



Australian Institute of Family Studies

RESEARCH PLAN 1999–2001

Australian Institute of Family Studies

The Australian Institute of Family Studies is an independent statutory authority which originated in the Australian Family Law Act (1975). The Institute was established by the Commonwealth Government in February 1980.

The Institute promotes the identification and understanding of factors affecting marital and family stability in Australia by:

- researching and evaluating the social, legal and economic wellbeing of all Australian families;
- informing government and the policy making process about Institute findings;
- communicating the results of Institute and other family research to organisations concerned with family wellbeing, and to the wider general community;
- promoting improved support for families, including measures which prevent family disruption and enhance marital and family stability.

The objectives of the Institute are essentially practical ones, concerned primarily with learning about real situations through research on Australian families.

For further information about the Institute and its work, write to Australian Institute of Family Studies, 300 Queen Street, Melbourne, Victoria 3000, Australia. Phone (03) 9214 7888. Fax (03) 9214 7839. Internet www.aifs.org.au/

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Research Plan 1999–2001

Peter Saunders



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Australian Institute of Family Studies
300 Queen Street, Melbourne 3000 Australia
Phone (03) 9214 7888; Fax (03) 9214 7839
Internet www.aifs.org.au/

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Contents

Introduction by Peter Saunders	vii
1. Statutory Duties of the Institute	1
2. Basic Principles Informing Research	1
Objectives	1
Interpreting the statutory research duty	1
Categories of research	2
Styles of research	2
3. The Three Program Areas	3
Three levels of family functioning	3
The micro level: Producing stable personalities	3
The meso level: Maintaining stable family units	4
The macro level: Contributing to social stability	4
The three 'big issues'	5
Establishment of the three program areas	5
Area A: Children and Parenting	5
Area B: Family and Marriage	6
Area C: Family and Society	6
4. A New Strategy for Research	6
A delimited focus	6
Liaison with other research organisations	6
New project proposals	7
Contract research	7
Research support	7
A core data base	8
A publishing strategy	8
5. Program Area A: Children and Parenting	9
Key question	9
Current core funded projects	9
Parenting-21	9
Evaluation of 'Looking After Children'	11
Current contract research: National Child Protection Clearing House	12
Future research in Program Area A	13

6. Program Area B: Family and Marriage	14
Key question	14
Current core funded project: Australian Divorce Transition Project	15
Current non-core funded research: Sibling Relationships and Adjustment to Parental Divorce	17
Future research in Program Area B	17
A new project on 'Happy Families'	17
Possible successors to the Divorce Transition Project	18
7. Program Area C: Family and Society	19
Key question	19
Current core funded project: Families, Social Capital and Citizenship	19
Current non-core funded research	21
Increasing Labour Market Inequality in Australia	21
Australia's Housing Choices	22
Transgenerational Income Support Dependence	22
8. Research on Youth Suicide Prevention	23
9. Staffing Profile Summary	24

Introduction

Over the last twenty years, the Australian Institute of Family Studies has established itself as a key resource in family studies in Australia. In planning its future research directions, the Institute wants to ensure that it continues to play a positive, relevant and pro-active role in the years to come.

It is clear that old agendas are changing, and that the Institute needs to be at the cutting edge of these developments. We cannot simply assume that the issues which dominated the Institute's work in the 1980s and 1990s are still the pertinent issues for us to be researching in the years to come. We need to think afresh.

The Research Plan, published here, was shaped and refined during the course of several processes. Through a series of seminars with Institute researchers early in 1999, we began a process of reviewing the work and future rationale of the Institute. We also met with many of our stakeholders, including public servants, academics, voluntary organisations and other research agencies, to discuss the sorts of key questions that family research should be addressing over the next three years.

Then in February 1999, the Institute issued a Briefing Paper entitled *What Future for Family Research?* which set out these ideas for future research directions, and invited people to comment. The paper elicited keen interest in the Institute's work and responses served to enhance the plan. A final draft was submitted to the Institute's Board of Management on 26 March 1999, and was subsequently approved.

We are pleased that the Research Plan for the triennium 1999–2001 is now in place. As the plan makes clear, we have built in a degree of flexibility to allow for new developments and opportunities as they may unfold. The work of the Institute is not set in stone, and the Research Plan seeks to ensure that we remain responsive to emerging agendas and changing circumstances as they arise.

Peter Saunders
Research Manager
April 1999

Research Plan 1999–2001

Australian Institute of Family Studies

1. 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 conduct, encourage and coordinate research to further our understanding of the factors affecting family and marital 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 give advice and assistance to the Minister in relation to the making of grants, and with the approval of the Minister to make grants, out of moneys made 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.

