



Director's report

Alan Hayes

As Australians contemplate the global recession and the possible impacts of these uncertain times, the historical analysis of previous downturns, their impacts and residues take on a renewed significance. The Great Depression emerges as one base for comparison. Glen Elder's (1974) volume, *Children of the Great Depression*, provided a lens through which the impacts on families and their children can be assessed. Based on longitudinal data from studies initiated before and as the Great Depression began, Elder's work painted a picture of the ways in which vulnerability and resilience play out across the life course. It also highlighted the extent to which many were buffered from the worst of the impacts. For at least half of the US population, the Great Depression was not a time of economic deprivation, but fear was pervasive. While the impacts extended across classes, the urban and rural poor were most affected. Though family conflict increased among those who were vulnerable, those families affected by loss of social status recovered quickly but showed some enduring attitudinal changes; they were, for example, focused on educational attainment, career security and investment in their children (but not necessarily family relationship quality).

David Potts' (2006) book, *The Myth of the Great Depression*, distilled from an extensive set of interviews the experiences of Australians who lived through the depression years. He tracked the shifts in attitudes to unemployment and the unemployed as job losses increased, and the rise of social solidarity through the mobilisation of social capital. Drawing on suicide and mental health statistics, Potts reflected on the nature of vulnerability and resilience. On the one hand, suicide initially rose in 1930, admissions to mental hospitals increased by 1% per year across the 1930s, anxiety and stress increased and family problems (including alcohol misuse, family violence and mental health problems) were exacerbated; but on the other, many reported they were "poor but happy". In addition, poverty-related health problems rose, marriage was delayed and fertility declined (including ex-nuptial births). While the divorce rate fluctuated, there was no clear trend across the depression years.

Financial stress tends to exacerbate mental health problems and relationship difficulties within families, and the negative effects can flow on to children. A recent Finnish study of the recession of the 1990s, for example, showed that in times of economic hardship, parenting difficulties and mental health problems influence each other reciprocally (Solantaus, Leinonen, & Punamaki, 2004). In considering the current downturn, it is important to think beyond the economic to the social policy implications for children, families and communities.

In framing Australia's policy and practical responses, it is also important to consider how this downturn may be different to previous times of economic and financial challenge. For example, levels of household debt are higher, especially among those with lower incomes and less job security. There is now a greater dependence on dual incomes, overtime payments and income from work additional to the principal employment. The proportion of self-funded retirees has risen, increasing the pressure to return to the workforce, while reducing their capacity to support their children and grandchildren, if needed. Older Australians are likely to be seeking employment in competition with the recently unemployed and school leavers. Unlike the Great Depression, however, there are more extensive safety nets in place and a clear recognition of the need for urgency of response and concerted global action.

While one needs to be very careful in drawing parallels with the Great Depression and earlier recessions, for the current circumstances, there are some insights that seem to have applied across other downturns. First, most will recover once the recession lifts, but the most vulnerable are likely to show the greatest residual negative impacts. Second, some locations will show longer term negative effects, especially as these relate to the loss of jobs in a particular sector, such as manufacturing. Third, structural inequality is likely to increase and, with it, childhood disadvantage, exacerbating intergenerational impacts. In sum, these impacts, unaddressed, may deepen social exclusion.

Update on *Growing Up in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children*

Consideration is being given to the extension of *Growing Up in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children* (LSAC) for another four waves of data collection. This would take the two cohorts of children up to mid-adolescence and early adulthood, respectively. Adolescence is a time of considerable change and, frequently, of challenge for many young people. LSAC maps the different developmental paths taken by children and young people and sketches the influences of their diverse family, school, peer and community experiences. In addition, as each subsequent wave of data is collected, the study will provide valuable insights into how experiences earlier in life relate to outcomes in middle childhood and adolescence. As such, it is of particular value to those who frame life-course social policies and programs to support children and young people.

Analysis of the data continues to grow, with over 300 registered users of the data and a steady stream of

publications based on analyses of Waves 1 and 2. To meet the expanding use of the data, there has also been an increase in the number of workshops held to support researchers accessing the material, with three workshops having been presented last year. An LSAC Data Expert Reference Group has been established to provide guidance on the analysis and management of the data.

