

Australian Institute



of Family Studies

Research Plan 2002–2005

The Australian Institute of Family Studies is the key centre for family research in Australia. In planning its research program, the Institute seeks to make a positive contribution to policy development and debate on issues of critical and far-reaching concern for families in Australia.

The research plan, published here, outlines how the Institute will structure and develop its research activities over the forthcoming triennium. In doing so, the plan builds on the initiatives taken as a result of the 1999–2001 Research Plan, particularly in terms of the core structure of the Institute's research activities and interests.

The plan was shaped and refined as a result of consultation during 2001 and early 2002. In the Spring/Summer 2001 edition of *Family Matters*, the Institute outlined its future research directions, and invited comment. The responses received as a result of this and the Institute's extensive consultation with its stakeholders – including public servants, academics, collaborative partners, and other

research agencies – shaped the content of the plan and helped identify the key questions that the Institute's research should be addressing over the next three years. A draft was submitted to the Institute's Board of Management in May 2002, and was subsequently approved.

The Institute is always interested to receive further comment on its planned activities and to receive suggestions for further areas of research on emerging issues of concern to the family.

The plan provides a general framework for envisaged research activities over the next three years, while building in the flexibility required to allow the Institute to remain responsive to changing policy and scientific environments. This will allow the Institute to identify new opportunities for pursuing its strategic directions and fulfilling its vision and objectives.

Future Institute research will continue to take into account both the processes that occur within the family and the interaction of the family with the broader social, economic, political and cultural environment.

Statutory duties of the Institute

The Australian Institute of Family Studies is a statutory authority established in 1980 under the Family Law Act (1975) which defines the functions of the Institute as:

(a) to promote, by the conduct, encouragement and coordination of research and other appropriate means, the identification of, and development of understanding of, the factors affecting marital and family stability in Australia, with the object of promoting the protection of the family as the natural and fundamental group unit in society; and

(b) to advise and assist the Minister in relation to the making of grants, and with the approval of the Minister to make grants, out of moneys available under appropriations made by the Parliament, for purposes related to the functions of the Institute and the supervising of the employment of grants so made.

The Institute's research plan is framed around the fulfillment of these statutory obligations.

Principles underlying the Institute's research activities

Three sets of principles will underlie how research at the Institute is conducted, how research projects will be developed, and the selection of new research topics.

The research conducted will:

- be founded on an understanding of the latest theoretical and methodological advances in the area;
- produce outcomes which will inform family policies and other policies likely to impact directly on family wellbeing; and
- provide opportunities for Institute leadership in family research as well as collaboration with government departments, other leading research organisations, and individual researchers.

The process of development of a new research project will:

- involve discussion with a comprehensive range of stakeholders across policy, service-delivery and research communities; and
- be considered in the context of resource availability, and other research activities and developments in the Institute.

Selected topics for research will:

- be consistent with the Institute's charter and overall strategic plan;
- be of critical and far-reaching concern for families in Australia today and in the foreseeable future;
- be current or emerging policy issues, and amenable to change through policy initiatives; and
- together aim for coherence and an overall balance across the areas of family functioning of concern to the Institute.

The Institute will undertake *quality assurance* through seeking external review of project proposals by those with expertise in the relevant domains from both a policy and a research perspective.

Categories of Institute research

It is anticipated that the Institute's research on different aspects of family functioning will continue to be accomplished in one of four different ways.

Core research is funded by Parliamentary appropriation and planned and undertaken by Institute staff. Proposals for core projects will be developed through a process of extensive consultation with key stakeholders. As part of the annual budgetary process, proposals for new and continuing projects will be developed by each research stream and evaluated in terms of their "fit" with the research plan and with the staffing and financial capacity of the Institute.

Contracted research is funded by government departments or other organisations, and undertaken by the Institute working alone or in partnership with other agencies. The established Institute practice of augmenting its core research with contract work will continue into the future. Contract research should fit closely with overall strategic and research objectives. It is acknowledged that at times opportunities for contract research present themselves that justify a delay in other (core) research. But in general, such work will only be undertaken if it can be fitted into existing plans and timeframes.