To implement these functions the Institute has developed a Research Plan to cover the forthcoming triennium. What follows is the Research Plan for 1999–2001.

2. Basic Principles Informing Research

2.1 Objectives

To develop a coherent research program which:

- derives directly from the Institute’s charter and corporate plan;
- is clearly related to current and emerging Government family policies and departmental and ministerial research priorities;
- produces outcomes which will inform family policies and other policies likely to impact directly on family stability;
- provides opportunities for Institute leadership and collaboration with leading research organisations and researchers.

2.2 Interpreting the statutory research duty

There are four things to note about the Institute’s research role as laid down in the 1975 Act:

- First, the emphasis is on family *and* marriage. This means that research which aims to strengthen and support marriage as an institution will always be central to the Institute’s work, but it also means that research on other aspects of family life should also figure strongly in our work. The Institute does not only work on issues concerning marriage and divorce, although its origins in the Family Law Act mean that such work will always be one key focus.
- Second, we are enjoined to *promote* the stability of the family. This suggests that the Institute should not be afraid to ‘take sides’ in specific debates on the family, even if what it has to say is contentious, unpopular or against the grain of contemporary

thinking. As a statutory authority, the Institute should not be partisan, and as a centre for social scientific research, it must avoid polemic. But it should speak out when research demonstrates that something is 'good' or 'bad' for some aspect of family life, and it should not be worried about making such judgements publicly.

- Third, the key focus is on the *stability* of the family, although the Act never defines what is meant by 'stability'. Stability should not be confused with lack of change. As Emile Durkheim recognised, social institutions can suffer from too little change as well as from too much. Change that is too rapid is disruptive and distressing, but institutions that do not change and adapt as time goes by can become stagnant and anachronistic. We should therefore interpret family stability, not as continuity with the past, but as any pattern of family life which sustains adequate family *functioning*. More specifically, a stable family is one which (a) supports the wellbeing of its individual members, (b) stays together for a sustained period of time, and (c) contributes positively to the wider society of which it forms a part.
- Finally, there is a recognition in the Act that the family is the *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 huge implications for other aspects of social organisation.

2.3 Categories of research

The Institute's research on different aspects of family functioning may be accomplished in one of four different ways:

- *core (in-house) research* which is funded by the core income and is planned and undertaken by Institute staff;
- *commissioned research* which is funded by the core income and is planned by the Institute but which is undertaken for the Institute by other research organisations (this category also includes employment on a contract basis of expert consultants to undertake specific studies in conjunction with Institute staff);
- *contracted research* which is funded by specific contracts from government departments or other organisations and is undertaken by the Institute working alone or with other agencies;
- *collaborative research* which may include collaborative ventures with the Department of Family and Community Services, other Commonwealth and State Government departments and agencies, and Australian universities or leading research organisations.

In addition, the Institute seeks to encourage, coordinate and give a lead to family research elsewhere in Australia (e.g. by organising national conferences, seminars and less formal small group meetings with family researchers), and to establish and maintain links with family researchers overseas (e.g. by hosting overseas visitors and by links with overseas research organisations).

2.4 Styles of research

Social scientific research can take a number of forms:

- *Short-term or long-term focus*
Some Institute projects will address issues of immediate relevance, and this plan contains a strategy which should enable us to respond much more quickly in future when policy-makers require a swift answer to a specific question. Equally, the Institute must also attempt in its research program to develop a deeper understanding of long-term trends and to identify emerging problems and future policy issues.

- *Pure and applied research*
The Institute should undertake research which is policy-relevant. The Institute will not pursue 'pure' research, if by this is meant research driven solely by intellectual curiosity. The place for this is in the universities. Equally, not every piece of research output should be expected to inform current policy in an immediate and obvious way, for policy-relevant research will sometimes need to be ahead of current agendas, and it may also need to address 'big' questions which cut across single policy areas.
- *Theoretical or empirical research*
The Institute does not undertake theoretical research, but nor should it lapse into abstracted empiricism. There is a case for atheoretical (descriptive) research when it comes to monitoring family trends in Australian society, and this is a crucial role which the Institute should and will perform. There is no case, however, for conducting core primary research which is not driven by theoretically-informed questions, for this can only result in aimless and ultimately repetitive work. All core research projects should be theoretically informed and conceptually rigorous, and this Research Plan seeks to ensure that all core work is underpinned by clear hypotheses or by an explicit theoretical rationale.
- *Quantitative and qualitative methods*
The Institute aims to strengthen its quantitative research output, but this must not be at the expense of qualitative studies. The two can often complement each other (e.g. the generally higher reliability of quantitative methods as against the generally higher validity of qualitative methods) and the Institute will continue to employ both as appropriate.
- *Multi-disciplinarity and inter-disciplinarity*
The Institute projects require a blend of disciplinary competences, the key ones being psychology, socio-legal studies, sociology, demography and economics. The Institute's work inevitably crosses and draws upon several disciplines (it is multi-disciplinary), but more than this, its approach to any one question is explicitly inter-disciplinary (i.e. it addresses issues and adopts methodologies which cannot be contained within any one discipline). This Research Plan spells out a strategy for developing interdisciplinary research teams which will work together over an extended period, thereby developing a deep pool of interdisciplinary expertise in each of our core program areas.