A second LSAC conference will be held on 3–4 December 2009. The conference will provide an opportunity for the presentation of findings across the first three waves of the study, following the release of the third wave of data later this year. With the release of Wave 3 data, the study will become truly longitudinal.

Feedback on the Wave 3 data collection suggests that most families still very much enjoy taking part in the study. Particularly pleasing has been the high rate of participation of teachers (over 80%) and parents who are living apart from but are still in contact with the child (74%). From Wave 2 to Wave 3, there has been an increase of 42% in the participation rate of parents living apart from their child. This is due to the use of telephone interviews rather than mailed self-complete forms. Feedback has shown that these parents very much welcomed the opportunity to give their perspective “in person”.

Inaugural Family Law System Conference, 19–20 February 2009

The focus of the Family Law System Conference was: The Australian Family Law System: Better Access to Justice. Held at the Old and new Parliament Houses, the event was organised by the Attorney-General’s Department and attended by senior representatives of the courts, non-government organisations across the family relationships sector, university researchers and representatives of state/territory and Australian Government departments and agencies. The Chief Justice, Deputy Chief Justice and several judges from the Family Court of Australia attended, along with the Chief Judge and senior staff of the Western Australian Family Court, and the Chief Federal Magistrate and several other magistrates. Delegates included CEOs or senior staff of the non-government organisations and family law and family relationships researchers, as well as many senior members of the legal profession, including solicitors and barristers in private, legal aid and community legal centre practice. The Attorney-General, the Honourable Robert McClelland MP, delivered the opening address and spoke at the dinner on the Thursday evening. Issues related to family violence, child abuse, Indigenous and CALD communities, access to justice, clarification of conceptual and terminological ambiguities in the legislation and the need for better coordination and integration of a complex system featured prominently in the discussions. Overall, however, while identifying some areas for further improvement, the conference affirmed the extent to which Australia is seen as leading the world in family law reform and providing innovative supports for families experiencing relationship difficulties, separation and divorce, and the complexities of post-separation parenting. I facilitated a working group on evidence-based decision-making that stimulated a lively discussion on the

need for a coherent national research strategy on family law and relationship pathways.

AIFS Seminar Series

The AIFS Seminar Series is a longstanding feature of the AIFS research and dissemination program. Alongside other research outputs—such as publications, websites and conference presentations—seminars provide an ideal opportunity for us to communicate the findings of AIFS research activities to a wide range of invested stakeholders.

The 2009 Seminar Series will involve events taking place every four to eight weeks through to November. As in previous years, the Seminar Series will be hosted mainly in our Melbourne offices, opposite the Flagstaff Gardens.

The combination of world-class speakers and an informed audience of researchers, family service providers, and policy-makers stimulates dynamic discussions and debates. Topics covered by our seminar speakers this year will range from families and work, to violence, abuse and neglect, to children, young people and their families. These issues are also central to our new Research Plan.

For further information about the AIFS Seminar Series, please visit our website: <www.aifs.gov.au/institute/seminars/seminars.html>.

AIFS Conference 2010

Planning is underway for the AIFS biennial national conference to be held 7–9 July 2010. The AIFS Conference is a forum for extensive debate on a wide range of family issues that are of key relevance to researchers, policy-makers and practitioners. As with previous conferences, next year’s will provide a platform for researchers to report findings from their family-related research, contribute to ongoing discussions and explore implications for policy.

Victorian bushfires

The horrific events of last February have touched us all. No matter how close their impacts are to you, it is understandable that we are all shocked and disturbed by devastation on such a scale. Of course, the speed and depth of response across the nation and globally has been a wonderful counter to the despair that this tragedy engenders.

The days and weeks following brought a mix of wonderful news to counter the flood of bad tidings. A former staff member of the Institute, for example, escaped to safety with her baby, though she sadly lost her home. Coordinated by the Institute’s social club, staff quickly responded to provide practical support to her and her family. While close to home, this is but one of thousands of examples of the way in which people coalesced to assist. It speaks volumes for the Australian character. One cannot help but be impressed by the extent of support that continues to be so freely offered. Equally, one cannot but be impressed by the courage displayed by those who have suffered so immensely in facing harsh realities in the aftermath of these tragic events. Our thoughts are with all those confronting the task of re-building their lives and re-establishing their families.



