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Relationship dynamics in Australia: Insights into family form and functioning

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The views expressed in this paper are those of the author
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A brief overview of AIFS

- The Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) was established in 1980, under the *Family Law Act (1975)*
- While initially in the Portfolio of the Attorney-General, it is now part of the Portfolio of the Prime Minister and Cabinet
- AIFS contributes to family wellbeing in Australia by undertaking high-quality research that informs the Australian Government and the community and influences policy, services and support for families.



Research strengths

- Longitudinal research
 - ◆ *Growing up in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children*
 - ◆ Australian Temperament Project
 - ◆ Stronger Families in Australia
 - ◆ Longitudinal Study of Separated Parents
- Major program evaluations
 - ◆ National Family Law Evaluation
 - ◆ Stronger Families and Communities Strategy Evaluation



Research strengths (continued)

- Identifying family trends and monitoring international developments
- Dissemination of findings in print, electronically and via our clearinghouses
 - ◆ The clearinghouses currently include
 - Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault (ACSSA)
 - Australian Family Relationships Clearinghouse (AFRC)
 - Communities and Families Clearinghouse Australia (CAFCA)
 - National Child Protection Clearinghouse (NCPC)
 - *Closing the Gap* Clearinghouse
(with the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare)



Current research

The Institute's planned research program, *Sustaining Families in Challenging Times*, focuses on the following themes:

1. Economic wellbeing of families
2. Families and work
3. Social inclusion
4. Violence, abuse and neglect
5. Family transitions and family law
6. Children, young people and their families