Collaborative research may include collaborative ventures with the Department of Family and Community Services, other Commonwealth and State Government departments and agencies, and Australian universities or other leading research organisations. Such collaborative ventures can include projects initiated by the Institute with the support of external funding.

Commissioned research is work undertaken for the Institute by other research organisations.

Characteristics of Institute research

Institute studies will remain diverse in nature, exploiting the complementary strengths of smaller scale in-depth studies, large scale surveys, and secondary data sources, and adopting short- and long-term perspectives.

Longitudinal and cross-sectional studies

There will be a continuing need for longitudinal data to enable the Institute to monitor social trends over time, to identify emerging problems and policy issues, and to track family trajectories, pathways, stability and change. Cross-sectional (once-off) projects will also continue to be needed, to address issues of immediate relevance, and to enable the Institute to respond quickly when a swift answer to a specific policy question is needed.

Policy relevant research

Policy relevance will remain a key criterion for Institute research, and research driven solely by intellectual curiosity ("pure" research) will continue to be regarded as outside its brief. However, not all research will necessarily inform current policy in an immediate and obvious way, since the attempt will also be made to anticipate future policy issues, and to address questions which cut across single policy areas.





Theoretical grounding

While the Institute will not conduct purely theoretical research, a solid theoretical grounding to research is critical for advancing knowledge and providing the evidence base for policy. All core research projects will be theoretically informed and conceptually rigorous, underpinned by clear hypotheses and/or by an explicit theoretical rationale.

Primary and secondary data

The Institute has an important role in both analysing existing data sets and collecting new (primary) data. Selection of the appropriate type of data for a particular study will be informed by the research questions involved, the availability of existing data sets to address those questions, and pragmatic considerations such as cost and time.

Quantitative and qualitative methods

While quantitative methods are likely to remain best suited to most Institute research endeavours, the Institute will continue to employ both qualitative and quantitative methodologies as appropriate.

Interdisciplinary approach

The complexity of family research issues increasingly requires the contribution of a range of disciplinary perspectives and competencies. Many of these are represented among the Institute researchers, and we can expect that collaboration and cross-fertilisation across program areas will be a strong feature of future research. In addition,

the Institute will continue actively to pursue collaborative research opportunities with other researchers outside the Institute where there is complementarity in research strengths.

Liaison with other research organisations

The Institute will not only seek and welcome collaborations with other research organisations, but will attempt to complement the research carried out in those organisations, exploiting the Institute's own unique skills and expertise. Overlap or duplication of work being undertaken elsewhere will be avoided through frequent communication and close coordination. Seeking input on this document is part of this process of communication.

Three broad research themes

This research plan seeks to address three broad and overlapping thematic areas where research will need to inform policy and practice. These areas are diversity, change, and the interactions of the family with broader social institutions.

Diversity

Diversity is a dominant characteristic of Australian families in the 21st century. It represents both a key strength of our society, and a challenge to policy. Important research questions revolve around diversity of family forms, of socio-economic and geographic variability, and of cultural background.

Family forms

Given the changes in family structure over recent decades, family research cannot focus solely on the traditional “nuclear” family. The functioning and needs of lone parents and their children, and of “blended” families, stepfamilies, and “second families” formed through separation, divorce and repartnering, will need continuing investigation. Further, families in some cultural groups (for example, Indigenous families) can be extended and intergenerational. At the same time, a number of “new” family types are emerging, such as same-sex couples with children, and families formed through reproductive technologies. The ways in which these families can support the needs of their members, particularly children, and the optimal ways in which communities and governments can assist them in this task, will continue to be important research foci.

Socio-economic and geographic variability

Australia’s population distribution – with large, relatively dense cities, as well as extensive rural and remote areas with low population density – pose particular challenges for policies aimed at supporting *all* families. There are also significant variations in the economic and employment status of families. The Institute should ensure it gathers research data on the wellbeing of families across this wide spectrum of societal situations. A key question for the Institute is how strong communities characterised by both diversity and cohesiveness come to be formed and sustained.

Cultural diversity

Increasing cultural diversity among Australian families suggests that the evidence base for ensuring that their needs during and after settlement are met will need to expand. Growing awareness of the particular problems facing Indigenous families also suggests a critical need for research in these areas.

