

CHILDREN, DIVORCE AND ONE-PARENT FAMILIES

The 1996 divorce figures showed a rise in the age specific divorce rate to the highest level for more than a decade (ABS 1996a). But a decreasing number of divorces involves children under the age of 18 – in 1996, for example, 54 per cent of all divorces involved children under 18 compared with 63 per cent two decades previously.

The annual rate at which children under 18 years have experienced the divorce of their parents, over the period since 1976, is shown in Figure 1. The figure depicts the numbers of children aged 0–17 years in each year whose parents divorced, expressed as a rate for all children under 18, and is referred to as the child specific rate of parental divorce. A slow but steady climb from the late 1980s can be seen.

One of the consequences of the divorce of parents is, of course, the creation of a one-parent family. And there has been a growth in children living in one-parent families, as shown in Figure 2. But the rate of growth reflected in Figure 2 has been faster than the growth in the annual rate of parental divorce shown in Figure 1. The data behind those graphs show that between 1989 and 1996, there has been a 16 per cent rise in the annual rate of children whose parents divorced, but a rise of more than double that figure in the percentage of children in one-parent families.

Any observed change in the percentage of children currently living in a one-parent family might be due to flows into, or flows out of, that family type. (Note that divorce figures deal only with marriage breakdown; no regular records exist of the breakdown of de facto relationships.)

Flows *into* depend upon children being born to a lone parent or the break down of a marriage or de facto relationship. Flows *out* depend upon a repartnering of the lone parent, or the leaving of full-time education or home of the last dependent child in the household.

Hence the observable difference in growth between children impacted by divorce and children in one-parent families suggests one of two possibilities. The first is that children in one-parent families are more frequently being drawn from sources other than the divorce of parents. The second possibility is that a lone parent is spending longer in a one-parent family because of the slowdown of exit factors.

We do not have longitudinal data to assess the change in relative contributions of either source. We do know, however, that teenage fertility has been dropping (see article by Kilmartin elsewhere in this issue) and that teenage lone parents are few, so teenage births have been a

declining factor in the growth. It is possible that a small but growing group of older women are having children without being in a long-term relationship with the father of the child at the time of birth, but the more likely contributor derives from the increasing trend toward cohabitation.

A recent British study (Ermisch 1995) has shown that some 50 per cent of cohabiting relationships into which children were born are likely to break down and produce a one-parent family. Some 69,000 Australian births in 1996 (ABS 1996b) were to a woman who was not married, representing 27 per cent of all births in that year.

In eight out of ten ex nuptial births, the father was named on the birth registration, suggesting that a large proportion occurred within a de facto relationship. The greatest proportion of these ex-nuptial births is likely to be to couples where neither partner has been married nor had a child to a previous relationship, with a small proportion occurring within 'step' families

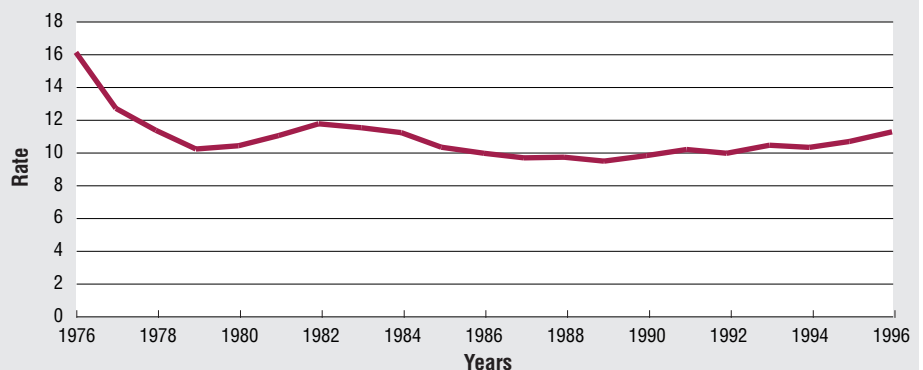
where one or both partners have had children from previous relationships.

Other stepfamilies exist through repartnering of the lone parent(s) without an additional birth to the family. Ermisch and Francesconi (1996) found that a quarter of stepfamilies in the United Kingdom were likely to break down every year; if this pattern is replicated in Australia, some of the growth in one-parent families would come from this source. The latest estimates for Australia show that in 1992, approximately 5 per cent of children under 15 lived in stepfamilies (ABS 1994), and a further small proportion lived in de facto families where both partners were the natural parents.

Those data would suggest that the breakdown of de facto relationships is likely to be one contributor, and perhaps the major contributor after divorce, to the growth in one-parent families.

On the other hand, we also know that remarriage has dropped steeply in popularity as a choice for people whose first marriage

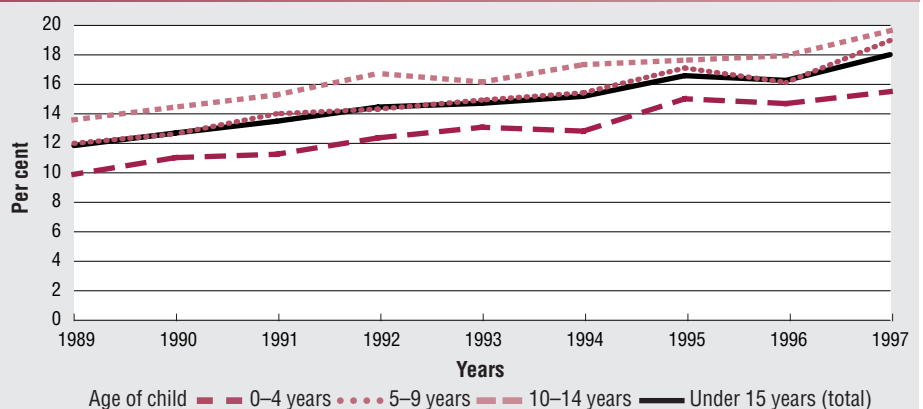
Figure 1 Child-specific rate of parental divorce, Australia, 1976–1996



Note: Rate refers to number of children aged 0–17 whose parents divorced per 1,000 children aged 0–17 years in or from two-parent and one-parent families (1995 figures estimates only).