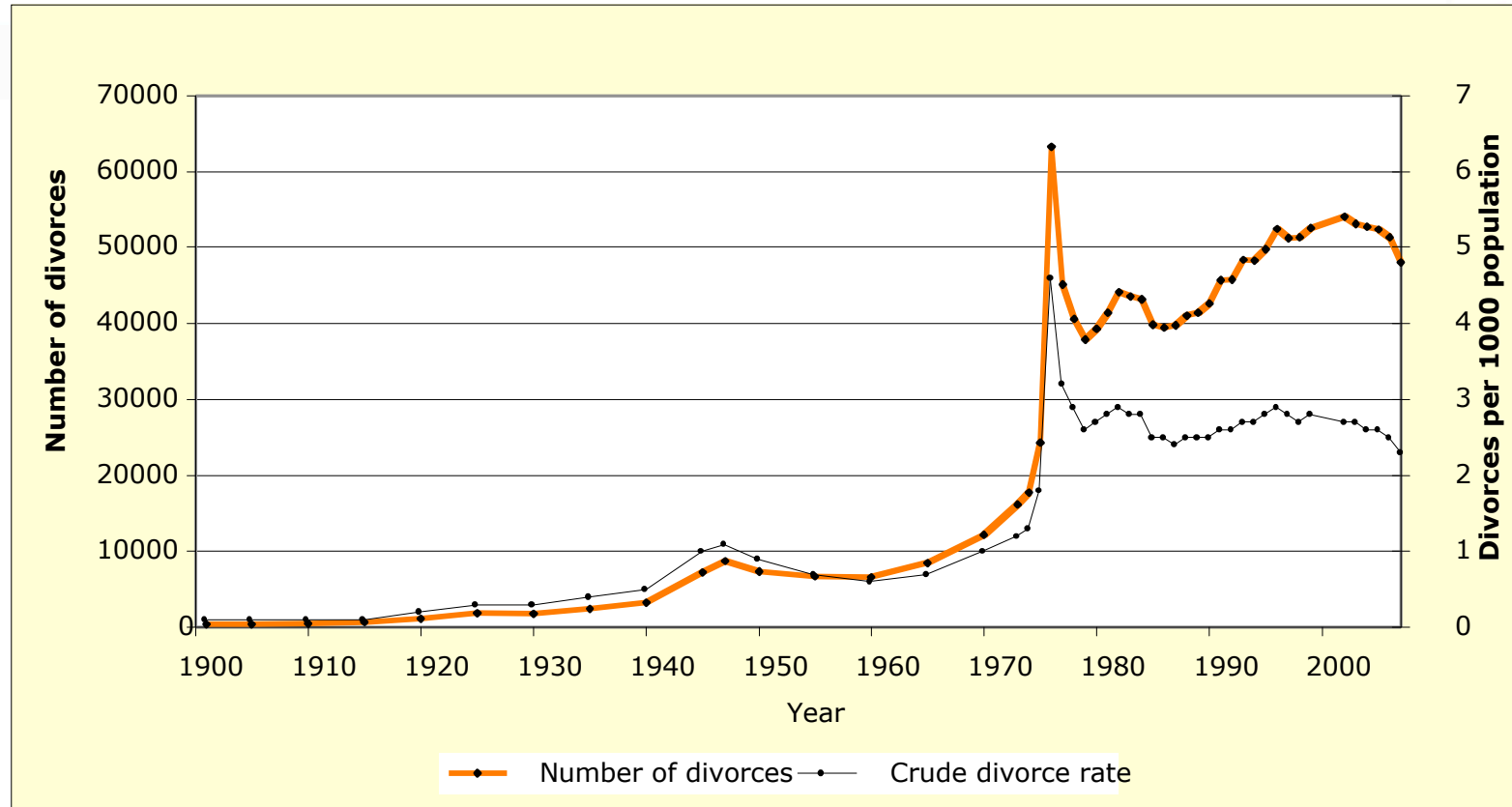
Relationship dynamics in Australia



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Crude divorce rates and number of divorces, 1901-2007