Change

The nature of family changes and transitions such as relationship formation, the birth of first and later children, family separation, family re-formation, and children leaving home has potential short- and long-term impact on the lives of family members, and those affecting children are of particular concern. There is increasing recognition of the critical importance of the early years of a child’s life for their later development, indicating that research which can inform the development of optimal supports and services for families with young children is of key importance.

The declining birth rate, older parents, and increasing numbers of couples with no children, are major social phenomena whose consequences for children, for parents, for family life and for society need unpacking. Further, our understanding of why women end up having fewer children than they earlier intended is incomplete. In the context of an ageing population, this issue has enormous policy implications.

From a societal perspective, two of the many changes confronting us are the rapid expansion in information technology which is increasingly pervading family life, and the developments in medical technologies, specifically those relating to reproduction.

New information technologies can change the way that families interact with one another and with the world. They have positive potential for both education and service delivery for parents, but may also have deleterious consequences for family functioning. Monitoring and understanding how families adopt and adapt to these technologies will be an important issue for the future.

Assisted reproduction technologies are being used for an increasing number of births, creating new possibilities such as delayed child-bearing and more diverse family forms. It will be important for research to examine the longer-term impacts of such technologies for family functioning, couple relationships and children's wellbeing, as well as for fertility trends.

More broadly, families continue to need to engage with changes in the economy, the community and the policy environment. The nature and impact of changes at all these levels will continue to be a critical focus for family research.

Family interactions with broader social institutions

Families exist within communities and societies. How families interact, through formal and informal mechanisms, with these broader social groups has significant bearing on the functioning of individual family members as well as the family as a whole. Understanding the factors involved in such interactions has become an increasingly important focus for research and policy development.

The interaction of families with their work environments is one obvious focus here. As patterns of work change, impacts on the family need to be monitored and understood. As it becomes the norm for parents to combine parenting and paid work, there need to be structures and supports within the workplace and broader community to allow parents to manage their multiple roles, and to optimise the quality of family life and children's development. Research on arrangements such as family-friendly work practices and the best ways to provide flexible high quality child care, will remain high on the research agenda. At the same time, it is recognised that parents should have the choice of staying at home with their young children, and the efficacy of measures that are aimed at enabling parents to make this choice will need to be examined.

Families' interaction with the legal system is another clear focus for the Institute. The Institute has a history of contributing to informed debate on family law issues. Evaluations of the effectiveness of current practice and future initiatives will continue to be needed to inform policy.

There is also increasing interest in the capacity of communities to enhance the wellbeing and resilience of their members. Understanding of the necessary characteristics of such communities and the processes by which they support families is still sketchy. For example, we know little about the nature of families' involvement in both government and non-government provided services, across different communities. Understanding how family functioning is affected by factors included within the broad rubric of social capital, including social cohesion, social networks, social inclusion and social exclusion, can be enhanced both through theoretically driven research and through evaluation of interventions.

Core Research

Core Institute research is organised into three streams:

- Children and Parenting Program
- Family and Marriage Program
- Family and Society Program

As noted above, it is anticipated that many of the Institute's research projects will benefit from cross-fertilisation across program areas, and that at times the same issue will be examined from different perspectives by more than one program area.

Another continuing core responsibility of the Institute is to monitor and disseminate information on trends across all aspects of family functioning and wellbeing.

Children and Parenting Program

Core concerns

Families play the crucial role in the development and socialisation of children. Above all else, family experiences shape the next generation of Australians. They do not do this alone, of course, for child care, schools, the local neighbourhood, and the mass media also influence the ways young people think and behave. However, the family is still the primary agency in rearing children.

The early environments and experiences of a child have long-term impacts on their development, and evidence is accumulating of the value of early interventions to prevent the development of later problems. In a rapidly changing society, it is important to understand the challenges that face parents in their task of nurturing and educating their children, and how supports offered through services and programs can best support them in doing so. There are also a myriad of determinants of relationships between children and parents, and important differences between children will affect the type of parenting that best supports individual child needs, and how parenting ultimately affects the course of their development.

Ongoing research

Multiple and changeable child care

This new longitudinal study examines child care contexts that may pose risks for child development. Managed by a consortium comprising the Institute, Macquarie and Charles Sturt Universities, and the New South Wales Office of Childcare, and funded through the ARC Linkage Grant scheme, the study is examining the effects of multiple and changeable care arrangements on children's development up to school age.