3. The Three Program Areas

3.1 Three levels of family functioning

The Australian Institute of Family Studies seeks to conduct research which contributes to successful family functioning. Successful family functioning can be assessed at three levels:

- stability at the level of the individual personality (the 'micro' level);
- stability at the level of the family unit itself (the 'meso' level);
- stability in the relation between the family and other social institutions (the 'macro' level).

3.1(1) The micro level: Producing stable personalities

The American sociologist, Talcott Parsons, pointed out in the 1950s that families in western cultures have lost many of their traditional tasks as a result of industrialisation and modernisation, but he identified two areas where they still have crucial, and unique, functions to perform:

- they provide emotional gratification for adults (i.e. it is to the family that most of us still look for deep, committed and affectionate relationships, particularly in the form of enduring and exclusive sexual union between adults);
- they play the crucial role in the socialisation of children.

Both of these areas are in principle important for the Australian Institute of Family Studies to look at, but the second is the really crucial one. Above all else, the family is the basic unit for producing the next generation of Australians. It does not do this alone, of course, for the schools, the local neighbourhood and increasingly the mass media influence the ways young people think and behave, but the family is still the primary agency in rearing children.

This then points to the first core question to which the Institute should address its research:

What family arrangements, or mix of other child care arrangements, best produce well adjusted and happy children who can fulfil their potential and grow into socially responsible and well adjusted adults?

3.1(2) The meso level: Maintaining stable family units

In order to perform their various functions, families obviously have to stay together over a sustained period of time. To do this, they have to develop strategies for living together (e.g. division of domestic tasks, strategies for conflict resolution, etc), and they have to adjust successfully to changes over time (e.g. the birth of children, the departure of children to form new, independent households, the growing dependency of ageing parents towards the end of their lives, the transmission of property from one generation to the next, etc).

A second core focus for the Institute should therefore relate to the successful accomplishment of these integrative and adaptive tasks. In other words, we should look at what it is that enables families successfully to stay together and to function well as social units, as well as looking at the sorts of arrangements that need to be put in place when they disintegrate.

Given its origins in the Family Law Act, the Institute has tended in the past to put more emphasis on arrangements surrounding the failure of marriages than on the factors contributing to their success. In the future, perhaps, we should strike a better balance between these two concerns. Given the growth of de facto unions, we should also incorporate these into future research in this area.

The core question posed at this level of analysis is:

How do stable families come to be formed, how do they succeed in managing problems and in adapting to change, and what are the best arrangements for managing the break-up of families when they can no longer function successfully?

3.1(3) The macro level: Contributing to social stability

As well as adjusting to internal change and development, families must also adapt to changes in their external environment. Following Talcott Parsons, we can see the family as one of four elements which together contribute to a dynamic but stable society. Families contribute to, and are in turn affected by, each of the other three:

- the *economy*;
- the *political system* (including the welfare state);
- the social life of the *community*.

To understand the contemporary family in Australia, we have to understand the changing relations between it and these other three sets of social institutions. Change in any one of these three areas will have profound effects on family stability. For example:

- Economic change, such as a decline in the number of traditionally male manual jobs, will force an adjustment in the way men and women organise their roles and responsibilities within the family.
- Political change, such as a reform of state welfare, may require families to meet certain of their needs in new ways.
- Community change, such as a rise in crime or vandalism, will lead families to adjust (e.g. by withdrawing their children from local schools or by turning in on themselves).

Equally, rapid change in the family itself will spill over into each of these other areas. A change in the domestic role of women has profound implications for the world of employment; an increase in rates of single parenting will almost certainly result in increasing levels of demand on state spending; a change in the way children are brought up may lead to more anti-social behaviour; and so on.

