

Institute Research R E P O R T

Since the last report on the progress of Institute research in Family Matters, many projects have been completed and others have commenced. **DAVID DE VAUS** reports.

Australian Living Standards Study

The Australian Living Standards Study (ALSS) is a major survey of national and international significance that has played a significant role in the Institute's research activities since 1990. It is the largest study ever conducted by the Institute and its findings will be a significant source of information for social planning for Australian families for the remainder of the decade. The study examines the living standards of families with children (aged less than 20 years) in twelve varying localities around Australia. In all, more than 5,000 families participated in the study.

The study took a 'whole of life' approach to the measurement of living standards and included questions on employment, economic resources, housing, health, transport, education and training, children's services, social and political participation, family relationships, and personal wellbeing. The study is unique on an international scale in respect of its focus on the measurement of the living standards of children, and on economic as well as non-economic measures of wellbeing.

In addition, the study concentrates on the contribution to living standards of a range of publicly and privately provided services. As well as the information from the households themselves, information about services was collected from the service providers and planners in each area (see ALSS Area Study below).

The database compiled from the data collected in the course of the study constitutes an important source of information on the living standards of Australian families. It will continue to be used in conjunction with new projects and for secondary analysis.

The Australian Living Standards Study was conducted by the Institute under contract with funding from the Commonwealth Department of Human Services and

COMPLETED PROJECTS

Health, the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, and the Department of Primary Industries and Energy.

All project reports have now been completed and provided to the contracting Commonwealth Departments. These include urban and rural reports on employment, child care services, housing, transport and health, as well as a report on a remote area (Tennant Creek). In addition, an urban and a rural service providers report has been completed.

When formally released later this year, these reports can be consulted at the Institute's Family Information Centre, or purchased from the Institute.

Australian Living Standards Study – Area Study

The Area Study component of the Australian Living Standards Study involved collecting data from providers and planners of a variety of services. The providers and planners approached were those delivering to the local government areas of the study, concentrating mostly on those providers with an office or agency within the local area. The services covered included children's services, community services, amenity services, education, health, housing, leisure and recreation, safety and security, transport, youth and financial services.

Three reports were submitted to government from this component of the ALSS project: one covering the nine urban areas, one covering two rural areas, and a separate report covering Tennant Creek.

These reports discussed such issues as

characteristics of service location, visibility and availability of services, co-location, use of volunteers, changes to charges for services, languages in which staff work, Aboriginal staff employed, non-English-speaking background staff employed, annual turnover of staff, use of multifunctional staff, a description of the wide range of programs offered – and some indication of how program guidelines are adapted to fit local area needs – and a range of other issues related to operating services.

Providers and planners were also asked for their perspectives on issues of duplication, necessary services missing from the area, oversupply, quality of local services, local demand, access difficulties and the stresses upon their own service.

The reports also contain perspectives from providers and planners about the methods they use for needs recognition, difficulties encountered when trying to address needs, the suitability of policies current at the time of the survey, changes that would improve the ability of the service to respond to demands, how providers publicise their services, how they evaluate their service delivery, and whether the staff training they can offer is considered satisfactory.

Early Childhood Study

The aims of the Institute's Early Childhood Study were twofold. First, the study sought to provide a comprehensive picture of the experiences of Australian mothers in caring for their children from birth until the first year of school in a variety of circumstances both in and out of the labour force (in metropolitan areas only). Second, the study set out to examine the relationship between child care experiences and child cognitive and socio-emotional competence on starting school. The study has taken a sample of children in their first year of school, identi-

fied the types of child care they had experienced in their preschool years, and assessed the links between differing child care context, cognitive skills and social-emotional development.

The results from this study are published in the Institute's set of seven Early Childhood Study books, with the final two in the series published this year bringing the project to a close. *Towards Integration and Quality Assurance in Children's Services*, prepared under contract by June Wangmann of Macquarie University, reports on current child care policy and matters of quality in child care. *Today's Care, Tomorrow's Children!*, by Gay Ochiltree and Don Edgar, provides an overview of the whole project and further elaborates on its findings. (For details of the Early Childhood Study series see the 'Institute Publications' column in this issue.)

Understanding Families

A book entitled *Families in Australia: A Socio-Demographic Perspective* was commissioned by the Victorian Board of Studies and written by Peter McDonald. The book is directed towards facilitating an understanding of family trends in Australia and elsewhere. It is designed for use by students and educators, policy makers and all practical professionals working with families. (See 'Institute Publications' column in this issue.)