Child care in cultural context

This ongoing study focuses on how child care services affect the development of children from diverse cultural backgrounds. Home and child care are two primary settings for child development, and continuities and discontinuities across these environments affect the potential of each setting to support child development. Little is known about the impact on children and families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds of child care that reflects the culture and values of the home, and child care that reflects the dominant Australian



cultural values and practices. Understanding parent preferences and children's responses to these types of care is likely to have implications for both the provision of child care and the wellbeing of the children concerned.

Australian Temperament Project

Effective policy development for children and families operates within an evidence-based framework. To obtain an accurate picture of the changes in child behaviour and adjustment, and to be able to draw valid conclusions about antecedent-consequent relationships, longitudinal research designs are required. The Australian Temperament Project is a large longitudinal study of children's development that began in 1983 with the enrolment of a representative sample of over 2000 infants and their families from rural and urban Victoria. The study investigates pathways to psychosocial adjustment across childhood and adolescence, and the influence of personal, familial and environmental factors. Since early in 2000, the Institute has housed this ongoing research project, and is in collaboration with researchers from the University of Melbourne and the Royal Children's Hospital in developing it. Currently the project is focusing on a broad range of outcomes among young adult participants, including a collaboration with Crime Prevention Victoria to study pathways to antisocial and criminal behaviour.

New research

Development in diverse families

This new Institute study should enhance understanding about how the structural properties of families (such as the number of parents present in a household, parents' marital status, and parents' sexual orientation) and the nature and quality of relationships within the family system influence children's adjustment. A large sample of families with primary school aged children will take part in the study to allow assessment of the quality of relationships within the family, parenting practices, family functioning, and quality of parent and child adjustment. Information about family history and many factors outside of the home (such as support systems and work-related variables) will also be collected. Families with both biological parents present, as well as other family types (such as stepfamilies, single-parent families, and families headed by gay and lesbian parents) will be included in the study.

Future areas for research

Child care

Among the societal trends and issues that fall within the scope of research in the Children and Parenting Program, child care issues continue to be prominent, including the trend toward use of child care for very young children. Critical questions for research concern the capacity of child care services to provide accessible, affordable and quality services for infants. There is also the question of whether child care can take on an early intervention role, by investing in the learning and development of disadvantaged children and providing support to their parents, thereby reducing inequalities in developmental and social outcomes.

Child wellbeing and family stress

Poor children fare worse than children who are not poor on a range of health and wellbeing indicators, and the ill effects of poverty can be carried right across the life course. This highlights a need to research and evaluate the impact of family and community poverty on children's outcomes. More information is also needed on the impact on parents and children of other sorts of stress, such as the pace of technological change and work stress, and how institutions and community-based support structures can provide a protective buffer to families in these contexts.

Parenting

The implications for parenting of current demographic trends requires ongoing study, to expand understanding of the range of care and child rearing responsibilities in different family types, and how they are fulfilled. Besides the family types under focus in the Institute's Development in Diverse Families project, more knowledge is required on the issues facing families with adoptive or foster children, and families where fathers are the primary carers. Parents in the "sandwich generation" may need to juggle caring for elderly parents with care for their own children and grandchildren, and grandparents may increasingly be involved in providing care for children. How such changes in family responsibilities meet the needs of both the adults and the children involved requires research.

Given the many socio-demographic changes which have impacted on the parenting role, a large number of programs have been developed over the last decades to promote parental competence. At present, there is little coherent information about the range of programs or their relative effectiveness. Hence, there is a need for a national stocktake of parenting education programs and comprehensive evaluation of their capacity to enable parents to fulfil their roles more successfully.

There are also large gaps in our understanding of how technological advances, such as new forms of communication including the internet, and assisted reproductive technologies, including donor insemination and in vitro fertilisation, are changing family patterns of interaction and functioning, and children's developmental outcomes.