A third core area of family research, therefore, should focus broadly on the relation between family change and economic, political and social change. The question to be addressed is:

How are contemporary changes in the economy, the organisation of government services and local community life impacting on the stability of families, and how is family change affecting the functioning of the economy, the demands made on government, and the overall cohesion of Australian society?

3.2 The three 'big issues'

Drawing all this together, and expressing it in bald and simple terms, the research agenda for the Institute can be understood in terms of an attempt to provide answers to three basic questions:

- What types of family and child care arrangements are most likely to maximise the wellbeing of children?
- What factors are most likely to promote happy and stable family unions?
- Under what conditions can families best contribute to good citizenship and a vibrant community life?

3.3 Establishment of the three program areas

All current and future research projects, core and contracted, will be located in one of three program areas corresponding to these three 'big issues' (or key themes).

3.3(1) Area A: Children and Parenting

Under this umbrella, there should probably be two projects running at any one time, one focusing on issues to do with outcomes of different patterns of child care, and the other looking more specifically at aspects of parental roles and responsibilities. The principal (but not exclusive) disciplinary resources in both cases will be developmental psychology and social policy, and the research should aim to inform government policies in areas such as maternity and paternity leave, family benefits, family counselling and child care provision and regulation. In addition, the Institute will continue to support research on the prevention of child maltreatment under the auspices of the National Child Protection Clearing House.

3.3(2) Area B: Family and Marriage

This program will probably also run two major projects at any one time, one specifically aimed at informing family law issues (e.g. property settlements, child access, family mediation, social justice in divorce), and the other aimed rather at understanding and therefore promoting the factors contributing to the success of marital and de facto partnerships. Work here will probably be grounded principally in the areas of social demography, sociology and socio-legal studies, and this program's policy relevance should lie, not simply in its close association with the concerns of the Family Court, but also in advising on matters to do with marital counselling and the social support of families at different stages of the life cycle.

3.3(3) Area C: Family and Society

Here we should be looking at the way different families combine varying degrees of economic self-reliance with use of state services, the voluntary sector and community networks, and the results that follow from different mixes of these different sets of resources. The disciplinary basis of this program will be mainly sociology, politics, social anthropology and welfare economics, and research in this area should explicitly inform current policy debates regarding issues such as how to discourage the emergence of an underclass culture of state dependency, the capacity of families to take on responsibilities which have hitherto been discharged by government, and the ways in which families can be mobilised to strengthen community networks and promote social civility.

4. A New Strategy for Research

4.1 A delimited focus

The development of three clear Program Areas gives us a yardstick against which to consider all future project proposals. The Institute cannot do research on everything to do with families – it must have a clearly delimited focus. The three Program Areas give us this.

It is important to recognise what is being ruled out here, as well as what is being ruled in. We can either do a few things well, or a lot of things badly. Inevitably, some interesting and worthwhile questions will be neglected when we narrow down the scope of our work.

A key issue we have had to address is whether the Institute should do research on the relation between the family and the economy. This plan involves a strategic decision to build up our strength in developmental psychology, but not in economics, for we cannot sensibly do both, and this is reflected in the identification of 'Children and Parenting' as one of our three Program areas.

When we need to take on board an economic dimension in our research, and we lack the competence internally, we shall buy it in from outside or engage in joint work with outside economists.

4.2 Liaison with other research organisations

The decision to build up developmental psychology at the expense of economics partly reflects an attempt to concentrate on those areas of family policy which are not already well covered by other research organisations.

Other organisations, including the Social Policy Research Centre, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, and the National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling, currently incorporate in their work the relation between the family and economic policy, and we should not try to replicate this. For example, we have agreed with SPRC that they

will take over our role in calculating regular estimates of the costs of children (although we shall continue to publish these in *Family Matters*). The Institute research plan as outlined here complements but does not overlap with the work of other centres.

4.3 New project proposals

The aim is to have no more than two core projects running in each of our three program areas at any one time. This will stop us being stretched too thinly across too many different projects. Contracts and other non-core work will also be taken on as appropriate, but only where they complement the existing research trajectory of the relevant program area. For example, a contract might be used as a way of developing new work in an area which the program team wants to develop in the future, or a joint project with outside researchers might be taken on as a way of developing more detailed analysis of one aspect of an existing core project.

Ideally, the two core projects in each area will be phased so that, for example, analysis and write-up on one is occurring while design and data collection is taking place on the other.

