

The Institute's Fifth Australian Family Research Conference, held in Brisbane on 27–29 November 1996, was opened by the Minister for Family Services, The Hon Judi Moylan. Across three days of plenary sessions, symposia and poster workshops, 278 participants from across Australia, as well as a handful from overseas, delivered, listened to, read, discussed and analysed a host of reports on family policy research and related endeavours currently being undertaken by governments, community agencies, the corporate sector, research institutes and universities, both in Australia and overseas.

It is appropriate that I should express in these columns the Institute's gratitude to the National Australia Bank for its generous contribution to the running costs of the conference. In his keynote address, Mr Ron Burke, General Manager Group Corporate Relations, National Australia Bank, expressed his hope that the Bank's involvement in the conference would mark only the beginning of a developing collaborative relationship between the Institute and the Bank, one which would be to the advantage of the community of Australia's families. We look forward to working with the Bank towards such collaboration.

There was intense interest in the proceedings of the conference, not only among the participants but also in the print and electronic media. During every day of the conference itself and for several days afterwards, there was extensive reporting of the conference, locally and nationally, with total conference exposure amounting to 66 press articles and 41 reports/interviews on radio and television. Such widespread coverage testifies to the high level of public interest in family affairs and family policy.

One of the conference contributions to attract extensive media coverage was the keynote address presented on the final day by Professor Bob Gregory of the Research School of Social Sciences at the Australian National University. Professor Gregory is a prominent labour market economist and in his presentation he focused on the impact of current unemployment levels on families with children.

Discussing changes in employment levels across all Australian postal code



DIRECTOR'S REPORT

HARRY MCGURK

districts, Gregory pointed out that, whereas in 1976 participation in the employment market was uniformly high across all postal districts, regardless of socioeconomic status, by 1995–96 participation in contemporary paid employment remained at the previously high levels only in districts of high socioeconomic status, and became progressively lower as socioeconomic

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status decreased. Gregory's data showed that unemployment levels were especially high among families with school age children. Among some districts of low socioeconomic status, up to 50 per cent of school age children of two-parent families were living in homes where *both* parents were unemployed.

In addition to discussing the direct impacts of unemployment on these parents and their children, Professor Gregory invited his audience to consider what the likely effects might be of such high concentrations of children of unemployed parents upon the morale and effectiveness of local schools, on the success of such schools in maintaining recruitment rates among children from families where parents *were* employed, and on the flow-on effects in neighbourhoods and

communities when these schools are threatened with closure due to recruitment failure.

Professor Gregory's address dramatically underlined the havoc which the scourge of unemployment wreaks upon individuals, families and neighbourhoods. His findings are sobering testimony to the consequences which flow from the increasing dispersion of incomes in contemporary Australia occasioned by the growth in the numbers of both two income and no income families.

In modern societies, involvement in the paid labour market is the primary means not only of providing for the material necessities of families and individuals – clothing, food and shelter; it is also the essential means of securing social participation. Humans have never lived by bread alone. Although in Australia the basic needs of the poor and the unemployed rarely go entirely unfilled, exclusion from the paid labour market implies effective exclusion from the kind of recognition as members of and participants in the larger society that contributes to a sense of inclusion, wellbeing and positive self-esteem.

When employed, whether in the public sector, a multi-national organisation, a medium size free-standing enterprise, or a small family business, work is the locus of substantial portions of social as well as economic life. Work integrates us within social and moral networks and contributes to social identity and belonging. Work provides a sense of self-worth, reflected by the recognition, through work, of our value to and our valuing by others.

Moreover, with the so-called new individualism that has been an outgrowth from the predominance of economic rationalism, the extent to which ours is a society driven by consumerist values has become overwhelming. It is primarily as consumers that we declare our individual status as fully paid up participants in society. In such a context, access to conspicuous fashion labels for clothes and footwear, access to restaurants and the like, have acquired critical symbolic value. They are our badges of social membership. Without them we lose our visibility as consumers, we lose our recognition as bona fide participants in the social order; we become outsiders.

Work, therefore, not only enables us to satisfy our basic material needs. As important, it provides the wherewithal to underwrite our participation in society. Without the access to consumer goods which paid work affords, we (and our dependents) are outcast, excluded.

This is the social significance of the high levels of unemployment among families of school age children, highlighted by Bob Gregory. Add to the scene the chronically high levels of unemployment current among young people and we have a picture of the economic and social blight which has befallen many of the nation's communities.