Family and Marriage Program

Core concerns

In order to perform their various functions, families need to work out ways of living together, and adjusting to stress and change. Research in the Family and Marriage Program looks at how this is achieved. It focuses on family stability, family transitions, and family law. Transitions include patterns of leaving home, and couple and family formation, dissolution and re-formation. Particular attention is given to factors that help explain diverse pathways, the way these pathways are negotiated, and their impact on family members. Central to this work is the evaluation of the impact on families of the Family Law Act as it is amended from time to time. Trends are examined at societal, family, and individual levels.

Research which aims to strengthen and support marriage as an institution will always be central to the Institute's work. A key task of the Family and Marriage Program is to examine factors contributing to the quality and stability of marriage and marriage-like relationships. The program examines relationships from various perspectives: strengthening relationships in their early stages, factors that contribute to the trajectories of relationship quality and stability, and lessons from long-lasting marriages.

Ongoing research

Family trends and transitions: The macro-level perspective

The Family and Marriage Program continues to analyse broad trends in patterns of leaving home, couple and family formation, family stability, and family dissolution and re-formation, along with associated values, attitudes and beliefs. Demand for such information is ongoing, given that such trends are often used as a barometer to assess the direction of society regarding standards of conduct and underlying values. Informed monitoring of such trends and analysis of their implications are important for proactive policy development. Current analyses are focusing on trends in establishing independence and partnerships, fertility, and relationship breakdown and re-formation.

New research

Fertility decision making

Like other developed countries, Australia is experiencing falling fertility rates in the context of increasing life expectancy, and thus an ageing of the population both in absolute and relative terms. Although outcomes of these trends remain controversial, they appear to involve a number of economic and social challenges.

There is much speculation about the relative importance of factors contributing to the fall in fertility since access to effective contraception became readily available. Considerable attention has been given to life course trends in society, financial and non-financial costs of having children, and beliefs, attitudes or values that may discourage childbearing.

The Fertility Decision Making Project is being undertaken in collaboration with the Office of the Status of Women to examine the nature and relative importance of factors contributing to decisions about having children, and to assess ways in which such factors interact to help shape fertility trajectories. This project will also provide insight into policy-relevant issues surrounding the development of couple relationships, each partner's understanding of the meaning, quality and stability of the couple relationship, perceptions of work–family balance, and family-related attitudes and values.

Caring for children after separation

As part of the broad policy shift towards encouraging post-separation co-parenting, there is a need to ascertain the nature, amount and quality of contact that non-resident parents have with their children. Little is known about some of the most rudimentary components of parent–child contact, such as the distinction between “day only” contact versus “sleepovers”, and “holiday” versus “term-time” arrangements. Failure to make these distinctions can underestimate both the amount and quality of contact that is occurring.

The main aims of this new project under development will be: (a) to map the nature, amount, and quality of parent–child contact between non-resident parents and their children; and (b) to improve understanding of why a significant proportion of non-resident parents lose or do not maintain contact with their children. A set of second-order aims are: (c) to explore contact decision-making processes; (d) to identify the factors, issues, or trigger events that promote or impede contact; (e) to examine the inter-relation, if any, between contact and child support; and (f) to consider the economic implications of contact for both parents.

While the focus of the project is on mapping the detail of post-separation parenting patterns, the data will also serve as a benchmark on which to begin modelling the economic implications of contact for parents (both non-resident and resident). They will also act as an important source of information for a more comprehensive investigation into the impact of divorce on children and parents.

Future areas for research

Couple and family formation

A comprehensive understanding of relationship formation and fertility patterns requires longitudinal data. An extension of the Fertility Decision Making Project into a longitudinal study would enable assessment of stability or change in decision-making, and help distinguish between outcomes and their causes by revealing their temporal order. It may be valuable to assess “birth cohort effects” by comparing the fertility plans and considerations underlying these plans for samples born in different periods – for example, the 1980s and 1990s.

Given that cohabitation (de facto relationship) is an increasingly common choice of couples, it is important to understand the dynamics of decision making concerning marriage and cohabitation. Not much is known about how partners understand their cohabiting relationships (going steady?, a prelude to marriage?, a replacement for marriage?, no strings attached?), and how these interpretations change over time. Research needs to elucidate what leads some committed couples to marriage while others never consider it as an option, what factors differentiate cohabiting couples who stay together from those who separate, and whether these factors differ from those for married couples.