The crucial question about project development is quality assurance. The best way to ensure that any new core projects are worthwhile, feasible and at the 'cutting edge' is to subject all proposals to a process of external refereeing and scrutiny. This means that the research plan need not outline every project which will be developed over the forthcoming three years, although indications should be given of the kinds of projects which might be brought forward over the course of the triennium.

4.4 Contract research

The Institute will continue to seek contract-funded research across all three of its program areas. It will, however, only bid for projects which complement its core work. This means that the problems in the past, when researchers are taken away from core projects to work on unrelated contracts and the work of the Institute gets delayed and disrupted, should become more manageable, for contract projects will form a more integrated part of the overall program of work in each area.

4.5 Research support

One of the most important innovations in this Research Plan is the establishment of a Research Support Unit. This will bring together and strengthen four functions on which all three program teams will draw:

- *Statistics*: Statistical back-up to projects, help in analysis of secondary data, and statistical training as required to existing research staff.
- *CATI interviewing*: The CATI (Computer Aided Telephone Interviewing) system is a core and distinctive resource of the Institute. We plan to make much more intensive use of CATI on a much more regular basis than in the past. Crucial to this is our decision to build up a 10,000 core sample to be interviewed once a year on a rolling basis (see below).
- *Survey management*: The new Research Support Unit will develop and manage the 10,000 core sample on which most project work across the three Program Areas will be based.
- *Monitoring family trends* (based on ABS and other secondary data): One of the Institute's most successful publications was *Australian Family Profiles*, published in 1997. There have been repeated requests for a new edition, and we consider that, in addition, it will be useful to set up and maintain a new set of pages on the Institute Web site which will contain data, analysis and commentary on various aspects of Australian family life. This too will be a function of the new Research Support Unit.

4.6 A core data base

The new core 10,000 sample will be developed on the back of the Institute's 1996 *Australian Family Life Course Study* data base. This will be widened (to 10,000 cases) and deepened (with work history and attitudinal data). Once established, this will provide an annual omnibus survey which will be the basis of most survey work needed by our projects, and as each new project bolts on questions, so these will become part of the ever-expanding data base. This sample is not intended as a longitudinal panel as such, for different items will be addressed each year in accordance with the requirements of different projects, but over time it will build into a unique data source. Participants will need to be tracked fairly carefully between surveys, and incentives will need to be developed to maintain goodwill and keep panel wastage to a minimum.

Development of this sample will not only service our own project needs, but will also allow swift analysis of specific issues as they arise (thereby meeting the Department's requirement for improved responsiveness to short-term queries), and should enable us to generate a new annual publication on Australian Family Attitudes. It will also be a resource for other researchers outside the Institute.

In addition to developing this 10,000 sample, the new Research Support Unit will also consider early on the feasibility of developing a new wave of the Institute's *Australian Family Formation Study* (a genuine longitudinal study with one wave in 1981 and a second in 1990). If it is considered feasible to run a third wave, this will take place in 2000 and, like the Life Course sample, it would then be a core resource for projects across all three program areas, as well as for outside researchers.

4.7 A publishing strategy

Ownership of data: Some Institute output (e.g. reports commissioned by government departments) never gets published because the material belongs to those who paid for the work to be done. If in future our contracted work is to complement our core work, then we need to try to come to agreements with the funding bodies giving us the right to use this material in our own future research and publications.

Three types of publications: The Institute must publish three different (but equally important) types of work aimed at three different audiences (in addition to its contracted reports).

- First, it must publish for a popular, non-specialist audience. Our popular audience is the readership of *Family Matters*, the Institute's research magazine. *Family Matters* is the Institute's key public face. It should continue to publish work by Institute staff outlining current work and commenting on current issues, as well as encouraging contributions from outside. *Family Matters* is not an academic journal; nor should it try to be one, for there are many specialist, refereed journals in this field. Its style should be serious journalism, not academic.
- Second, it must publish for the policy community. The key output here will be our *Australian Family Briefing* series. These should be kept short and pithy, setting out key findings or key arguments which can easily be digested by ministerial advisers, departmental researchers and others working in the field of family policy. There should be a regular stream of Briefings coming out of all three Program Areas.
- Third, it must publish for the academic community. This is the role of the *Working Paper* series. A Working Paper should be used to get material out quickly and/or to get material out for comment and criticism. In either event, the presumption should be that a Working Paper is a prelude to a more considered, published article in a refereed academic journal.

Joint publications: The Institute will continue to encourage joint authorship of work, both that between Institute staff and outsiders, and that between senior and more junior staff.

