

The first reports from our corresponding consultants describe research that falls under the broad sub-headings of indigenous families and children and adolescents. Reports received on policy developments focus primarily on child protection.

## INDIGENOUS FAMILIES

Research in this area is a mainstay of work at the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, as Jon Altman reports. Using census analysis and ethnographic techniques, a series of recent working papers on the economic status of indigenous households and families has clearly illustrated the continuing socio-economic disadvantage of indigenous sole-parent families. Furthermore, the income poverty among indigenous families with children, in 1991, is such that nearly half of all indigenous children, compared to around 18 per cent of other families, were in families with incomes below the poverty line. Although there have been apparent reductions in indigenous poverty relative to the rest of the population since the Henderson Commission of Inquiry into Poverty in the mid-1970s, these changes are due to the increase in the level of poverty among other Australians rather than to any absolute improvements in indigenous poverty. The research also points to the need for the distinctive circumstances of indigenous families to be taken into account in any reform of Henderson equivalence scales and poverty measurement.



AUSTRALIAN FAMILY  
RESEARCH AND POLICY

*News*

COMPILED BY IAN WINTER

**This column is designed to keep readers informed of contemporary developments that matter to families. Compiled from reports provided by a panel of corresponding consultants with expertise in the many dimensions of family research and policy making, the column provides a snapshot of family research and policy issues from a range of research perspectives and geographic locations around Australia. We encourage readers to contact their local Family Matters corresponding consultant to advise them of significant happenings and developments that may be of interest.**

A recent review of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission social policy development (CAEPR Discussion Paper No. 94) critiques much of the existing literature that simply assigns Aboriginal families to the category of welfare recipients or dysfunctional domestic groups.

## CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

As part of a commitment to improving the outcomes for children and young people in state care, Lee Wightman reports that the Department for Family and Community Services (SA), in conjunction with Professor Jim Barber of Flinders University is developing an evaluation framework for the pilot phase of the implementation of the Looking After Children package. Looking After Children, developed in England, is a comprehensive assessment, case planning and educational tool for caregivers such as foster parents and social workers. The package aims to ensure that all key domains of a child's life (such as education and health) are adequately addressed and that the range of developmental and other opportunities necessary for normal development are available to children and young people in state care. Professor Barber is also engaged in the development of outcome measures for the child protection system in New Zealand, under the auspices of the Social Policy Agency.

The needs of, and service delivery to, vulnerable adolescents is a further element of ongoing research in South Australia. A major research project is being undertaken under the auspices of the Policy and Development Division of the Department for Family and Community Services. Data will be collected by workers in over 50 services ranging from district centres of the Department for Family and Community Services, streetwork services, and emergency accommodation and

## FAMILY MATTERS CORRESPONDING CONSULTANTS

**Professor Pat Noller**  
Centre for Family Studies  
University of Queensland

**Ms Cynthia a'Beckett**  
School of Early Childhood  
Queensland University of Technology

**Professor Marcia Langton**  
Faculty of Aboriginal and Torres Strait  
Islander Studies  
Northern Territory University

**Ms Lee Wightman**  
The Office for Families and Children  
South Australia

**Dr Steven Zubrick**  
Telethon Institute for Child Health  
Research  
Perth, WA

**Dr Judy Cashmore**  
Social Policy Research Centre  
The University of New South Wales

**Professor Hal Kendig**  
Lincoln Gerontology Centre  
La Trobe University  
Melbourne, Vic.

**Dr Alison Garton**  
The Australian Psychological Society  
Melbourne, Vic.

**Professor Jon Altman**  
Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy  
Research  
The Australian National University  
Canberra, ACT

**Associate Professor Sotirios Sarantakos**  
Department of Sociology  
Charles Sturt University  
Wagga Wagga, NSW



detention centres. Two hundred and fifty young users of these services will be interviewed to determine their assessment of their own situation and needs, their perceptions and opinions about the current service system, and service usage patterns.

Pat Noller reports that there are a number of research projects underway at the new Centre for Family Research, at the University of Queensland. These focus on: child abuse and juvenile crime; young adults' retrospective perceptions of parental and judicial decisions about residence and contact in divorcing families; conflict in families with adolescents; family influences on the development of children's beliefs about alcohol; siblings of children with a disability; and cooperative interactions in primary school children.