Remarriage rates, like first marriage rates, have declined over recent years. We need to know more about the extent to which this trend is due to a tendency for divorced people to cohabit, and about the stability of such relationships. Marriages following divorce are more likely to end in divorce than first marriages and remarriages following widowhood. Clearly there is a need to know more about the characteristics of post-divorce relationships and the factors or dynamics that contribute to their quality and duration.

Relationship stability and wellbeing

A further important area for future research would address the trajectories of marital and relationship quality over the course of a relationship. This would require a longitudinal study (such as an extension of the Fertility Decision-Making Project). Such a study would enable assessment of patterns of change in relationship satisfaction and factors that might moderate these patterns, including couple dynamics, the impact of families-of-origin, personal coping strategies, and psychological make-up.

Given that young people are staying in the education system longer, are less likely to find permanent employment, and hence stay in the family home longer, parents are having to adjust to the prolonged dependency of their children. We need to know more about the ways in which families are coping with these changes, as well as the impact of prolonged dependency on the young adults themselves – for example, their long-term aspirations and intentions, relationship formation and self-concept.

Relationship dissolution and re-formation

The Family Law Reform Act 1995, among other things, replaced the language of “guardianship”, “custody” and “access” with the less proprietorial “residence” and “contact”. The reforms emphasise that “parental responsibility” is ongoing despite changes in the parental relationship. Research on current attitudes to parental responsibility would inform many areas of family and child policy.

In Australia as elsewhere, it is not unusual for parents to repartner after divorce, and hence to acquire responsibilities for additional children. Such family situations pose a significant challenge to child support policy. Some have argued that these responsibilities can impose an excessive burden on non-resident parents in second families. Despite widespread interest in this issue, scant empirical data have been collected to unpack the complexities surrounding such multiple financial responsibilities.

Family-related legal processes

The Family Law Pathways Advisory Group recently released its report *Out of the Maze: Pathways to the Future for Families Experiencing Separation*. The report recommends various strategies to facilitate smoother pathways through the legal system to minimise conflict, and to help families to cope with changes in their lives and to meet new responsibilities and commitments. Research that enhances understanding of why disputes arise about post-separation parenting, and how people go about attempting to resolve them, will clearly be important areas of ongoing research. There will also be a continuing need to evaluate the effectiveness of family law reforms.

Family and Society Program

Core concerns

There is a recognition in the Family Law Act that the family is a “fundamental unit in society”. This means that the Institute must not only look inside families, to understand what makes them function, but must also look at the relation between the family and other social institutions. Changes in society have a direct impact on family life, just as changes in family life can have implications for other aspects of social organisation. To understand the contemporary family in Australia, we have to understand the changing relations between it and three sets of social institutions. Change in any one of these three areas will have impacts upon the way in which families operate.

Families contribute to, and are in turn affected by: the economy and market; the welfare system and interaction with government; and social life and the community.

The Family and Society Program, therefore, focuses broadly on the relation between family change and economic and social change.

Ongoing research

Families, social capital and citizenship

The Families, Social Capital and Citizenship project aims to examine levels of social capital associated with varying family circumstances and to assess the importance of social capital in shaping patterns of family engagement with the economy, polity and community. An overarching research question is to establish the importance of social capital to economic, political and community engagement. A conceptual and methodological framework for measuring social capital has been developed and a national survey of 1500 families undertaken. Key measures of social capital have been developed and tested using these survey data, which will be used to profile social capital in Australia, and then explore how social capital facilitates labour market activity, promotes civic and political life, and is distributed spatially.

Family and work decisions

The Family and Work Decisions project is a study of how families with dependent children decide whether or not to participate in the paid labour market. The project will focus on people's knowledge and understanding of the income support system and the way in which it interacts with paid employment, and decisions about labour force participation, living arrangements, and family formation. The study will include partnered and lone mothers, with a particular focus on lone mothers, a group of great policy interest but about whom there are few large-scale survey data available. An important component of the study will be the importance of family-friendly work practices in decisions regarding labour force participation.