It is particularly important to involve junior staff in writing as well as data collection and analysis, for this is crucial for their skills and career development. Authors should be listed in order of their relative contribution to the work, and not necessarily in alphabetical order or in order of seniority.

5. Program Area A: Children and Parenting

5.1 Key question

The family is the basic unit for producing the next generation of Australians. It does not do this alone, of course. With the increase in single parenting, and the increase in the number of mothers in part-time or full-time employment, early child care is today often accomplished by varying mixes of parents, informal carers in the extended family or local neighbourhood, and formal child care agencies. Furthermore, the influence which parents have over how their young children develop is to some extent mediated by the influence of teachers, neighbours, other children, and, of course, television. Nevertheless, the family is still the primary agency involved in rearing children, and its influence is particularly marked in the early and most formative years.

This is the context which gives rise to the core question to which projects in Program Area A are addressed:

What family arrangements, or mix of other child care arrangements, best produce well adjusted and happy children who can fulfil their potential and grow into socially responsible and well adjusted adults?

5.2 Current core funded projects

There are currently two core funded projects, both nearing completion:

- Parenting-21 (includes the Buai Sei Wagel [Parenting in the future] extension project on Torres Strait Islanders);
- Evaluation of 'Looking After Children'.

5.2(1) Parenting-21

Background:

Parenting-21 (the '21' in the title refers forward to the next century) began in July 1995. It is the Australian component of the International Study of Parents, Children and Schools (ISPCS). This international project includes researchers from Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Sweden, and the United States, and is being coordinated by Sara Harkness and Charles Super from the School of Family Studies at the University of Connecticut (USA). Its overall aim is to identify cross-cultural differences and similarities in parenting across various ethnic groups.

In 1997, the Institute part of this project was extended with funding from the Commonwealth Government to include the Torres Strait Islanders.

The Parenting-21 project thus involves:

- the agreed Institute contribution to the international comparative study;
- any further work we choose to complete ourselves on the Australian sample;
- the extension to the Torres Strait Islander component.

The main project was originally scheduled to be completed between April and June 2000, but this is currently under review. The Torres Strait Islanders extension is due to be completed in mid-1999.

Objectives of the main project:

In addition to contributing Australian data to the International Study of Parents, Children and Schools (ISPCS), the project seeks to document parenting attitudes and practices adopted by ordinary Australian families as we approach the 21st century. The emphasis is on comparison of how parents from different cultural backgrounds go about raising children, and the main point of this is to inform the future planning and development of support services for families with young children.

The project involves studying the relationships between, on the one hand, parental beliefs, ideas and understanding about the nature of children and childhood, and on the other, actual child rearing practices. It focuses upon the rearing of children from infancy (5 months) to middle childhood (8.5 years) and examines the aspirations, misgivings and hopes parents have for their children; their sources of information about children and childhood; their sources of help, advice and support when confronted by difficulties; and the influence of all this on the way they rear their children.

Objectives of the extension project:

The study investigates the factors which influence the quality of parenting experienced by children in the Islander communities. The project aims to provide a valuable resource for policy makers and service providers concerned with the design and delivery of family support services to Torres Strait Islander people, and both the Steering Committee and the project team are composed largely of Islanders. A particular emphasis is placed on the impact on traditional parenting and family values of 'modernisation' (e.g. new technologies, formal education, migration for work, and so on).

Research design (main project):

Data collection for Parenting-21 occurred in two phases. In the first, 380 volunteer families Australia-wide were asked to provide information about their child rearing practices by means of a series of brief self-completed questionnaires. Families with one child aged between 5 months and 8.5 years were eligible for this component. Data collection and preparation of data for analysis has been completed and analysis has begun.

In the second phase, it was intended that 60 sets of parents from each of the Aboriginal, Anglo, Italian, Polish and Vietnamese communities in Melbourne should be interviewed to explore their child rearing values and practices in more detail. However, only the Anglo and Vietnamese interviews were ever completed.

The methodological weaknesses of the questionnaire sample are such that we have decided to do no further work on it (the data set will be deposited in the Data Archive for the use of other researchers). The interviews with the Anglo and Vietnamese samples have, however, produced some worthwhile results, and we will be reviewing this material in a forthcoming Working Paper. Once that Paper has been completed, we shall take a decision as to whether any further work should be done on this project, beyond our agreed contribution to the book on the international comparison.

Research design (Torres Strait Islander extension):

The interview and self-completion questionnaire methods employed with the Anglo and Vietnamese families are inappropriate to the study of Islander communities. For this reason, qualitative methods were developed instead: discussions with a single extended family group, followed by focus groups (consisting of single sex groups with similar parenting experience across different islands) interviews with 12 key participants from Thursday and Horn Islands.