Families and Cultural Diversity in Australia

One of the Institute's initiatives for last year's International Year of the Family was a book on families and cultural diversity. The manuscript, compiled and edited by Robyn Hartley, has been completed and the book will be released towards the end of 1995.

Families and Cultural Diversity in Australia is the culmination of a project in which 13 authors contributed to ten chapters which discuss values guiding family life and experiences in Australia. Included are chapters on Aboriginal, Chinese, Filipino, Greek-Australian, Italian-Australian, Latin American, Lebanese-Australian and Vietnamese-Australian families, together with two chapters which explore the broad context of family change and issues for Australian families in the future. Differences and similarities in patterns of parenting, marriage, kin relationships, family life, child rearing, and the role of older people are explored.

Work and Family

Also as part of an International Year of the Family initiative, Esso Australia contributed to the publication of the forthcoming book, *Work and Family Life: Achieving Integration*, by Ilene Wolcott and Helen Glezer. Using data from two Institute surveys – the Australian Living Standards Study and the Australian Family Formation Project – the monograph examines how families perceive and manage their paid work and family caring roles. It explores the impact of work conditions on family relationships and wellbeing, looks at how family commitments can affect work preferences, and describes satisfaction with both work and family life. (See 'Institute Publications' column in this issue.)

Children's Rights and Law

Another Institute initiative for the International Year of the Family is a collection of papers compiled and edited by Kate Funder designed to raise awareness among service providers and students. Contributors are specialists in philosophy,

law and public policy. Provisionally titled *Children's Rights and the Law in Australia: Readings for Service Providers*, this book addresses current debates about children's rights and Australian law and policy in education, family law, child welfare and juvenile justice, health and economic support. The book is due for release soon.

Commonwealth's Role in Preventing Child Abuse

At the request of the Commonwealth Minister for Family Services, Senator Rosemary Crowley, the Institute prepared a report titled *The Commonwealth's Role in the Prevention of Child Abuse*, which examined the extent to which the Commonwealth is fulfilling its international obligations to protect children. The report has been completed and presented to the Minister, and can be purchased from the Institute.

Family Change, Family Relationships and Adolescent Sexual Behaviours and Attitudes

This project, funded by a Commonwealth Aids Research Traineeship awarded to Dr Kate Funder, was executed under the supervision of Professor Doreen Rosenthal, La Trobe University. The project investigated links between young people's family structure when they were growing up and their attitudes and behaviours in intimate sexual relationships. Based on a survey of 640 male and female tertiary students from university and TAFE campuses throughout Victoria, the results showed significant differences in sexual attitudes and behaviours between young people from two-parent, one-parent and stepfamily backgrounds.

Newtown Revisited

As reported in the last issue of *Family Matters* (No.40, p.17), Newtown Revisited is a collaborative research project between the Australian Institute of Family Studies and the University of Newcastle, examining changes in family and community life between 1966 and 1991.

Newtown was the site of a community study undertaken by Lois Bryson and Faith Thompson in 1966, published under the title *An Australian Newtown: Life and Leadership in a Working Class Suburb* (Penguin, Ringwood, 1972; Kibble Books, 1976). Newtown was also one of the areas included in the Institute's Australian Living Standards Study. These two data sets provide the starting point for an analysis across time of how family life has changed in a working class suburb.

CURRENT PROJECTS

The analysis will examine the impacts of a sectoral shift in the Australian economy, changes in the nature of welfare services, and a diversifying demographic structure, upon a community that was developed by the Victorian Housing Commission in the 1950s to provide accommodation for young families near to newly established manufacturing plants.

Housing Preferences and Capital Gains

Australians have a strong belief in home ownership as a means whereby ordinary

families can gain not only security of tenure but also an appreciating asset providing financial security for old age. Real capital gains are expected to make home purchase worthwhile financially, no matter how much struggle is involved in the saving of the deposit and the meeting of repayments.

However, findings from the Australian Living Standards Study on housing in Melbourne indicate, broadly, that in an era of deregulated interest rates, and high rates of change in family circumstances (through separation, remarriage, unemployment) many families can encounter financial difficulties or changed housing needs. Many, particularly those in outer suburbs, may have been better off financially renting rather than buying.

In May 1995 the Institute commenced a research project, in conjunction with

the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, to examine the impact of capital gains on housing benefits and net housing costs of families in the inner, middle and outer suburbs of Sydney and Melbourne. This study will measure housing costs and levels of capital gains and identify which families benefit most, by combining data already collected in the Australian Living Standards Study on family characteristics with valuation information extracted from records of local councils and the New South Wales Valuer General.

