However, as David de Vaus points out in his article elsewhere in this issue, assumptions of family assistance are based on the *willingness* of relatives to help each other, whereas relationship problems can preclude or severely limit this. Also, although slightly more respondents had siblings nearby, only half of the outer urban residents had mothers or fathers living within the nominated effective range of a 30-minute drive.

Nevertheless, the immediate family networks of respondents living in the outer urban localities appear to provide the best potential for family support.

Why should there be a greater availability of relatives in the outer suburbs compared with other localities? It may be that expansion by families from established outer suburbs into newer fringe suburbs is occurring, rather than a radical movement of relatives across town from each other. If so, then outer suburban family links would not be weakened by geographical dispersion any more than those in middle or inner urban families.

In contrast, the overall situation of the rural dwellers most resembled that of inner city respondents (Figure 1). Both were less likely to have parents and/or siblings living within a 30-minute drive.

However, there was an important difference between the rural group and the three urban groups. Almost all the rural respondents (90 per cent) were Australian born, while nearly half of the inner urban and just over one-third of the middle and outer urban residents had been born overseas. The inner urban people therefore were particularly likely to report that their



parents and siblings still lived overseas. Nevertheless, rural residents were still less likely than urban residents in general to have their parents and siblings living nearby. This finding supports the notion of the drift of younger people away from rural areas – a pattern that contradicts the commonly held view of close-knit rural communities.

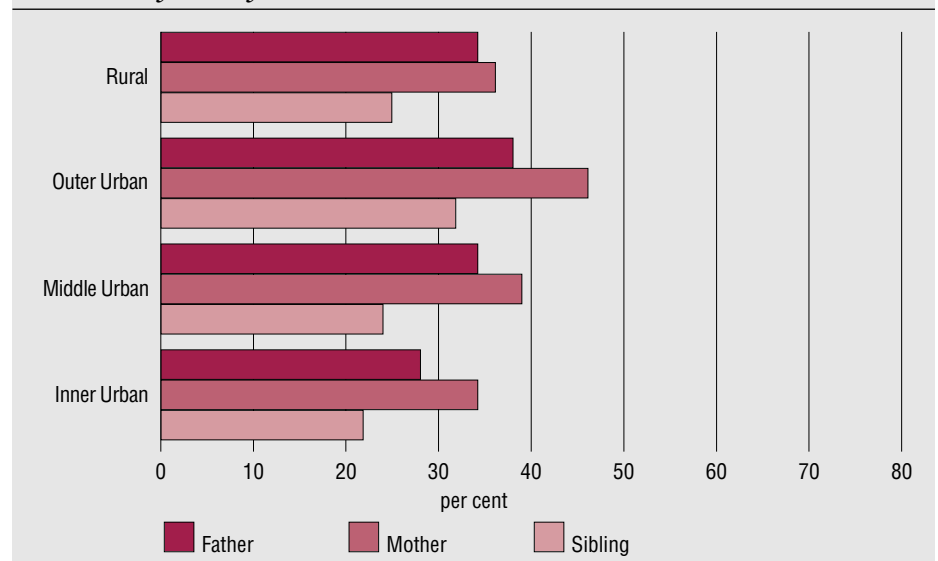
Furthermore, when compared with inner city residents in particular, rural respondents were not living in large

regional centres and so were generally less adequately served by public service infrastructure. This suggests some lack both in available government and family support for rural residents.

### Contact with Relatives

Living nearby does not necessarily mean that family members have much to do with one another. To what extent does locality affect the amount of contact

Figure 2: *Proportion of respondents who see relatives at least weekly, by locality*





Picture: Don White

seen as frequently as parents were, and the relationship between having a sibling living nearby and having weekly personal contact was weaker than it was for parents. This suggests a stronger link in the family network between respondents and their parents than between respondents and their nearest sibling.

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In all localities, more respondents had at least weekly telephone contact with their parents or sibling than personal contact, although these two modes of contact were not mutually exclusive (Figure 3). Also, respondents in general spoke to their mothers on the telephone more frequently than they spoke to their fathers or siblings (this includes people who had either both parents living or only one).