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (various years), Divorces, Catalogue No. 3307.0/3310.0; Estimated Resident Population, Catalogue No. 3201.0.

Figure 2 Children in one-parent families as a percentage of all children in same age group, Australia, 1989–1997



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (various years), Labour Force Status and Other Characteristics of Families, Catalogue No. 6224.0.

has ended in divorce. If people are not remarrying, they are more likely to remain in a one-parent family status. We have no recent longitudinal data to look at the increases in cohabiting relationships which might follow a period of living as a lone parent, but it is possible that those, too, have slowed down, although not at the rate of the slowdown in remarriages. This slowdown in the exit from a lone-parent family is likely to have a small effect only upon the observed growth in one-parent families.

The issue of change in full-time educational retention rates of children aged 15 or more years, or changes to the age of leaving home (both possible factors in the growth of one-parent families) are not likely to impact on the data under discussion which are confined in Figure 1 to children under the age of 18 and in Figure 2 to children under the age of 15.

Whatever the relative contributions of the factors mentioned above, by 1997, 15 per cent of children under the age of five (up from 10 per cent in 1989), and 19 per cent of children aged between five and 14 years (up from 13 per cent in 1989), were living currently in a one-parent family. It is likely that children of divorce still make up the majority, with children from a de facto relationship making a growing contribution.

Both Figures show a strong rise in the latest 12-month period. It is likely that the rise in the children impacted by parental divorce (Figure 1) is a major contributor to the rise observed in children in one-parent families (Figure 2).

It may be concluded that the major growth of children living in one-parent families is likely to derive from the growth in divorce, but that other factors such as the breakdown of de facto relationships are probably contributing to the trend. Little contribution is thought to come from factors such as any increase in the rate of birth to women without partners, or any change in the rate of re-formation of stepfamilies following lone parenthood.

References

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Picture: Double Jay Graphic Design

There are two important differences between results obtained by using the basket-of-goods method and the expenditure survey method as presented in the accompanying Tables. First, the basket-of-goods approach provides only part of the cost of a child, while the expenditure survey measures the total amount spent on the child. Second, the basket-of-goods method indicates how much parents would spend on their children if the child was to enjoy the fruits of the basket specified by the researcher. In this sense, it provides an 'ideal' or desirable costing. In contrast, the expenditure survey method indicates how much parents actually spend on their children, even though the amount spent might be considered inadequate or excessive by the objective standards of the basket-of-goods method.

Basket-of-Goods Approach Based on Lovering 1983 Adjusted to CPI figure March Quarter 1997

	2 years	Age of child 5 years	8 years	11 years	Teenage
<i>Low income families</i> (below average weekly wage)					
Per week	31.95	40.99	50.28	53.31	79.42
Per year	1666.40	2175.74	2620.82	2781.30	4141.50
<i>Middle income families</i> (average weekly wage and above)					
Per week	48.07	53.92	69.61	90.12	132.14
Per year	2506.68	2813.47	3629.72	4582.40	6890.36

Note: Included are food and clothing, fuel, household provisions, costs of schooling (not fees), gifts, pocket money and entertainment. NOT included are housing, transport, school fees or uniforms, child care, medical or dental expenses. Holidays are a component of the middle income figures only.

Source: Lovering, K. (1984), Cost of Children in Australia, Working Paper no.8, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne.

Expenditure Survey Approach Based on Lee 1989 Adjusted to AWE figure March Quarter 1997

Age of child (years)	Food	Transport	Recreation	Household goods	Housing and utilities	Clothing	Other*	Total expenditure weekly
0-1	31.74	46.84	32.53	32.33	26.12	17.61	17.51	204.79
2-4	27.92	36.39	25.98	29.80	16.73	15.46	15.03	167.53
5-7	29.42	37.94	39.11	26.93	21.12	17.87	11.86	181.20
8-10	41.07	52.85	39.36	28.30	14.27	16.50	26.03	218.50
11-13	45.26	44.85	36.65	31.43	30.37	23.87	30.46	243.05

* Includes medical and dental costs, education costs and other miscellaneous costs. Costs of children vary according to the number of children in the family, the parents' incomes and whether one or both parents are working.

Note: The figures in the table relate to a one-child, one-income family with an income of \$688.70 gross per week. The Lee data show that two children cost about 55 per cent more than one child, while three children cost about twice the cost of one child. The dollar costs of children are relatively 'flat' compared with rises in family income: children in poor families cost proportionally more, and children in rich families proportionally less than those in middle income families.

Source: Lee, D. (1989), Calculations of the direct costs of children based on the 1984 ABS Household Expenditure Survey, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne.

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