

# Ageing and families

As the Acting Director's Report noted, this issue of *Family Matters* has as a theme the United Nations International Year of Older Persons.

The United Nations has identified 18 'Principles' for the International Year which are organised into five clusters: independence, participation, care, self-fulfilment and dignity. These principles are incorporated into four conceptual 'Dimensions': the situation of older persons, life-long individual development, multi-generational relationships, and the relationship between development and the ageing of populations.

These principles are relevant to Australian Institute of Family Studies research and are reflected in the articles in this issue of *Family Matters*. For example, the 'care principle' refers to issues of family and community care, while the 'independence principle' addresses issues of access to services and care, and opportunities to work and determine the time of retirement. Recognition is given to the changing workforce attachment of women and men and the consequences for income security. The 'dimension of life-long individual development' recognises the importance of decisions and choices made in earlier stages of life that can influence the experience of old age.

Of specific interest to family research is the 'multi-generational relationships dimension'. The implications and challenges of demographic and social trends that can affect family relationships across the generations are emphasised. Another aspect of this dimension is the importance of reaching policy consensus on multi-generational exchanges in relation to caregiving, social security and pensions.

Policy decisions about the balance between private responsibilities and government provision of income support, health and access to aged care services are important influences on family decisions about caregiving and support.

The question of whether an ageing population will create an unfair burden on future generations is addressed by several authors. *Andrew Tongue and Nicola Ballenden* from the Commonwealth Office for Older Australians emphasise the healthy and independent aspects of many older people as a family and community resource. *David Thomson*, Head of the History Program at Massey University, suggests that government policies have favoured older people and that the current generation of young people have few of the economic and family

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advantages of their grandparents and parents. In his view, the intergenerational contract has become skewed. *Ian Winter*, of the Australian Institute of Family Studies, extends this debate in his discussion of the housing prospects of young people.

The Council on the Ageing's *Denys Correll* reflects on how the images of older people may influence public policy decisions affecting options for older persons, particularly in the areas of employment and income arrangements in later life.

A more pessimistic view of older people's circumstances in terms of family support, health and financial status is advanced in the paper by *Mandy Leaveratt* of the Brotherhood of St. Laurence, and the fact sheet by *Ruth Gordon* of the Council to Homeless Persons.

These authors discuss different experiences and aspects of the needs of low-income elderly people and the availability and appropriateness of government services for the aged.

Who does and who will provide care for frail and ill older people is the subject of several articles. The relationship between the availability of family caregivers and admission to residential care of older people is described by *Diane Gibson* and *Zhibin Liu* of the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. The experiences and attitudes of adult children as principal carers of their elderly parents is explored by *Christine Milkward* of the Australian Institute of Family Studies. *Victor Minichiello* and *Irene Coulson*, of the University of New England's School of Health, discuss the importance of community resources in the context of family caregiving, particularly for those caring for a relative with dementia.

Overall, these articles, with their focus on changes in family patterns, structures, transitions and attitudes across the generations, make a contribution to understanding the role that families have in the lives of older persons. Nearly all the authors are concerned with how the nexus between family and community resources affect family possibilities and constraints for both older and younger generations of family members. They raise the issue of how, in a more complex family and social environment, the 'intergenerational contract' can be strengthened so that both older and younger generations of family members will prosper now and in the future.

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