New facts and Figures on Australian Families

The Australian Institute of Family Studies is pleased to announce the release of its latest book – *Australian Family Profiles: Social and Demographic Patterns*. This is a comprehensive collection of the latest facts and figures on Australian families, accompanied by a clear and concise discussion of family changes and trends. For more information on this important new book see page 71 of this issue of *Family Matters*.

What is to be done? Current levels of unemployment are chronic and do not seem amenable to any short-term solution. Lowered levels of unemployment will come about mainly as a result of growth in the overall economy. That is a process which will take place over the medium to long term. It is highly likely that an excess of supply of labour over demand will continue to characterise the employment market for some time to come.

That being the case, unemployment and income support policies will be required that extend beyond any endeavour to ensure that people who are unemployed devote the majority of their time to looking for paid work. It will be important to create and deliver policies and programs that enable unemployed persons to increase their skills repertoire and their flexibility, to improve and sustain their employability, and to maintain a work ethic. This may involve access to various forms of training, community work and trial employment. These are tasks which will require collaborative input from governments, employers and unions for the development of effective solutions.

However, there is also a related set of tasks which needs to be undertaken by the community at large in order to overcome the extent to which people without paid employment are excluded from society. On the latter point, a paper by Patricia Short, also presented during the Institute's Australian Family Research Conference, described the extent to which families

reliant upon income support are often isolated from social support networks. There is growing recognition of the significance of social support networks to the functioning and wellbeing of families and individuals under stress. However, we cannot expect socially excluded or isolated families to create their own support systems unaided.

There is a need to enhance motivation and opportunity for social participation by, rather than the social exclusion of, low income and unemployed families. For this to occur, a change of emphasis, indeed a change of values, will be required which moves us away from dependence upon consumerist symbols as testimony to societal participation, towards a rediscovery of the importance of direct social engagement, particularly at the level of neighbourhood and community.

In this context, Graham Vimpani, Professor of Community, Child and Family Health at the University of Newcastle, also speaking at the conference, drew attention to the need for policy makers and service providers in government, the community and private sectors (I would include the religious and the corporate sectors) to work collaboratively towards the development of integrated, whole of government/whole of agency approaches to whole of community family support services. Vimpani spoke of the importance of such services being neighbourhood based, developed in partnership with neighbourhood residents.

The success of such endeavours will require government agencies, community services, banks and businesses, churches, schools and voluntary societies to cooperate at neighbourhood level. An early task might be the development of an inventory of the neighbourhood resources that have the potential to contribute to the creation of a supportive environment for families, an environment in which, to paraphrase Vimpani, there is 'something for every family and something special for families with special needs'. A subsequent task would be the creation of effective networks to ensure the optimum deployment of these resources in ways that are inclusionary, empowering and affirming to all families.

Successfully implemented, a likely outcome of the project envisaged by Professor Vimpani would be the reconstruction of neighbourhood infrastructures of the kind that promote the growth of social capital, growth of the trust that creates the strong communities which our society so sorely needs and which the individualist agenda that has dominated recent decades has so sorely compromised.

It is heartening to note that there are the beginnings of demonstration projects along these lines in some of the States of the Commonwealth. We will look forward to carrying reports about them in subsequent issues of *Family Matters*.

Harry McGurk

Institute hosts Family Research Conference

A delightful venue and smoothly run conference provided a strong base for the Institute's Fifth Australian Family Research Conference, held in Brisbane from the 27-29 November.

The conference attracted 284 delegates including 128 academics, 77 bureaucrats and politicians from government departments, 41 representatives from service and community organisations and 38 others including media, lobbyists and research consultants. A wide range of academic fields was represented including psychology, sociology, education, health, criminology, social work, social policy, law, demography, economics and theology. Such breadth in the attendance was certainly a good starting point for a conference that aimed to tread the pathways between family research and family policy.



The Institute's Fifth Australian Family Research Conference held in Brisbane, 27-29 November 1996.

The conference program comprised keynote addresses, symposia, papers grouped by theme, as well as a policy debate. In addition, the Institute's Conference Program Committee put particular emphasis on poster displays, encouraging service providers, policy evaluators and people with research in progress to use this means of communication. The poster session, given

prominence by being unopposed by any other sessions, was well attended and of a generally high standard. The buzz in the room indicated lively discussion, and we are encouraged to use posters more extensively in the future.

AVAILABILITY OF CONFERENCE PAPERS

Most papers from the conference can be obtained from the Institute's Family Information Centre (copying fee \$9.00 per paper). A number are now available from the Institute's web site (www.aifs.org.au) and others will be added as they are received from the authors. Selected papers are published in this Autumn 1997 issue of *Family Matters*. (For a selection of other papers, see the last issue of *Family Matters*.)

—Kate Funder and Ian Winter

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