Impact of children on family labour supply

The Impact of Children on Family Labour Supply project will develop and empirically estimate models of family labour supply which combine information on financial incentives with information on non-financial determinants of the decision to participate in the labour market. Particular attention is paid to the impact of career breaks on the subsequent labour market outcomes of mothers. Labour market outcomes examined include the likelihood of being employed, hours worked if employed and hourly wage rates. Other outcomes such as job satisfaction are also considered. Empirical modelling of this type will allow new insights into many specific policy questions.

New research

Measuring social capital in Families First communities

The Institute has recently been contracted to expand on its social capital research by using a modified version of the social capital survey to benchmark the nature and distribution of social capital in three inner-west Sydney communities, and to explore how early interventions being conducted there as part of the “Families First” program (Department of Community Services, New South Wales) contribute to social capital. The project involves a series of community surveys and qualitative data collection. This community-based approach to measuring social capital provides an opportunity to link the ongoing work of the Families, Social Capital and Citizenship project with grounded service provision, and directly inform policy and service providers about the facilitation of social capital and community capacity.

Future areas for research

Ageing and inter-generational exchanges within families

The ageing of the Australian population has important implications for the provision of care for people in society, including: (a) the role of grandparents in providing child care; (b) the needs of and support for the growing elderly population; (c) financial and “in kind” support and transfers across generations; and (d) implications for the so called “sandwich generation” – that is, women, typically in their sixties, who have multiple caring responsibilities such as taking care of ageing parents, their spouse and own children, as well as grandchildren.

Research into family exchanges focuses on the giving and receiving of emotional, social, material and financial support. It considers the internal processes of family interaction, such as family cohesion and solidarity and how these impact on the interface between families and society – for example, in the spheres of welfare, health and child care services, and interaction with the labour force. This research area covers both sides of the private–public or citizen–state debate, as it considers present and future needs for formal services in the light of levels of informal (family) support available.

Social, material and geographic inequality

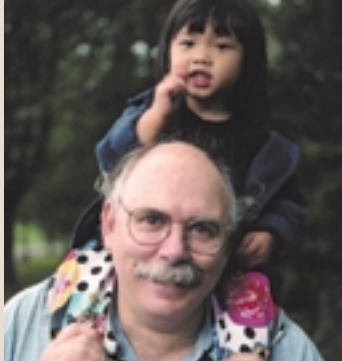
As well as focusing on the average Australian family, it is also critical to understand the specific circumstances and dynamics that lead to some Australian families experiencing short-term or prolonged spells of poverty or disadvantage.

Traditionally in Australia, studies of poverty have focused upon income inequalities or living standards. The recent focus upon social capital and community has highlighted the importance of social connections as a means of mediating poverty or preventing an intensification of marginalisation. A holistic view of poverty and inequality must take account of both economic and social poverty or disadvantage and how they are linked, including a focus on spatial clustering of inequalities. Such research would inform policy and service providers about the best means and transition points in which to intervene in family life.

Work and family

Another continuing focus for future research is the interaction of work and family life. For example, research could examine the “business case” for providing a work environment in which employees are able to better balance work and family. Key topics might include the effect of work-family balance in reducing worker turnover, and spill-overs between satisfaction with family life and productivity at work. The potential roles of government and business in facilitating a better balance, for example through maternity leave provisions, will also need research attention.

Contract Research



The Institute's core research program is supplemented by contract research projects. Currently, the Institute is contracted to undertake a number of major, long-term research projects. These are: the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children; the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia Survey; the National Child Protection Clearinghouse; and the Stronger Families Learning Exchange. These projects are all compatible with the vision and objectives of the Institute and are a valuable addition to its core research.

Longitudinal Study of Australian Children

The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) is funded by the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services as part of the Government's Stronger Families and Communities Strategy. The Institute, as the lead agency in a consortium of nine organisations, was awarded the contract to design and implement LSAC, which is expected to run until at least 2010. The study will follow two representative cohorts of Australian children (5000 infants and 5000 four-year-olds) over seven years. It will add to the understanding of early childhood development, inform social policy debate, and be used to identify opportunities for early intervention and prevention strategies in policy areas concerning children.

Using a collaborative and multi-disciplinary approach, LSAC will address a range of research questions about children's development and wellbeing in the domains of education, health, family functioning, and child care, as well as including core measures concerning the child and family. Data from the study will be accessible to a wide range of researchers. The longitudinal nature of the study will enable researchers to determine critical periods for the provision of services and welfare support, and to identify the long-term consequences of policy innovations.