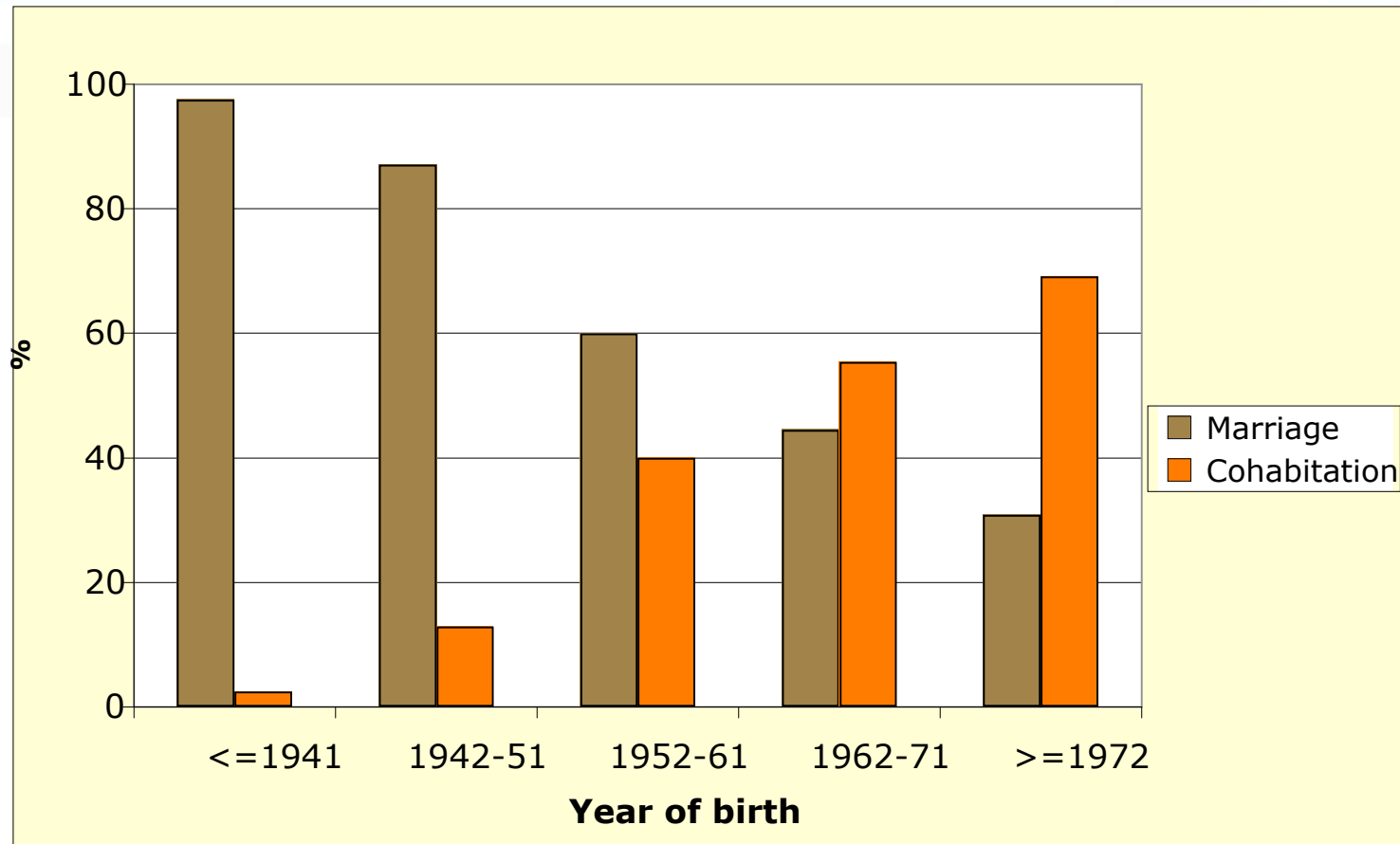


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Sources: ABS (various years), *Marriages and Divorces Australia*, Catalogue No. 3310.0

Women ever partnered: start of first couple relationship by year of birth



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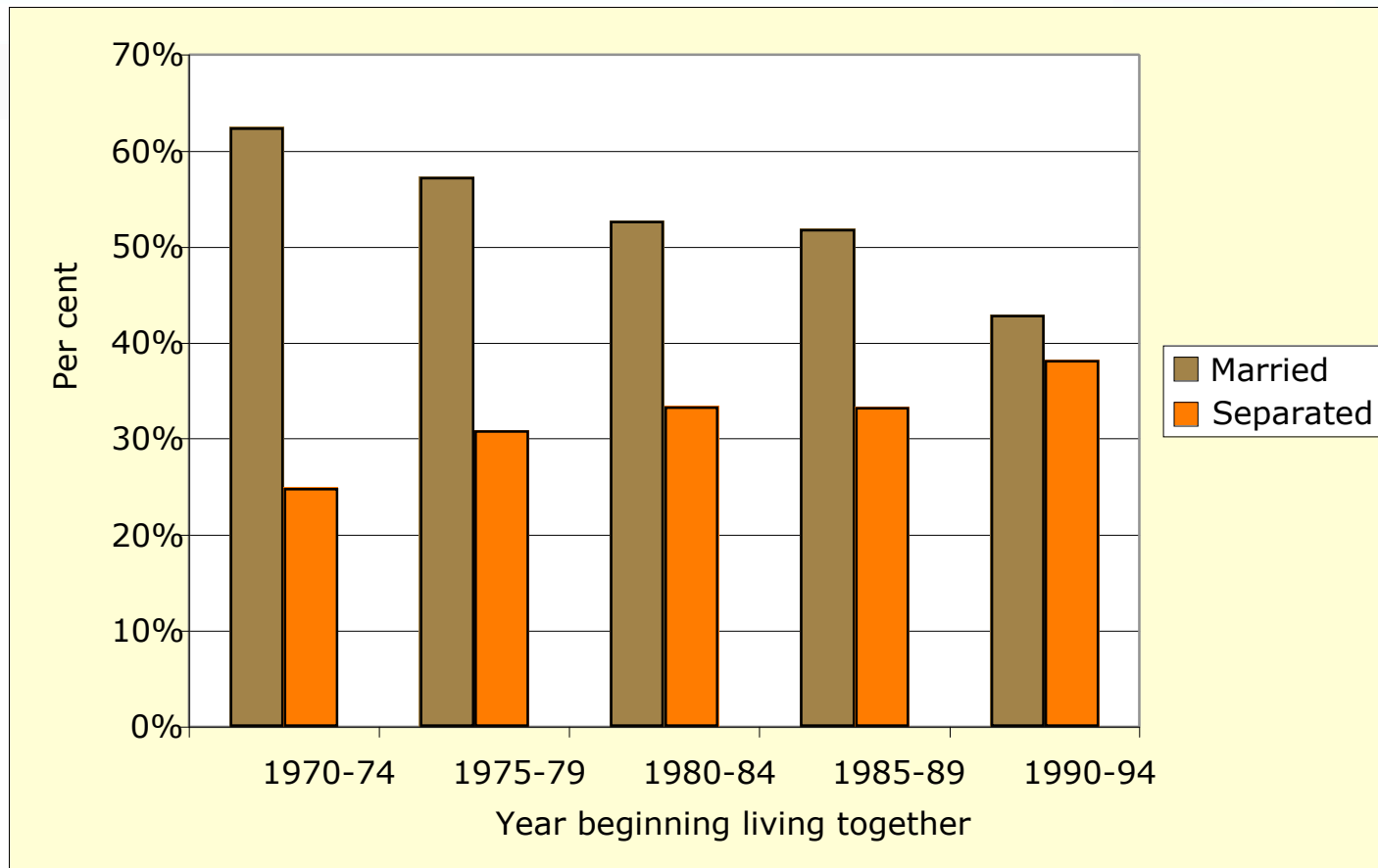
Source: 3 datasets combined: *HILDA*; *Negotiating the Life Course*, (ANU); and the *Australian Life Course Survey* (AIFS)