This project should contribute to the debate on the impact of capital gains and housing on economic inequalities among families and on income transfers between generations. The study may also provide a better understanding of the operations of the housing market and help reduce the incidence of families with economic difficulties spending too much on their housing, buying in the wrong location and so on.

DSS Community Research Project: Analysis of ALSS Data

As part of the Community Research Project, the Department of Social Security contracted the Institute to analyse Australian Living Standards Study data to identify domains of living standards, broadly defined, that differentiate significantly between DSS clients and other comparison populations. The analysis involves developing measures of living standards of interest to the Department of Social Security; comparing the socio-demographic characteristics and living standards of different income groups; identifying the reasons for such differences; and considering the implications of this for policy.

DSS Community Research Project: Development of Survey Instrument

Under contract from the Department of Social Security, the Institute has developed survey instruments to be used to evaluate the effectiveness of the interventions which constitute the DSS Community Project to enhance the living standards of project participants. The project involves measuring the living standards of program participants before the commencement of the program and again after participation. The design of the pre-test instruments has been completed.

The instrument design was based on the sets of questions that were developed in the Australian Living Standards Study and involved extending that study's measures in the areas of non-cash income, access to information, formal labour market involvement, informal labour market participation, family relationships, personal wellbeing and reduced costs.

Puckapunyal Primary School Project

Because of the nature of military life, children in Defence Force families are subject to regular moves and educational disruption. This project examines the effect of these moves on the educational and general wellbeing of children, including the formation and dissolution of friendships.

The opportunity to conduct such a study arose from the planned move of the First Armoured Regiment of the Australian Regular Army from Puckapunyal to Darwin. The move will take place between July and December 1995 and will involve approximately 130 school-aged children. In conjunction with the principal of the Puckapunyal Primary School and the school's transition aide, the Institute will collect data from students, teachers and parents both before and after the move in order to obtain a better understanding of the effects of the move and the factors contributing to these effects. Results from the study should provide insight into ways in which some of the adverse effects of the military lifestyle on children might be overcome.

In addition to the specific study, this project will provide the Institute with the opportunity to develop and test a range of measurement instruments that would be appropriate to larger scale studies of the effects of work-based disruption on the lives of children.

Rural and Regional Families

Rural families have become a focus for greater attention, particularly during the prolonged drought over recent years. There have been a variety of policy responses, mainly oriented toward income support but with an enhancement of the role of rural counsellors and other agencies to allow them to offer family and social support. Apart from reasonably sample-specific studies, families in regional and rural Australia remain relatively unknown and undifferentiated in the minds of many people.

As part of its demographic trends monitoring function the Institute is currently conducting research to obtain a clearer picture of regional and rural families from the 1991 Census. Using the classification of local government areas developed by the Department of Housing and Regional Development, with adaptations applied by the Institute, some comparisons will be drawn and similarities observed among families in urban developed areas compared with those in fringe areas, in regional cities and towns, in agricultural areas and in remote areas.

Family Friendly Work Practices in Small Business

This project is being conducted under a contract from the Work and Family Unit

of the Commonwealth Department of Industrial Relations. It involves the production of a resource guide that will identify potential ways in which small and medium-sized enterprises can adopt appropriate workplace policies and practices to assist workers with family responsibilities achieve a better balance of their work and family roles.

A Profile of Australian Families: Towards the 21st Century

At the request of the Family Services Division of the Department of Human Services and Health, the Institute is preparing a profile of family characteristics of Australian families in the 1990s. Its purpose is to draw together in one document a wide range of statistical information about family characteristics. It will present these in an accessible format and will provide basic data on a wide range of family-related matters.

Areas to be addressed in the profile include marriage, divorce, extended families, having and not having children, child care, youth, ageing, work and family issues, incomes and families, time use in families, family care of children, the elderly and disabled, rural families, family violence, family wellbeing, and disadvantaged families.

Family Law Reform Evaluation

The Institute has been commissioned by the Attorney General's Department to evaluate the impact of the Family Law Reform Act No.1, Part VII – Children, on public attitudes to parental responsibilities and children's rights after parental separation. A national survey will be conducted at three points in time – before the implementation of the Act, and at two subsequent times as yet to be determined, but provisionally two and five years after implementation. At this stage a steering committee has met to consider the design of the study and wider consultations have been conducted with relevant bodies. The first stage of the evaluation will be completed in 1995–96.

Cost of Children

During 1994–95 the Institute continued to publish the regular 'Cost of Children Update' in *Family Matters*. Previously announced plans to hold a workshop to re-examine methodological issues relating to the cost of children have been postponed awaiting further developments in relation to government funding of research on this topic.

David de Vaus is Research Manager of the Australian Institute of Family Studies.