Day-to-day management of the study will be undertaken by a Project Operations Team comprising the Project Director, Design Manager and Survey Manager based at the Institute. A Consortium Advisory Group includes representatives from each consortium member (namely, the Australian Council for Educational Research, the TVW Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, Queensland University of Technology, Macquarie University, Charles Sturt University, Murdoch Children's Research Institute, the Australian National University's National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health and Centre for Mental Health Research, and the Social Policy Research Centre at the University of New South Wales) as well as some consultants.

The consortium brings together significant research and management expertise, and includes researchers from a wide range of disciplines, including child development, sociology, epidemiology, public health, family studies, psychology, paediatrics and child health, early childhood education, social policy research, and economics. This breadth of expertise ensures comprehensive coverage of influences on children's development.

Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia

The Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey, funded by the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services, is being conducted by a consortium including the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research at the University of Melbourne (the lead agency), the Institute, and the Australian Council for Educational Research. HILDA is being carried out in close collaboration with the Department and other key stakeholders from a range of disciplines, thereby ensuring the survey's policy-relevance and multi-disciplinary perspective. The Institute is represented in the Project Management Group and is responsible for the family dynamics module in each wave, while also sharing in the responsibility for the overall coordination of the survey design.

HILDA is a national household panel survey in which the sampling unit is the household, and all members of households selected in Wave 1 are being followed up over time, with children interviewed when they turn 15 years old. The sample is extended in subsequent waves to include new members of households containing an original sample member (for example, new children or a new partner living with an original sample member).

The survey is currently funded for four years and involves three waves. Wave 1 was conducted in the second half of 2001, with nearly 14,000 people from 7680 households providing the data. Subsequent waves will be conducted in the second half of 2002 and 2003. Wave 1 derived information on a wide range of issues, including: household structure, family background, marital history, family formation, education, employment history, current employment, job search, income, health and wellbeing, child care, and housing. Wave 2 also includes a "wealth" module.

National Child Protection Clearinghouse

The National Child Protection Clearinghouse (NCPC) is an informational, advisory and research unit focused on child abuse prevention, child protection and associated family violence. The Clearinghouse has been operating at the Institute since 1995, and is funded by the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services. It is currently funded until July 2003, with an expectation of continued funding beyond this date.

Overall, the Clearinghouse prioritises the development of research that has a primary and/or secondary prevention focus, impacts on the provision of child protection and family support services, and covers issues of national importance, and thus has implications for Commonwealth, State and Territory government departments and other service providers.

In addition, one research activity undertaken each year focuses on an area of particular interest to the Department of Family and Community Services. Broad research priorities are informed by discussions with the Australian Council for Children and Parenting.

Key research priorities for the Clearinghouse for the next three years will include:

- investigating issues affecting "at risk" client families' access to support services – an extension of a current exploratory research project;
- monitoring the nature and trends in child abuse prevention activity across the nation – review and/or extension of the National Audit of Prevention Programs conducted in 2000;
- investigation of aspects of the operation of child protection and family support systems; and
- identification of best practice in prevention programs and program evaluation, child abuse prevention approaches for Indigenous and rural or remote communities, child abuse prevention approaches for culturally and linguistically diverse communities, and child abuse and the internet.

Stronger Families Learning Exchange

As part of the Government's Stronger Families and Communities Strategy, the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services has contracted the Institute to provide a "learning exchange" to support parents, families and communities in their role of caring for young children.

The Stronger Families Learning Exchange (SFLEX) is comprised of an Action Research Training and Support Team and the Stronger Families Clearinghouse – designed to provide the latest information on research and programs concerned with family wellbeing, primary prevention and early intervention. At present, the Learning Exchange is funded to provide services until mid-2004.

The Training and Support Team will provide ongoing training and support in action research evaluation to between 70 and 80 projects funded under the Stronger Families Fund of the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy.

Using the action research approach, team members will work with funded projects to facilitate their work, providing training in areas of action research evaluation and assisting project teams to interpret information, assess their progress and to plan future actions.



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