



In November, I had a valuable opportunity to participate in a series of meetings in London, Paris and Oslo. In London, the impacts of the global financial crisis were starkly evident in the daily media projections of growing unemployment, potentially estimated to reach over 3 million, a figure not unlike that of the UK recession in the 1980s. The likely duration of the effects also seemed to be revised daily, with some commentators speculating that it might take a decade for the UK economy to recover fully. Not surprisingly, the impacts on children, families and communities were prominent concerns. For Australia, this is a time of great uncertainty. If the impacts of previous downturns are repeated this time, it will be those who are already disadvantaged who will be particularly vulnerable. As I indicated in my last report, the Institute is focusing on the most effective ways in which it can assist in providing accurate information on the ramifications of the downturn for Australian families.

## Research news

### Growing up in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children

*Growing up in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC)* continues its impressive productivity. The third wave of data collection is near completion, with more than 8,600 families taking part thus far. Feedback has been very positive, and we look forward to learning how the children and families are progressing following the release of the data in 2009.

Preparations have also commenced for the fourth wave, with a series of consultations and the development of proposals concerning the areas of child and family life to be included. Some new methods of collecting the information have been tested, such as using telephone, face-to-face and computer interviews with parents, and computerised interviews for children. These have been very well received in our trials.

The Institute has recently completed a report commissioned by The Smith Family on the home-to-school transitions of children from financially disadvantaged families who are taking part in the LSAC study. The report showed clear links between family financial disadvantage and children's readiness for school and their later academic achievement and adjustment. As well, multiple child, parental, family and community influences on children's cognitive and social/emotional school readiness were found. More risk factors were present among the financially disadvantaged group of families in the study. The higher rate of school readiness predictors among financially disadvantaged families can help explain lower rates of school readiness among children from these families compared to non-financially disadvantaged families. Overall, being "ready" for school was very important for children's home-to-school transition, and family financial disadvantage seemed to compound the effects of low readiness for school.

### NCPASS report: Child protection research

On 12 December 2008, the Institute released a report on the national statutory child protection data collection, entitled *Comparability of Child Protection Data: Project Report*. It was commissioned by the National Child Protection and Support Services (NCPASS) Data Group. The aim of the project, which commenced in July 2007, was to examine (a) rates of notifications, investigations and substantiations of harm to children, and the rates of children on child protection orders and in out-of-home care for the period 2000–01 to 2005–06; (b) differences in rates of notifications, investigations and substantiations of child maltreatment, and the rates of children on child protection orders and in out-of-home care across jurisdictions in the 2005–06 reporting period; and (c) factors that may explain differences in rates across jurisdictions and within jurisdictions over time.

Nationally, all headline child protection indicators (i.e., notifications, investigations, substantiations, children on orders and children in out-of-home care) increased over the period of analysis (2000–01 to 2005–06). Increases in frontline indicators (notifications, investigations and substantiations) were larger, although less consistent, across jurisdictions, while increases in children on orders and in out-of-home care were more consistent, although marginal, across jurisdictions.

When analysing the data for the 2005–06 reporting period, the rates of children on orders and children in out-of-home care were found to be broadly similar across jurisdictions and were thus relatively comparable. However, the rates of notifications, investigations and substantiations were subject to much greater variation across jurisdictions and were thus less comparable. The pronounced variation observed in frontline indicators (notifications, investigations and substantiations) were due to:

- different processes for recording notifications;
- variations across jurisdictions in the way in which each complies with relevant national counting rules;
- the degree to which reports are screened before entering the statutory system; and
- threshold differences at the point of system entry and at other points along the service continuum.

The project was undertaken with the assistance of staff from the Children, Youth and Families Unit at the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, who are responsible for the compilation of the annual *Child Protection in Australia* publication, which reports on annual child protection administrative data.

To access the project report, visit the Institute's website: [www.aifs.gov.au](http://www.aifs.gov.au)

### Family Law Evaluation

Thanks to systematic, intensive planning undertaken collaboratively with the Attorney-General's Department (AGD) and the Department of Families, Housing, Community

Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA), I am pleased to report that the Institute's comprehensive evaluation of the family law reforms is progressing well. As earlier reports have indicated, this work, which is being undertaken on behalf of the AGD and FaHCSIA, began with the collection of baseline data in mid-2006, around the time that the reforms were introduced. There are three key components to the research program, each of which entails a series of studies: the Legislation and Courts Project, the Service Provision Project and the Families Project.

