

# New Forward Research Program for Institute



The Institute has developed a research program that will shape its research activities for the next three years.

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The primary function of the Institute's research program is to design and implement research projects, results of which can inform the process of policy and program development and the delivery of services to promote the effective functioning and wellbeing of families in Australia.

In the forward research program that has now been developed, the Institute's research activities fall into two broad categories – projects primarily based on the collection of new data, and monitoring projects – as well as ongoing analysis of the Australian Living Standards Study. Within the two categories, sub-program areas are identified and, within these specific areas, individual projects are listed. These areas of research and brief descriptions of the project topics are outlined below.

## PRIMARY DATA PROJECTS

Primary data projects fall into one of four sub-program areas. These sub-programs reflect different points in the life cycle of families and have been selected to ensure that research is relevant to a wide range of family forms and the varying needs of families at different points in the life cycle.

Within limited resources we can undertake projects only within a restricted range of the issues that potentially could have been addressed. In developing the program, however, we have tried to be as comprehensive as our resources allow and to emerge with a portfolio of work that can usefully inform the policy, program and service delivery process across a broad range of topics impinging on the wellbeing of Australian families.

### 1. Life Course of Australian Families Sub-Program

Just as there is no one, simple, defining characterisation of 'the family' in contemporary Australia, so is there no one defining moment in the lives of families. Families are engaged in constant processes of transition – adaptive adjustment which is the essence of family stability. To understand family stability, therefore, is to understand the processes in which families engage to maintain equilibrium and thereby, on a continuing basis, to provide for the nurture and care of their members.

To maintain this dynamic stability families need to be able to respond adaptively to the varying demands confronted by them at different points along the family life course. For example, providing for the nurture and care of preschool infants is a different task, yields different experiences and requires different resources and supports from those required in caring for adolescent youngsters. Similarly, achieving balance between the demands of work and family requires a different set of adjustments when caring for young children from those required to meet the needs for care presented by elderly and infirm parents.

We have little understanding of the processes in which families engage as they adapt, or fail to adapt, to the changing demands made upon them across the life course, nor of the ways in which policies, services and programs facilitate or inhibit successful adaptation. The *Australian Family Life Course Project* is intended to fill this gap.

This project, to be piloted extensively over the next two years, will be based on a longitudinal study of families at different points in their family life cycle and will constitute an ongoing investigation of the state of the nation's families. Because it will

be designed with policy relevant parameters in mind, it will be an invaluable source of contemporary information about family functioning for policy makers and service providers.

The life course project will provide broad brush information on family functioning and wellbeing, and about the impact of policies and services thereon. However, the level of information on issues specific to particular periods in the life course of families or on particular aspects of family function will be insufficiently detailed to act as a guide to policy or to inform policy evaluation. Thus, selected aspects of family function will be assessed within the research program under the sub-program headings that follow.

### 2. Family Formation, Breakdown and Re-formation Sub-Program

Patterns of family formation in Australia have changed markedly over the last 20 years. Teenage marriage has become uncommon, living together before marriage is becoming more commonplace, and people are delaying marriage. Young people are living at home longer and because of the changing nature of the labour market are remaining economically dependent on their parents for extended periods. The formal marriage rate is down while the de facto marriage rate has more than trebled. Children are far more likely to be born to unmarried parents but the majority who are, are born to cohabiting couples. Although not as high as in some Western societies, marriage breakdown remains a common experience in Australia: for every ten marriages in 1992 there were four divorces.

The Family Law Act is under review and amendments before Parliament are

designed to give greater emphasis to children's rights and parental responsibilities after divorce. The nature of service provision is changing, with a variety of services and programs having been developed, expanded or modified to either help prevent marriage breakdown or to help deal with the consequences of marriage breakdown. Among these are marriage education programs, marriage and relationship counselling, family mediation, the Child Support Scheme and the Jobs Education and Training (JET) Scheme.

Marriage breakdown has profound consequences for family relationships and can affect the capacity of family members to care for one another and the parenting roles and responsibilities of parents.

Six projects are planned for the study of family formation, breakdown and re-formation.

*(i) Marriage relationships and values*

This study will explore the expectations, images and meaning of marriage and marriage-like relationships among young people and adults at different stages of their 'marriage career', and will investigate the effect of these on the wellbeing and stability of relationships. It will have direct implications for marriage education and counselling programs.

*(ii) Housing and the family life cycle*

This project will focus on householding, family structure and kinship support networks among families with children aged 18–30 years. It will explore how families manage the process of their children leaving home and establishing their own households, and the impact of this on family wellbeing.