Long-term cohabitation

Cohabitation began	Still cohabiting by 2001
1970-74	1%
1975-79	1%
1980-84	2%
1985-89	4%
1990-94	9%



Outcomes of cohabitation by 5 years



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Source: 3 datasets combined: *HILDA*; *Negotiating the Life Course*, (ANU); and the *Australian Life Course Survey* (AIFS)

How are families faring?



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Family stability by social marital status of parents

Wave 2 (2006)	Wave 1 (2004)	
	Married families	Cohabiting families
Still together	89.2	74.9
Step families	0.1	0.5
Sole parent	3.2	8.7
Attrition	7.5	15.8
Total	100.0	99.9
N	3578	379

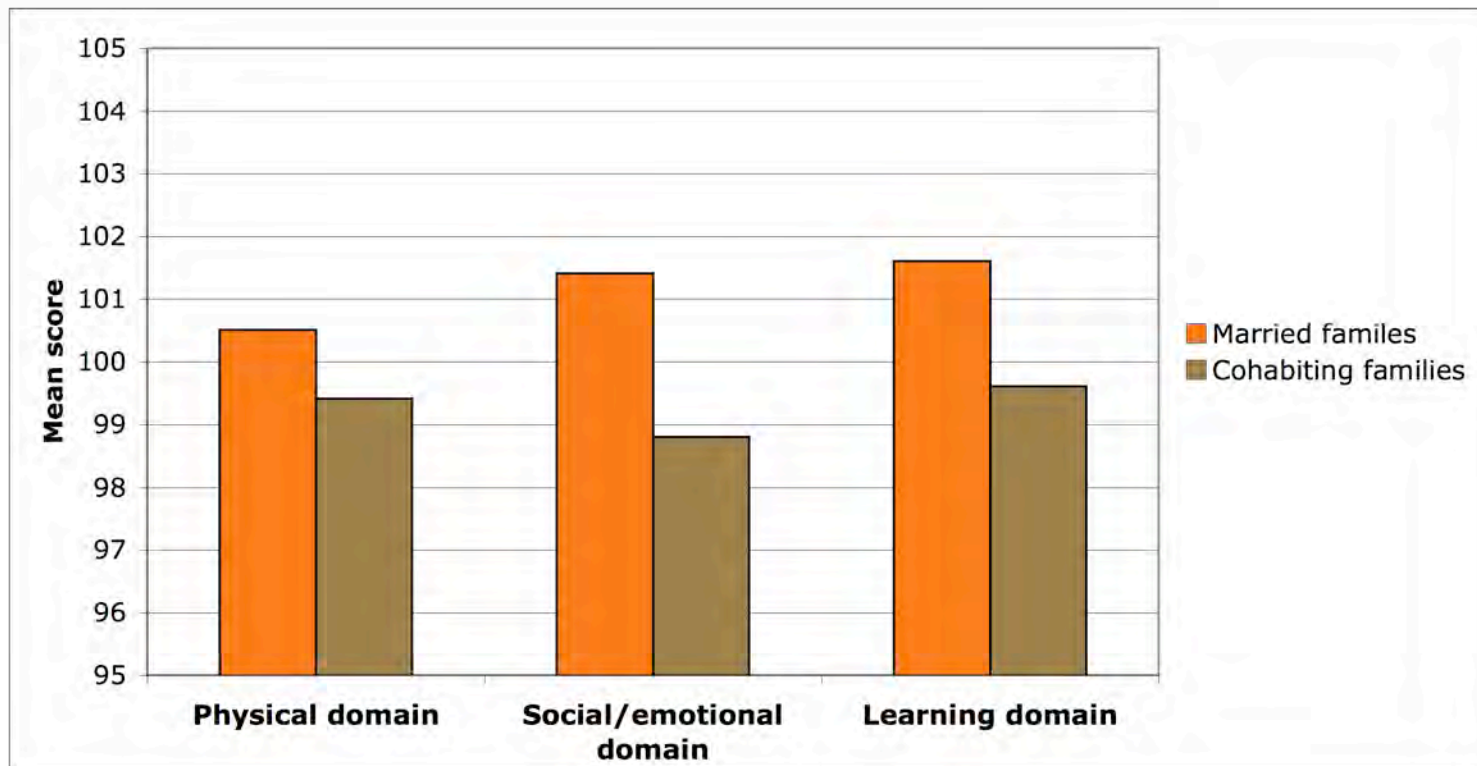


Selected characteristics of children and mothers by social marital status of parents