The Legislation and Courts Project explores the implementation of the substantive changes to the laws governing post-separation parenting matters and changes aimed at making court processes less adversarial. Earlier this year, Dr Rae Kaspiew and her team conducted interviews and focus groups with key legal system players, including judges, magistrates, registrars, family consultants and lawyers. This qualitative work will soon be complemented by a quantitative file analysis of cases from the Family Court of Australia, the Family Court of Western Australia and the Federal Magistrates Court (to be conducted from December 2008 to February 2009). In November, the team also commenced an online survey of family lawyers, which represents a replication and extension of the baseline survey of family lawyers, conducted in mid-2006.

The Service Provision Project examines the system of service delivery from the perspectives of both service providers and their clients via two waves of qualitative and quantitative studies of service providers (in-depth interviews and focus groups with CEOs, managers and general staff, then an online staff survey) and a mailed questionnaire to clients. The initial waves of the two studies of service providers were held between late 2007 and early 2008. To gain insight into service providers' opinions about how well the reforms have been travelling since this early period, Kelly Hand and her team are preparing for the second wave of the qualitative and quantitative studies, to be conducted in February–April 2009. Soon afterwards, a survey of clients will be undertaken to obtain their views on the extent to which the services they have accessed have helped them resolve family relationship issues and, where relevant, the process of separating.

The Families Project includes two General Population of Parents Surveys. The first, conducted in mid-2006, provided baseline data, while the second will take place in early 2009. Among other things, these two surveys will allow the monitoring of help-seeking behaviour regarding relationships and parenting, parental involvement in their children's lives after separation, and relationships between children and their grandparents. Thanks to the diligent work of Dr Jodie Lodge and her team, I am pleased to report that we have now completed Wave 1 of our survey, Family Pathways: The Longitudinal Study of Separated Families. In this first wave, 10,000 parents who separated after the introduction of the reforms in July 2006 were interviewed. In March 2009, the team will be undertaking a second large-scale study of separated parents, called Family Pathways: Looking Back. This study will entail interviews with 2,000 parents who separated prior to the introduction of the reforms. More information about these two surveys is available in the Institute Activities section of this edition of *Family Matters*.

Further information on the Institute's evaluation of the family law reforms can be found on the website: [www.aifs.gov.au/familylawevaluation](http://www.aifs.gov.au/familylawevaluation)

## **Director's activities**

My recent trip overseas was productive and rewarding, highlighted by meetings with a number of key organisations working in areas that are of direct relevance to the Institute's work. My prime reason for travelling was to deliver the opening keynote address at the Family and Parenting Institute's international conference in London, and to participate in a debate on "Family welfare: What's government got to do with it?"

During my time in the UK, France and Norway, I also had meetings focused on social inclusion/exclusion; child poverty, structural inequality and social mobility; and longitudinal research.

### **Social inclusion**

In London, I had a unique opportunity to gain firsthand knowledge of the UK social exclusion policy context. Professor Leon Feinstein, who is currently seconded to the UK Ministry of Justice to work on a project related to disadvantaged youth and juvenile offending, provided valuable insights into UK prevention services and the scope for better interagency collaboration in this area. I valued the opportunity to meet with staff of the Cabinet Office's Social Exclusion Task Force. Naomi Eisenstadt, the head of the Taskforce, provided a very valuable update on its current work, especially related to system reform and the challenges of working across government and jurisdictional boundaries. In addition, we discussed the problems of improving data exchange across agencies to ensure better coordination of service projects and how policy development is informed by the research analytical capacity of the Taskforce. Dr Sarabajaya Kumar, a Senior Research Fellow within the Skoll Centre for Social Entrepreneurship and the Said Business Centre at the University of Oxford, provided a very comprehensive briefing on the Third Sector and voluntary organisations in the UK, as well as her perceptions of major developments in educational and social policy. I especially welcomed the opportunity to meet Stephen Aldridge CD, the Director of the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit, who provided insight into the role of the Cabinet Office in the strategic development of social policy, including the UK approach to addressing social exclusion.

### **Child poverty, structural inequality and social mobility**

I was struck by the extent of focus in the UK on issues related to child poverty, structural inequality and social mobility. Following an initial meeting with Kate Green of the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG), I met Anne Longfield, the CEO of 4Children. Having worked on the review of the Children's Strategy while seconded to the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit, Ms Longfield was very well placed to provide a comprehensive briefing on the extensive network of children's centres in the UK. We also discussed policy changes related to labour force participation requirements for lone parents, a trend that parallels Australian policy direction. At a meeting with Professor Jonathan Bradshaw, from the department of Social Policy and Social Work at the University of York, we discussed the UK Child Poverty Strategy and current progress towards meeting its 5-, 10- and 20-year targets for the eradication of child poverty. Professor Bradshaw provided particularly valuable insights into the extent of structural inequality and limitations on economic and social mobility in the UK. I was also fortunate while in London to be able to attend

the Local Government Association debate on “What will it take to narrow the child inequality gap?” This was a wonderful opportunity to hear not only the political perspectives on structural inequality in the UK but also the views of senior executives from local authorities across the UK on problems of social exclusion, disadvantage, inequality and child poverty.