5.2(2) Evaluation of 'Looking After Children'

Background:

This project evaluates a new approach to the organisation and monitoring of children in out-of-home care. This new approach is called 'Looking After Children', and it originated in England, since when it has been taken up by many child welfare agencies across the world.

In 1997, the Victorian State Government committed itself to a trial implementation of 'Looking After Children', and the Australian Institute of Family Studies agreed to conduct an evaluation of the trial by analysing the benefits (if any) for the children and young people concerned.

The project was originally funded for two years (1997–98) by the Rotary Health Research Fund of Australia, but it has been incorporated within the Institute's core program and is currently being funded by the Institute following the completion of the Rotary grant at the end of 1998.

The project involves collaboration with other research organisations and government departments, as well as with the key stakeholder, the Victorian Department of Human Services, Youth and Family Services, Protection and Care Branch.

Objectives:

The project investigates the physical and psycho-social health and wellbeing of particularly disadvantaged children and young people in Australia. It aims to make a significant contribution to research activity on the use of the 'Looking After Children' approach and to put the Institute at the forefront of research and practice knowledge in this field in Australia.

The project has the potential to influence policy by promoting an improved standard of care to children and young people in the public care in Australia. It was undertaken to inform the wider adoption of the approach in state welfare systems throughout Australia. Specifically, the evaluation of 'Looking After Children' provides evidence of the success of an attempt to develop a caring environment for children in out-of-home care similar to that experienced by children in most Australian families.

Research design:

The Children's Welfare Association of Victoria initiated a 12-month pilot in the Eastern Metropolitan region of Victoria involving non-government agencies and the Department of Human Services. The overall aim of the Victorian trial was to improve outcomes for children and young people in out of home care through a trial implementation of the Assessment and Action Records. To this end, the pilot was also to examine the most effective way to introduce 'Looking After Children' in the Victorian system, and to suggest ways of adapting the materials for use in current case-management, case-contracting and case-planning systems.

The Australian Institute of Family Studies supported the trial by conducting an independent evaluation of the success of the implementation in meeting its aims of contributing to the physical and psychosocial health of children who require to be looked after away from home. Specifically, the evaluation project was to assess objectively:

- the success of the 'Looking After Children' implementation in improving the quality of care experienced by children and young people in out of home care in Victoria;
- the extent to which implementation of 'Looking After Children' contributed to children and young people's sense of wellbeing and control over their lives;

- the extent to which implementation of 'Looking After Children' enhances the involvement of families of origin in promoting the health and wellbeing of their children and young people during placement;
- to record the perceptions of foster parents and others *in loco parentis* concerning the contribution of the 'Looking After Children' implementation to their parenting of children and young people during placement and the promotion of their health and wellbeing.

The Institute's investigative approach was to monitor health and wellbeing, and the initiation of actions (which includes consulting children and young people in decisions that affect their lives, and involving parents as partners in caring and planning for their children during placement), in respect of all children and young people involved in the trial to enable a before and after contrast of outcomes.

Responses to questions contained in questionnaires administered to children and young people of appropriate maturity, and all carers responsible for children and young people involved in the trial were the primary source of information for the evaluation. Information was also collected from other extant records and by means of interviews.

5.3 Current contract research: National Child Protection Clearing House

Background:

The National Child Protection Clearing House is funded by the Commonwealth Government and has been based at the Australian Institute of Family Studies since 1995. Its primary role has been to collate and disseminate information on child abuse prevention (which is why it is located administratively within the Institute's Family Information Centre), but it has also developed a research function, and under its new three-year contract, recently agreed with the Clearing House National Council, this function will be expanded.

In 1997 the Clearing House, through the Institute, was awarded a contract by the Protection & Care and Office of the Family sections of the Victorian Department of Human Services to evaluate the Enhanced Client Outcomes (ECO) and Family and Neighbourhood Links (FANL) demonstration projects, both of which involve preventative interventions. Through the National Child Protection Clearing House, the Institute has been at the forefront of knowledge and debate in this area, predicting changes to policy and describing new approaches to child protection and child abuse prevention.

The evaluation of both ECO and FANL began in July 1997. The evaluation of ECO was completed in December 1998 and a report submitted to the Department of Human Services. The FANL evaluation is due for completion in late May 1999.