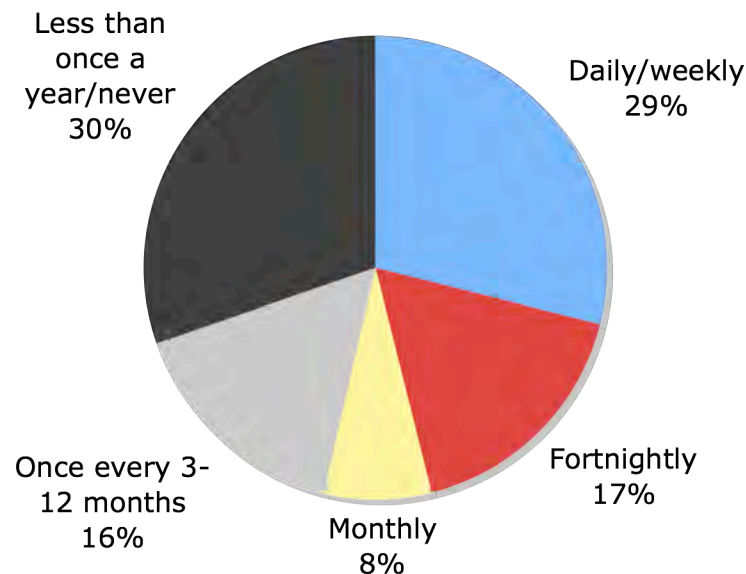
	Married families	Cohabiting families
Children		
Boys	50.5%	51.2%
Age (years) (mean)	4.8	4.8
Born in Australia	95.0%	98.4%
Mothers		
Mother's age (mean)	35.3	33.6
Mothers' education - a degree or high	33.7%	16.1%
Mothers in paid work	61.0%	54.4%
Parental income weekly \$1500	41.9%	22.0%
Experienced any of 7 financial hardships in the last 12 months	22.7%	39.3%



Children's well-being measures by social marital status of parents



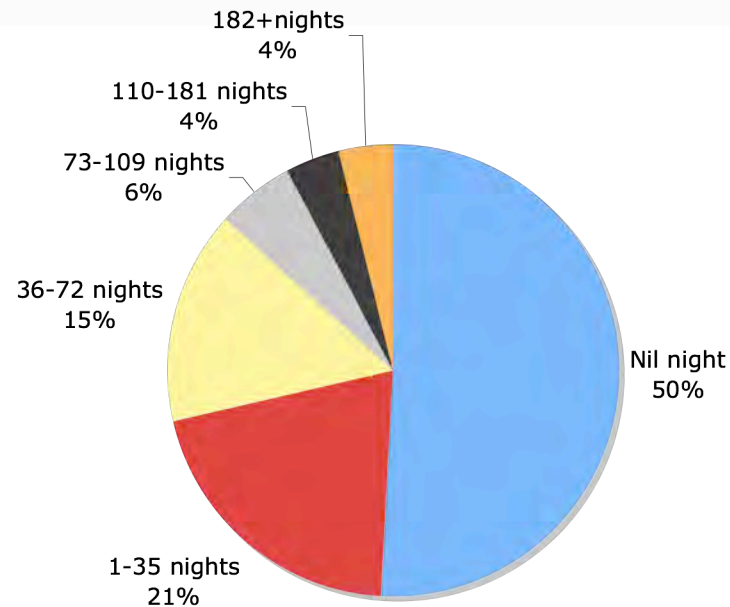
Children aged 0-17 who had a natural parent living elsewhere: Frequency of face-to-face contact (2007)



Note: Reported by resident parents. These results exclude children whose contact arrangements were not known.



Children aged 0-17 who had a natural parent living elsewhere: Number of overnight stays (2007)



Note: Reported by resident parents. These results exclude children whose contact arrangements were not known.