Vale Ken Rowe

Statistician, psychometrician and educational researcher

26 December 1945 – 7 February 2009

I was shocked and profoundly saddened to hear the news that Dr Ken Rowe, an eminent senior researcher at the

Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) had tragically been a victim of the fire at Marysville in early February. Dr Rowe worked as a teacher in a one-teacher school, served in New Guinea and Vietnam during National Service, and was seconded to the Police Education Centre, where he was involved in all aspects of police education. He completed studies in statistics at the University of London to sharpen his skills in providing an evidence base for educational research. On his return to Australia, he joined the staff of the Ministry of Education before moving to a position at the University of Melbourne. In 2000, he accepted the position of research director at the ACER. With his wife Kathy, a paediatrician, he pursued their mutual interest in advancing the evidence base for the importance of teaching quality for improving children's outcomes when they are learning to read. Dr Rowe challenged the

prevailing myths of reading pedagogy and sought to replace the rhetoric of reading ideologies with the light of research evidence and reason. In 2004, his standing in the field was recognised by his appointment to head an Australian Government inquiry into the teaching of reading. Dr Rowe took a keen interest in the Institute's work. His critical friendship to *Growing Up in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC)* was especially valued. Sadly, the last occasion on which we spent time together was at the inaugural LSAC Conference in December 2007. Ken is survived by his wife Kathy, his sons David, Andrew and Iain, and three grandchildren. He will be sorely missed.

References

Elder, G. H. Jr. (1974). *Children of the Great Depression: Social change in life experience*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Potts, D. (2006). *The myth of the great depression*. Melbourne: Scribe.
Solantaus, T., Leinonen, J., & Punamaki, R-L. (2004). Children's mental health in times of economic recession: Replication and extension of the family economic stress model in Finland. *Developmental Psychology*, 40(3) 412-429.



Grace Soriano

It was with very mixed feelings that we farewelled Grace Soriano, who left the Institute to take up a position in the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) on 12 February 2009. On the one hand, we were sad to lose Grace, who has made very valuable contributions during her time at the Institute. On the other, we are delighted that she has an opportunity to use her many skills to address new challenges in a role with FaHCSIA

that will enable her to use the skills she developed, and her capacity to work so effectively with community organisations.

For much of her time at the Institute, Grace worked as an Executive Assistant to the Deputy Directors and as a senior researcher. In recent years, she held a full-time research position, working on the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy Evaluation, including the Communities and Families Clearinghouse Australia (CAFCA), playing a key role in the management of the Promising Practice Profiles element of its work and, more recently, on the Family Law Evaluation. She has made very valuable contributions to the Institute in each of the roles she has filled, not just in terms of the nature of the work she has undertaken, but also in terms of her generosity, kindness and good humour. We wish her well for the future.



Dr James Boorman

James Boorman has recently been appointed to the position of AIFS IT Manager. James brings extensive experience in managing and supporting IT in a research environment from University College London and the University of Cambridge, where he most recently held senior research and IT positions in the Department of Biology and the Department of Haematology.

After being awarded a PhD in pharmacology and undertaking an IT-intensive postdoctorate in

neuroscience, James took a position at Cambridge to be more involved in IT. While working at Cambridge, he provided IT management and support for a number of world-leading medical research projects, ranging from improving blood safety in Africa to identifying candidate disease genes in genome-wide association studies.

James has been a Senior IT Officer at AIFS since April 2008, and has been acting IT Manager since August. James and his team have been busy working on the updating of the Institute's IT infrastructure and their focus in 2009 will be to continue the update and implementation of new technologies and databases to optimise the workflow of the corporate and research teams of the Institute.



Elly Robinson

I am pleased to announce the re-appointment of Elly Robinson to manage the Australian Family Relationships Clearinghouse and the Communities and Families Clearinghouse Australia. Elly has experience in the development and production of publications, learning materials and resources

for practitioners, service providers, students and the broader community. She has worked at Jesuit Social Services as the Co-ordinator of the Education and Professional Services Unit, and as a Senior Project Officer in the Education and Training Unit, Centre for Adolescent Health. Elly also played a key role in the Depression and Changing Families scoping study, conducted by the Australian National University. This project examined the relationship between the family law system and mental health issues.