

The Australian Living Standards Study

From 1991 until late 1994 the Australian Institute of Family Studies undertook a major, innovative study of the living standards of Australian Families – the Australian Living Standards Study (ALSS). Conceived and directed by Dr Peter McDonald, then the Institute's Deputy Director (Research), the study was partially funded under contract by the Commonwealth Government. The contract funding provided resources which assisted with data collection costs but, because the study was seen to be of particular significance, the Institute also contributed substantial resources to the study.

While the research was still underway some of the early results were reported in *Family Matters* and at various conferences and elsewhere (for example, McDonald 1993a, 1993b). By mid-1995 the Institute had completed and submitted all the reports required by the contracts and this opened the way to report on the study and to make the results and data more widely available. This issue of *Family Matters* provides the first opportunity since the completion of the study to report on some of the findings.

A fundamental goal of the study was to measure living standards in a much broader way than traditionally had been done. The study grew out of a concern that in Australia the understanding of poverty and living standards focused too much on the adequacy of family incomes and neglected other significant dimensions that contribute to a family's quality of life – factors such as access to transport, health care, feeling safe, good education, and the availability and quality of services for families (Brownlee and McDonald 1991). The conceptualisation of the ALSS therefore reflected the view that living standards depend on more than income and necessarily involve the efficient delivery of necessary services to families.

After reviewing the international literature, the study adopted a 'spheres of life' approach that had been developed in Scandinavia (Brownlee 1990; Erikson and Uusitalo 1987). Fourteen spheres of life were identified for study: health, housing, economic resources, transport, employment, education, recreation, physical environment, security, community services, access to information, social and political participation, family relationships, and personal wellbeing. Within each of these spheres questions were asked about the objective circumstances of families, the importance they attached to particular matters in relation to each sphere, the needs of the family and their satisfaction with how they were managing, and with the quality of services relating to each sphere of life.



A Brief Overview

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Another important goal was to identify whether there were locational differences in living standards – when living standards are conceived of in the broader way used in the study. This goal reflected concerns about the living standards of families living in rural and remote areas, and about whether the living standards of families who moved to the urban fringe because of cheaper housing suffered due to poor services and poor employment opportunities.

Thus, the ALSS was designed to answer questions such as:

- How do housing standards vary for Australian families?
- What are the employment opportunities, the level of income available and the cost of living in the local area?
- What about transport, access to schools or higher education?
- Can families get health care when they need it?
- Is there child care nearby, and care for ageing or invalid relatives?
- Are the facilities and opportunities for leisure, recreation, safety and security adequate?
- Are people happy with the environment in which they live? (AIFS 1991)

To assist in focusing on the impact of location on living standards, the ALSS collected very detailed information from 12 local government areas throughout Australia. Because the study used an area-by-area collection method, data gathering was spread over a period of two years. Using data collected from households in each of the local

government areas, and information about the actual level of services in each area and the perceptions of each locality's service providers, the study aimed to develop a holistic understanding of the availability and use of services.

There were two distinct components to the data collection in the study. The first, referred to as the Household Study, collected detailed information from households within the selected local government areas. The second, referred to as the Area Study, and involving a survey of service providers, was designed to identify the nature of the services existing in the area at the time of the survey, and describe more broadly the nature of the 12 areas.

The local government areas were selected to provide families from a range of locational types. The locations were as follows:

- *inner urban* – Melbourne and South Sydney local government areas;
- *middle urban* – Box Hill in Victoria, and Ryde in New South Wales;
- *outer urban* – Werribee and Berwick in Victoria, Elizabeth/Munno-Para in South Australia, and Campbelltown and Penrith in New South Wales;
- *rural* – Berri/Loxton/Renmark in the Riverland area of South Australia, and Roma/Burgil in Queensland;
- *remote* – Tennant Creek in the Northern Territory.

The Household Study component of the ALSS aimed to sample 500 randomly selected households from each local government area. A household was eligible for selection if it had responsibility for a child under the age of 20 years, even if that child was not living in the household. This allowed for households such as those rural families with children at boarding school to be selected.

In all, about 5000 households were included in the study. Face-to-face interviews and mail-back questionnaires were used in each household, with questionnaires being completed by each parent in the household, all children who were of secondary school age or older, and on behalf of children younger than secondary school age. Depending on the household size up to 11 questionnaires could be completed for a household. This yielded a detailed, extensive and complex set of data.