*(iii) Effects of proposed changes to the Family Law Act*

The proposed changes to the Family Law Act envisage changes to parenting after marriage breakdown, including an increased emphasis on parental responsibilities and children's rights. The effect of these legislative changes will be monitored. Initially a baseline survey will be undertaken to ascertain the situation before the implementation of the Act. After the Act is implemented, two follow-up studies will be conducted to identify changes in attitudes, understandings and behaviours.

*(iv) Service provision and family breakdown*

The provision of services for families in which marriages have broken down or are

under strain are being reassessed, partly as a result of foreshadowed changes to the Family Law Act but also as a result of changing community attitudes and concerns. This part of the program will involve evaluation of such services.

*(v) Parenting after marriage breakdown*

This project will examine the parenting of mothers and fathers after marriage breakdown in three contexts: sole parenting, non-resident parenting, and step-parenting. It will examine the extent to which the parenting roles and experiences of fathers differ from those of mothers. It will also compare the way in which the law and provision of services affect the post-divorce parenting of mothers and fathers.

*(vi) Family breakdown and intergenerational relationships*

Marriage breakdown and remarriage can disrupt kinship networks and the capacity of the extended family to provide caring and support. This project will assess the extent to which marriage breakdown and remarriage affects patterns of caregiving and relationships across the generations, and will explore ways in which the adverse effects of this (for example, grandparent access) might be alleviated.

### 3. Parenting Sub-Program

Families have always played a core role in the care and nurture of children, in their socialisation and in the transmission of values from one generation to another. With the greater participation of women in the workforce and greater acceptance of gender equality, the care of children can no longer be thought of as simply a mother's role nor even an exclusively parental role. What was once seen primarily as the mother's responsibility for child care needs to be seen as the responsibility of parents and of the wider community.

Formal and informal child care are key methods by which the caring role of parenting is shared with society and is an issue that concerns parents and governments alike. Formal care needs to be affordable, accessible and of a high standard. Child care serves many functions: in addition to enabling parents to work, it can provide respite care and promote child development. It is important to know the range of functions that families, governments and society require child care to serve.

Although both formal and informal carers make important contributions to child rearing, parents remain the central carers for most children. In Australian society we know little about the diversity of parenting strategies and values and there is a need to understand these and to understand the context within which different strategies are employed. A full understanding of these strategies will contribute to programs of parent education and in education for relationships.

The Institute's new responsibility for the National Child Protection Clearing House has given it an important role in discussions relating to child protection. There is an increasing concern about issues around mandatory reporting and child maltreatment and how these issues should be addressed.

Five projects are planned for the study of parenting.

*(vii) Parenting practices and child rearing values in contemporary Australia*

This study will investigate the child rearing strategies of Australian parents from diverse cultural backgrounds in bringing up their children. It will also collect information on the concepts, standards and values employed by parents in rearing their children.

*(viii) Uses of child care*

While it has been government policy to make affordable child care available to working parents, there has been an unanticipated increase in the use of fee assisted child care for non-work related reasons. Parents are clearly putting child care to a variety of uses but little is known in detail about the nature of such usages or about how parents balance the different purposes for which they need child care. These uses will be the focus of this study of child care.

*(ix) Quality in preschool care and outcomes for children*

The federally funded Child Care Quality Improvement and Accreditation System for Long Day Care Centres in Receipt of Child Care Assistance (QIAS) has now been in operation for almost two years. There has been no independent evaluation of the scheme's impact on the actual quality of the service delivered to children, nor has there been any assessment of the scheme in terms of its outcomes, immediate as well as longitudinal, for children. This study will address these issues.

**(x) Child abuse prevention and protection**

A child abuse prevention strategy has been adopted in many states and territories in which professionals are mandated to report cases of suspected child abuse and neglect to the authorities. One consequence of the introduction and expansion of mandatory reporting has been to shift the bias in the resourcing and activities of the child protection services away from work focused on actual child protection and child welfare to a residual forensic, investigative and referral service. This project will explore alternative models of child abuse prevention and child protection services.

**(xi) Family mobility and the wellbeing of children**

This project will focus on the effect of regular and enforced job-related mobility and work-related parental absence on the wellbeing of children.

#### 4. Ageing, Later Life Families and Family Care Sub-Program

Two, somewhat opposite, trends are evident in family caring in Australia. In the area of child care the government is becoming more involved, with families, the community and government increasingly sharing the caring of children. On the other hand, in other areas of care families are increasingly being expected to be involved in the care of the frail elderly, disabled and ill family members. With less and less institutional care available, families are being expected to provide more of the primary care for ill, disabled and infirm family members, while the government provides support services for these families.

These policy driven trends are based on the assumption that families are able and willing to provide the care that people require. It has frequently been pointed out that family care for the disabled and frail elderly really means care by women, and in this sense the policy of family care has far more implications for women than for men. However, models of family care should not assume the family model of the 1950s where many women of, say, middle age were not working. Today's relatively high levels of workforce participation, increasing levels of sole parenting and family breakdown, and more individualistic values may mean that many women are not available to provide the care that the policies assume. At the same time children

remain home for longer periods and there is an increasing number of elderly and disabled people who may need care.