A longitudinal study of early child development in everyday situations is currently underway at the Centre for Applied Studies in Early Childhood, Queensland University of Technology. Cynthia a'Beckett informs us that the project involves following the lives of 29 children, and their parents, teachers, carers and peers, from the age of 12 months to five years, the results of which we will aim to report on in the future.

## CHILD PROTECTION

Child protection is currently under the spotlight in New South Wales with a number of inquiries having recently reported or due to report soon. Judy Cashmore informs us that over the last year or so the Wood Royal Commission on Police Corruption has provided considerable impetus to government policy development in relation to child protection. A number of government departments and other agencies which appeared before the Commission were found wanting in their management of child sexual assault, from its investigation and prosecution to the treatment of children who have been abused. Departments have been shown to have inadequate and inconsistent policies and practices in which the needs of children have been lost from sight.

The Commission has also exposed the sexual abuse of children in care, abuse by teachers and members of religious orders, and the lack of any effective response to such allegations by the major churches and by government departments such as the Department of School Education and the Department of Community Services. Teachers and other employees have commonly been transferred following

allegations of abuse to other unsuspecting communities without adequate investigation and without regard for the duty of care for further groups of children.

The Premier of New South Wales has subsequently required government departments and agencies to develop policies and procedures, and to bring these into line with other departments to provide consistent, coordinated and effective protective intervention for abused children. The Commission's report on the paedophilia reference is due for release at the end of August.

An Office for Children and Young People has been established within the NSW Cabinet Office to monitor and coordinate policy development; one of its first tasks is to coordinate the government response to the Royal Commission and to ensure that the deficiencies revealed by the Commission are attended to.

Other developments in New South Wales, Judy Cashmore reports, are that in February the Premier launched the Inter-Agency Guidelines for Child Protection Intervention developed by the NSW Child Protection Council. A comprehensive and coordinated training and implementation process is now underway. In the first wave of training for those working directly with children for whom there are protective concerns, over 10,000 employees of government and non-government agencies are undergoing joint training in their local networks. Further training is planned for approximately 200,000 people who work with children as teachers, child care workers and in other professional capacities.

Following a 1996 report by the NSW Community Services Commission and similar work in Victoria, ways of providing tighter screening and recruitment practices for workers and carers with direct contact with children are being considered, together with better procedures for dealing with allegations against employees. Discussion is occurring at senior government level to enable an information exchange between states on abusive offenders.

Other recent developments are that the Children (Care and Protection) Act 1987 is currently under review, and standards in relation to substitute care are being developed. Also a new Director General and senior management team has been appointed to the NSW Department of Community Services, following a report by the Council on the Cost of Government.

Via Steve Zubrick, the corresponding consultant in Western Australia, Patricia Wringe of Family and Children's Services informs us that the Child Protection Services Register was launched in August 1996 to assist in the provision of coordinated child protection services. The Register records the names of children who have been maltreated (as well as the services provided to these children) and the perpetrators convicted of related offences.

Also, Family and Children's Services (WA) has developed and piloted a system of responding to reported allegations which separated 'actual' or 'likely harm' from concerns about parenting or family stress. The reforms, implemented statewide in May 1996, will result in fewer families being subject to inappropriate and intrusive child maltreatment investigations while more families with genuine difficulties are offered appropriate and flexible services to meet their needs. The South Australian and the Tasmanian governments have now adopted key aspects of these reforms.

These reforms were implemented following research conducted in Western Australia between 1989 and 1994 which showed a sharp rise in the number of allegations reported to the department of child maltreatment involving neglect or sexual, physical or emotional harm to children. Allegations of maltreatment jumped from less than 3,000 in 1989 to nearly 8,000 in 1994. The majority of these allegations related to inadequate parenting skills, social disadvantage, isolation and family stress, rather than actual harm to children.

Lee Wightman reports that the SA Office for Families and Children, Domestic Violence Unit, is coordinating a 12-month pilot of a Violence Intervention Project in the northern area of Adelaide. The project aims to increase the future safety of children and women affected by domestic violence and to reduce the incidence of domestic violence by increasing the options available to men to change violent behaviour. Families eligible for inclusion in the project, which offers separate specialised services for children, women and men, will be identified through police intervention with male offenders. The project is funded by participating government and non-government agencies and will be independently evaluated.

*Ian Winter* is a Senior Research Fellow with the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