From the data set, the Australian Institute of Family Studies has provided the Commonwealth with a number of contracted reports. These include reports comparing all study areas on employment, housing, work-related child care, transport, access to basic

medical services and service providers perspectives (Brownlee 1995; Burbidge and Winter 1995; Millward 1995; Transport Research Centre 1994; Weston 1995; Kilmartin 1994a, 1994b, 1995; multiple authors 1994). Reports were prepared for urban, rural and remote areas.

ALSS Articles in this Issue

The reports prepared for government run to thousands of pages. The articles by Institute researchers that follow in this issue of *Family Matters* can therefore only begin to draw on the extensive and complex data provided by the ALSS.

Instead of attempting to provide a summary of the main findings of the ALSS, the articles in this issue are designed simply to provide some glimpses of some interesting aspects of the data. The broader theoretical questions about whether the 14 spheres actually exist as empirically separate spheres of living standards, and whether they are empirically independent of income, will need to be addressed elsewhere.

Child care

Christine Millward examines the use of formal and informal work-related child care for pre-school children and identifies the importance of the availability of formal child care as the key determinant in the choice between formal and informal care. She finds that, when the study was conducted, there were differences between areas in the availability of child care, with families in the outer areas having poorer access to this service. In the absence of formal child care, these families made greater use of informal child care from other family members which, as it turns out, were more available to families living in the outer areas. Christine Millward also reports that, with the exception of the cost of formal care and difficulties when children are sick, parents are highly satisfied with both the formal and informal care their pre-schoolers receive.

Medical services

Ruth Weston also reports on very high levels of satisfaction with access to basic medical services. In addition, she addresses a number of issues relating to the bulk billing of medical services and points to potential problems with the discretion doctors have in the decision to bulk bill. She argues that such discretion, coupled with problems in identifying some low income families, may mean that some needy people are denied access to free basic medical services despite the aims of the Medicare system. She also points to the problems that arise when doctors in a region rarely if ever bulk bill. Ruth Weston also asks the question whether the availability of bulk billing leads to an overuse of basic medical services, and she provides some interesting data to shed light on this matter.

Children's safety

David de Vaus and Sarah Wise argue that an intangible aspect of living standards or quality of life is how safe people feel. For families, concerns about the safety of children can play an important part in the quality of life of both parents and their

children. The authors report on the levels of concern that parents have that their children will be attacked or kidnapped when outside of the home. The high levels of concern reflect an ever present anxiety in the lives of many modern families, especially those in urban areas.

Housing

Andrew Burbidge and Ian Winter note that the cost and quality of housing is a key component of the living standards of most Australian families, and that the large majority of Australian families who aspire to buy their own homes no doubt expect that home ownership will contribute to family wellbeing – in both the material and non-material sense. For a long time home ownership has been seen to be a good financial investment and a way of improving a family's financial wellbeing. The authors critically examine this issue in the four Melbourne areas of the ALSS and question the assumption that home ownership necessarily financially advantages families.

Family problems and service provision

Christine Kilmartin reports on some findings of the ALSS Area Study that she coordinated. She observes that the variation in a range of family problems, including isolation, as reported both by service providers and by parents, does not fit a uniform pattern of 'outer urban / inner urban / rural' and warrants some attention in the way that services for families are allocated. She also observes that while the providers reported that the outer urban and rural areas were relatively lacking in facilities, the distribution of other elements of family living standards counter-balanced that perceived absence.

ALSS Data Sets

Given the scope of the ALSS there remains considerable opportunity for further analysis of the data. Already the data have been used to inform further projects such as the Newtown Revisited study reported in this issue, the analysis of housing costs and capital gains in Sydney by Institute researcher Andrew Burbidge, and the book *Work and Family Life* by Institute researchers Ilene Wolcott and Helen Glezer (described on pages 55–56 of this issue). The data have also been used in work on the living standards of DSS clients for the Department of Social Security, and they will be used for work with the Office of Disabilities.

The Institute wishes to encourage further use of these ALSS data. For reasons of confidentiality the Institute has been reluctant to deposit the data in publicly accessible data archives. We are currently investigating ways in which researchers can gain access to the data without compromising the Institute's obligations to ensure the confidentiality of study participants.

At this point there appears to be several options. One is for the Institute to prepare, on a cost-recovery basis, tailored data sets that meet the needs of researchers while at the same time protecting the privacy of participants. Other options are to engage in



collaborative arrangements whereby the Institute and external researchers work together on the data set, and to undertake contract research whereby the Institute conducts the data analysis on behalf of the contracting agency or researcher.

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