In Paris, staff of the OECD Social Policy Division—Dr Simon Chapple, who focuses on child welfare; policy analyst Dominic Richardson; economist Anna Cristina D’Addio; and Mark Pearson, head of the division—discussed structural inequality and social mobility in the context of developments in life course social policy, across the OECD. We also discussed innovations in approaches to child and family welfare.

### **Longitudinal research**

While in London, I had discussions with Professor Heather Joshi, the Director of the Millennium Cohort Study. The Institute has close links with Professor Joshi and her research team. Maintaining our close collaborative relationships is an important priority. Our discussions focused particularly on the measurement of biomarkers, as well as the emerging longitudinal study networks and developments in Europe, including the new French longitudinal study, which is closely linked with that country’s census data. In Paris, with the OECD, I also discussed issues related to harmonisation of longitudinal data across international studies. This is an emerging priority for the OECD, aimed at complementing the comparative work it does based on administrative data sets. Again, it is important that the Institute monitor this development, given our role in *Growing Up in Australia*.

In Oslo, I had further opportunity to discuss developments in longitudinal research. Following my presentation of an address at the Norwegian Institute of Public Health, I participated in a workshop comprehensively covering their research program, including the Mother and Baby Study, which is following a sample of over 100,000 pregnancies longitudinally. Data are collected on the infants, their mothers and fathers. We particularly discussed issues concerning biomedical data collections, their storage and



Alan Hayes with staff from the Norwegian Institute of Public Health. l. to r.: Dr Kristin Mathiesen (Director, Department of Child and Youth, Division of Mental Health), Alan Hayes, Dr Geir Stene-Larsen (Director-General), and Dr Kristian Tambs (Head of Research, Division of Mental Health)

management—an area in which the Norwegian team has considerable expertise. That evening I signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Institute of Public Health at a function hosted by their Director-General, Dr Geir Stene-Larsen. There is great enthusiasm to ensure that this is a very active, productive and mutually beneficial partnership.

### **Concluding thoughts**

My time overseas has strengthened several valuable, ongoing relationships. I anticipate that there will be follow-up contact and further opportunities for staff of the Institute to collaborate with the key organisations that I visited. It has also provided a unique set of insights into the current state of social policy in the UK and Europe, as well as a valuable opportunity to draw the work of the Institute to the attention of researchers, practitioners and policy makers. There is clearly great interest in both the work of the Institute and in Australian social policy innovations. Given the gravity of the financial and economic challenges facing the world, innovative social policy responses are needed to address the rapidly changing global circumstances that now confront Australian families.

### **Dr Antonia Quadara**

Antonia Quadara has been appointed as ACSSA Co-ordinator. She brings with her 10 years of research experience in sexual assault, women’s safety and women’s policy. Her areas of investigation have explored the legal representation of Indigenous sexual assault victims and, in undertaking a PhD in criminology, public policy debates about the sex industry and women’s safety. She had been a Senior Research Officer at ACSSA since 2006.



In addition to working at the Institute, Dr Quadara has also worked as a Research Associate with the Melbourne Centre for Criminological Research & Evaluation, where she was an evaluator for the Neighbourhood Justice Centre Evaluation and a lecturer in the School of Political and Social Sciences in Criminology.

Dr Quadara has a wealth of experience in conducting and communicating research to various audiences, ranging from those in policy making and the service sector to tertiary students and researchers. With the ACSSA team, she is well placed to continue ACSSA’s objectives of undertaking, evaluating and communicating research to varied key stakeholders and supporting positive policy and practice directions in responding to and preventing sexual assault.

### **Stephanie Purcell**

Stephanie Purcell has recently joined us as Human Resources (HR) Manager. Stephanie brings extensive experience from the Australian Public Service in Canberra, where she most recently held senior HR positions in the Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy, and the Attorney-General’s Department. In 2007, Stephanie completed a Master of Human Resource Management, through which she gained a strong interest in building employee engagement for the mutual benefit of organisations and staff. Already she has been playing a role in the shaping of the Institute’s collective agreement, particularly in relation to the implementation of best practice performance management and learning and development. Stephanie’s focus in 2009 will be on implementing holistic and integrated HR strategies to support the Institute and its workforce.