Around half of the rural respondents spoke on the telephone at least weekly to their mothers compared with 38 per cent to their fathers and only one-fifth to their siblings, and resembled the patterns of telephone contact of inner urban people.

Patterns of contact for middle and outer urban respondents also resembled each other. Well over half spoke to their mothers at least weekly, around 45 per cent spoke to their fathers and around one-third spoke to their siblings at least weekly. For these two groups, the frequency of personal contact with their parents correlated well with their parents' proximity. Not only did they live closer to their parents, but also

they saw them more often than did their rural and inner city counterparts.

For sibling contact in middle and outer localities, however, the telephone pattern was much the same as for personal contact: there was a weaker correlation with proximity. Although respondents were more likely to report a sibling nearby than a parent, siblings were telephoned much less frequently than parents. Again, this implies that the flow of communication was taking place more often between the two generations than within the same one.

### Gender Differences in Family Networks

Apart from where people live, the internal functioning of

families has implications for types and levels of assistance exchanged between households. Previous studies have demonstrated that an important aspect of family relationships is the way in which women form the main intra-familial links (Finch 1989; Rapp 1982; Lehr 1984; Rosenthal 1985; de Vaus 1994). There is also continuing social expectation that women will take the main responsibility for family exchange, especially the caring and support roles (Finch 1989; Lehr 1984; Rosenthal 1985; Sussman 1965).

Past research has also shown that most help to an individual household is provided by the female partner's relatives (Finch 1989). It is also women, especially mothers, who are most likely to live closer to their families and to draw on the resources of their own families. Lee's (1980) review of research into kinship patterns identified higher contact rates for the female partner's relatives than for the male partner's relatives. This suggests that help and support is greater from the wife/mother's side of the family.

Although Lehr (1984) warns that quantity of contacts does not necessarily correlate with quality of activities or relationships, nevertheless proximity and contact with parents and siblings might be expected to be more pertinent to the everyday lives of women than of men. In order to examine the extent of gender differences in family networks in the modern Australian context, proximity and contact were examined for men and women separately.

### Proximity and Contact by Gender

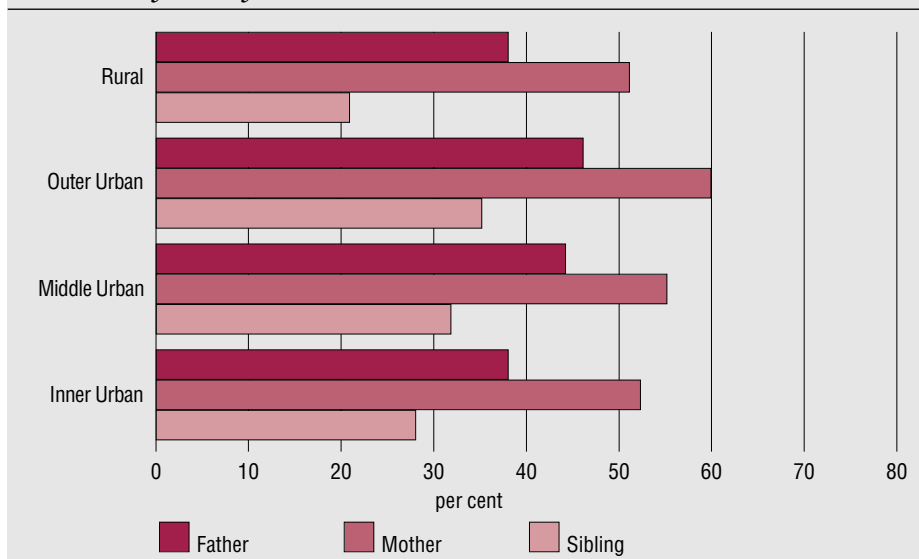
Women living in outer and middle urban localities tended to have their parents and siblings living closer by than did men. This supports the notion that the families of wives/mothers are more involved than the families of husbands/fathers.

The reverse was true for rural families, where men's parents lived nearer than women's parents: more than 40 per cent

between relatives? The frequency of personal and telephone contact for fathers, mothers and siblings of respondents is shown in Figures 2 and 3.