Policies and service delivery models that rely on family care need to ensure that families are able and willing to provide the care that is assumed. People in dysfunctional and fractured families, or in families that are so heavily committed they may not be able to provide the extra care that is required, must be considered. Furthermore, it is critical that carer families are provided with the necessary support services.

Five projects are planned for the study of ageing, later life families and family care.

**(xii) Later life families and intergenerational care**

The widespread stereotype of the elderly as burdens and as consumers of care neglects the fact that most elderly people are substantially independent for most of the time. It also ignores the fact that rather than being net consumers of care the elderly are an important community care resource. This project will examine care by the elderly as well as care of the elderly, and will focus on care provided to and by other family members. As well as identifying the extent to which elderly people provide and receive care from other family members the project will explore the nature of family relationships among the elderly. This approach is based on the view that successful and positive caring and successful ageing and wellbeing in later life is significantly affected by the quality of intergenerational relationships.

**(xiii) Living arrangements, preferences and housing among the elderly**

This study will have three components. First, it will examine the actual living arrangements of the elderly. Second, it will investigate the preferred living arrangements of the elderly and what their grown children are prepared to provide in terms of shared living and household assistance. Third, it will examine the housing and locational choices and kinship networks of 'empty nesters' and retirees. This component will explore the housing and locational decisions that households make at this stage of life and how these decisions relate both socially and spatially to their family and friends.

**(xiv) Women in the middle**

Many middle-aged women face potential overload as they care for their adult children who remain at home, their grandchild-

dren, their elderly parents, and also participate in the workforce. This project will consider the extent to which such 'women in the middle' experience role overload, identify ways in which they cope, and ways in which they can be assisted.

**(xv) Migrants and caring**

This project will explore the needs for care of elderly people from non-English-speaking backgrounds, the nature of family care, and difficulties faced by carers. It will evaluate the extent to which support services for family carers meet the needs of these families.

**(xvi) Service delivery for the elderly**

Service delivery for elderly people is an important policy issue and will become more so as the proportion of elderly citizens increases. A range of service delivery issues, including Home and Community Care (HACC) and palliative care, deserve careful study. These and similar service delivery issues will be explored in this part of the research program.

## MONITORING PROJECTS

In addition to the program of projects based on primary data collection, the Institute intends to continue with two monitoring projects. These involve the monitoring, analysis and reporting of secondary data.

**1. Family Trends Monitoring**

Monitoring and reflecting the changing demography of Australian families has always been a significant component of the Institute's research-related activity and so it will remain under the new program.

Within this strand of the program, among other things, data available from the Australian Bureau of Statistics and other agencies (for example, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and the Bureau of Population Research) would be acquired, collated and analysed to provide up-to-date information on: the structure, status and size of Australian households; household and family formation, family breakdown and re-formation; families caring for ill, frail and disabled dependents; and cultural diversity in these parameters.

The monitoring project will include a variety of activities, some of which will draw on data provided from other

components of the Institute's research program. For example, it is intended to publish a regular 'state of the family' report which, among other things, will draw on data collected in the *Australian Family Life Course Study* (described earlier). The Institute will also compile a publication profiling Australian families as we approach the 21st century which will include statistics on the current situation in Australia, trends, and international comparisons in relation to issues such as family forms, marriage, divorce, extended families, children, youth, ageing, work and family, family incomes and income support, caring for and by families, family violence, and family wellbeing.

Outcomes from this branch of the research program will be valuable in themselves. In addition, they will provide important contextual information for interpreting outcomes from primary research projects conducted by the Institute.

## 2. Legislative, Policy and Program Monitoring

In addition to contextualising the Institute's primary research within a demographic framework, it is important to keep abreast of changes in the legislative framework within which families function, and also of changes in family policy and service provision. It is necessary to have knowledge and understanding of these processes at State and Commonwealth level.

Thus equipped, the Institute will be better placed to contribute to, and to influence, legislative change and policy development. These functions will be carried out on the basis of integration and coordination between the Institute's research program and the work of the Institute's Family Information Centre which maintains databases on legislation and family services and which is also a principal stakeholder in the annual publication *Diary of Social Legislation and Policy*.

## AUSTRALIAN LIVING STANDARDS STUDY

There is scope to make further use of the data contained in the Institute's Australian Living Standards Study (ALSS) database. Several projects are currently making use of these data and many of the new projects described here will be able to draw partly on ALSS data. Further analysis will also be conducted to identify the distinctive non-income components of living standards, the extent to which these are independent of household income, and the extent to which living standards are related to the geographical location of families.

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