Quality of co-parental relationship and contact frequency

LSAC data: parents' reports about social/emotional wellbeing of children (age 4-5 years):

- **Relatively better off where:**
 - ◆ in intact family with
 - little hostility between parents;
 - ◆ parents are separated and
 - child sees other parent frequently **and little hostility between parents**
- **Relatively worse off (in separated families) where:**
 - ◆ hostility, regardless of how often they see other parent or
 - ◆ never see this parent



How are children now
(as compared to 20 years ago)?



Differences on *toddler behaviour problems*

	ATP	LSAC	P <
Night waking	10%	11%	n.s.
Difficulty falling asleep	8%	2%	.001
Worries a lot	3%	4%	n.s.
Destructive	9%	5%	.001
Hurts other children	5%	2%	.001



Linked sources of family risk and vulnerability



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Toxic environments and child and family outcomes



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Child protection statistics

- **317,526 reports** to statutory child protection services were made nationally (2007-08)
- **Three times** the number of reports 10 years ago (103,302)
- **55,120 substantiated**
- **Neglect and emotional abuse** (including witnessing DV) most commonly substantiated
- **31,166 children in out-of-home care** (30 June 2008)



Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children over-represented in:
 - ◆ child protection (**6 x more likely** to be substantiated)
 - ◆ out of home care (**9 x more likely** to be in care)
- Sexual abuse is a significant, but under-reported, problem
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are **35 times more likely** to be hospitalised due to family violence-related assaults



Impacts of child abuse and neglect in childhood and adolescence

- Attachment and social interaction problems
- Physical health problems
- Learning & developmental problems
- Behavioural problems
- Trauma & psychological problems
- Mental Health problems
- Youth suicide
- Eating disorders
- Drug and alcohol abuse
- Aggression, violence and criminal behaviour
- Teenage pregnancy
- Homelessness
- Death (fatal abuse)



Parental vulnerabilities



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Substance misuse and child protection

- A high proportion of child protection cases feature parental substance misuse¹:
 - ◆ Victoria (2001-02): 46.2%
 - ◆ Western Australia (2003): 57%
 - ◆ New South Wales (2007-08): 20.3%

¹ National data are not routinely collected



Domestic violence and child protection

- A high proportion of child protection cases feature domestic violence¹:
 - ◆ Victoria (2000-01): 40%
 - ◆ Western Australia (2003): 38%
 - ◆ News South Wales (2007-08): 31.1%
- Emotional abuse (which includes witnessing DV) is the most commonly substantiated abuse type (38% of all cases)

¹ National data are not routinely collected



Mental illness and child protection

- A proportion of child protection cases feature parental mental illness¹:
 - ◆ Victoria (2000-01): 15%
 - ◆ New South Wales (2007-08): 14%
 - ◆ Western Australia (2003): 14%

¹ National data are not routinely collected



Parental histories of abuse and neglect

- Many parents involved with child protection themselves have experienced childhood abuse and neglect
- Parents with past histories of abuse were:
 - ◆ 5 times more likely to physical abuse their children
 - ◆ 2.6 times more likely to neglect their children



The hard edge of disadvantage



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Typical characteristics of young offenders

- Chronically disadvantaged ...
- With a history of:
 - ◆ Neglect;
 - ◆ High family conflict;
 - ◆ Low levels of educational attainment;
 - ◆ Family break up;
 - ◆ Participation in substance misuse;
 - ◆ Antisocial behaviour including
 - Physical aggression and violence; and/or
 - Mental illness.



Intergenerational transmission?

New South Wales data show:

- A history of parental imprisonment applied to
 - ◆ around half of those in juvenile detention and
 - ◆ around a third of those under community-based supervision.
- A parent currently incarcerated applied to
 - ◆ 11% of those in detention and
 - ◆ 5% of those under supervision.



In conclusion

- Family dynamics and social address have impacts on risk, vulnerability and children's outcomes

But

- Family form is less important than family functioning
- Risk is not destiny
- Protection is no guarantee
- Eliminating risk/vulnerability does not necessarily lead to protection
- Predicting resilience outcomes is a risky business!



In conclusion (continued)

- Fragility of relationships has impacts that can be lifelong and cross generations
- The impacts on children of relationship toxicity, turbulence and instability are clear
- Relational dimensions need further prominence in considerations of social inclusion and exclusion
- Family and relationship services and supports need to be set in an inclusive, lifespan developmental policy and practice frame.