Outer urban residents were slightly more likely to see their parents and siblings regularly than residents living in the other areas (Figure 2). Inner urban residents were the least likely to see father, mother or a sibling at least weekly, followed by rural residents, and then middle urban residents. Overall, the sibling living nearest was not

Figure 3. *Proportion of respondents who phone relatives at least weekly, by locality*



of rural men reported parents nearby, compared with around one-third of rural women, although there was almost no difference between rural men and women regarding the proximity of their nearest siblings.

Although not tested here, one explanation for the greater involvement of rural men's families could be the tendency for women to marry into rather than out of rural communities, thus leaving behind some or all of their family members. As well, it is possible that there are gender differences in farm and family business employment, such that male children, even after marriage, are more likely than female children to stay and work with or near their parents. In this regard, there are possible problems for lone mothers in rural areas, with past research indicating that the reliance of lone mothers on other family members increases after separation or divorce (Marks and McLanahan 1993).

For men and women in inner urban localities, there were no gender differences between proximity of mothers, fathers or siblings, so overall only limited support of gender-linked kin networks might seem justified. However, regardless of sex, inner urban residents were also less likely than middle and outer urban residents to have kin nearby.

With contact frequency, there were pronounced gender differences for all locality types. Women saw their mothers more frequently than their fathers, whereas men saw their mothers and fathers about equally often. Women contacted parents and siblings more regularly than men did.

For rural and inner urban residents, women telephoned their parents more often than men did, although there was no significant gender difference in personal contact. Outer and middle urban women saw and telephoned their parents and siblings significantly more often than did men.

The correlation between proximity and personal contact was also stronger for women than for men, and especially the adult daughter-mother relationship. If mother lived close by, she would see her daughter quite often. This was reported by 60 per cent of the outer urban women. However, in the middle and outer urban localities, despite the reasonable proximity of a 30-minute drive, men were less likely than women to see or telephone their parents regularly. Over one-third of rural and outer urban men saw their parents at least weekly, compared with less than 30 per cent of inner and middle urban men.

To sum up, although there was mixed evidence for women's kin living nearer

than men's kin, women maintained more regular contact with their parents and at least one sibling than men. The main pattern was that more of the locational difference in contact rates between parents and adult children was accounted for by the interaction of wives/mothers with their parents than by that of husbands/fathers. This also seemed to be the case for sibling relationships.

## Conclusions

Although caution must be exercised in interpreting close proximity or high contact rates solely in terms of positive experiences and constructive assistance for families, these findings suggest that some community locations had closer family ties than others. Contrary to the notion of the 'rural idyll', closer family ties were more likely to occur in outer suburban

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localities than in rural localities. Further, there was some evidence for weaker same-generation family links in the rural communities surveyed, which most resembled the inner urban localities regarding close proximity of and regular contact with parents and siblings.

These findings are therefore more consistent with family dispersion via rural-urban drift than with the notion of traditional close-knit rural communities.

There was some general evidence of stronger intergenerational links than same-generation links between adults. Perhaps this strong link was influenced by the fact that all the adults interviewed were themselves parents. The findings also suggest that women are more involved with relatives on a regular basis than men. The more frequent contact between women and their relatives endorses past research on gender differences in family networks, indicating that adult daughters are more involved with parents on a regular basis than adult sons. This implies the likelihood of more support and exchange across family households via women than via men.

It should be noted that the focus of this analysis is not upon *actual* assistance being exchanged, but rather on the varying *potential* for family help in a variety of community settings. While many adults had relatives in reasonable proximity, there were sizeable proportions of people in the four locality types who either did not have various family members or who had them

but they lived far away. The role of in-laws, while not considered here, might in future analysis be shown to counteract to some extent the paucity of some personal kin networks (although this may make no difference for most of the single parents included in the sample).

Overall, the findings indicate that there is considerable variability between individuals and between communities in the family support systems potentially available to them. Whether the potential becomes actual depends, as David de Vaus notes elsewhere in this issue, upon the willingness of individual family members to accept an obligation to extend help to others in the family.

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