The work has entailed extensive liaison and collaboration with the DHS Head Office Steering Committee, the management and staff of the Loddon Mallee and Northern Metropolitan regional DHS offices, the Children's Protection Society and the Shire of Whittlesea and Swan Hill local governments, as well as with a number of other agencies who contributed data for the evaluation.

Objectives:

The Enhanced Client Outcomes (ECO) and Family and Neighbourhood Links (FANL) Demonstration Projects developed by the Department of Human Services Victoria are the result of recent changes in child protection/child welfare policy which has been driven by the perceived need to redress the balance between primary and secondary prevention and tertiary prevention, focusing more on the former and shifting resources away from tertiary child abuse prevention services (i.e. child protection).

This policy shift has resulted in significant changes to child protection systems across Australia, with most adopting a range of innovative programs that bear some similarity to Victoria's ECO and FANL programs.

The Department of Human Services is currently moving to implement the ECO approach in child protection services across the State of Victoria. ECO will then become the universal child protection case management system. Thus, the results of the Institute's evaluation will significantly influence the state-wide implementation, and child protection/child welfare work for a number of years.

Research design:

The evaluation was designed as a comparison of regions implementing both FANL and ECO projects with others piloting the ECO project alone. The study involves extensive and detailed evaluation of the implementation of the projects in all targeted areas via the collection of baseline data and a case tracking methodology. These approaches make it possible to contrast the additional benefits that accrue from adding FANL to ECO compared with those accruing from ECO alone, to compare both FANL and ECO projects across regions, and to assess the impact of the FANL and ECO projects on the wellbeing of families and the wider community.

- Data were collected on a series of indicators in order to assess changes in participating areas after implementation of the FANL and ECO projects. The indicators included child protection and child welfare data, crime statistics, changes in the 'Index of Social Disadvantage', and health indicators (such as childhood injuries, incidence of mental illness, substance abuse, perinatal health and childhood asthma).
- In addition, changes in agency roles and procedures, and management perceptions of the FANL and ECO projects were monitored over the course of the evaluation via questionnaires, completed by non-government organisation (NGO) and DHS management.
- Representatives of community groups involved in the FANL projects were invited to complete pre/post-test questionnaires on changes to local communities brought about by FANL and any new initiatives they may be undertaking prompted by their involvement with the project.
- The impact of the FANL project on community awareness of the availability of family support services was assessed by a CATI survey of a representative sample of 200 families with children under 17 years.
- With respect to the ECO project, an extensive evaluation was conducted via the collection of a sample of 200 child protection cases (100 cases from each region, 50 pre-ECO and 50 ECO cases) from the DHS CASIS database. This sample has been supplemented by qualitative case data collected from NGO and DHS staff which describes in detail the case management process for a series of 20 cases.

5.4 Future research in Program Area A

The two existing core projects are both in their concluding phases. We shall shortly need to start work on one new core project, with another possibly to follow a year or so after that, depending on resources. It seems likely that one project will be on some aspect of child care and the other on some aspect of parenting.

There are a number of possible ideas for new core projects which we need to develop and evaluate. For example:

- We have not at this stage ruled out some sort of development of the Parenting-21 Project, for it is obviously crucial to understand whether and how different parenting and child rearing practices in different ethnic and cultural groups (particularly recently

arrived immigrant groups) affect the possibility of children developing successful work and family lives when they grow up.

- Another possibility would be for the Institute to develop a major review of existing evidence, from Australia and overseas, on the influence of different family structures on children's wellbeing. Early work at the Institute (*Children in Australian Families*) suggested that there are only relatively small differences in wellbeing between children growing up in natural, blended and single-parent families, but this has been challenged by the Western Australian Child Health Survey which even suggests that growing up with natural parents who have a bad relationship is better than growing up with a step-parent and a natural parent who get on well, or with a single parent. So much work has now been done into these sorts of questions that it may be time for a comprehensive review of the evidence.
- A proposal to study fathers and fathering has been shelved pending the appointment of the new Head of this Program Area, but considerable developmental work has already been done on it, and it will be reconsidered along with the other proposals. Fathers may have a profound positive or negative impact on their children's development, but most studies of the contribution that fathers make to children's wellbeing have failed to control for the contribution of mothers, and has neglected fathers' relationships with adolescents. This proposal would look at families of different types with at least one adolescent or young adult child, and would consider how fathers balance family, work and other commitments. CATI interviews would be conducted with father, mother and target child in each family, probably using the newly expanded 10,000 data base.
- An earlier proposal for a major study of the outcomes of different child care patterns has been revisited and may also be brought forward later as a possible new core project in this area. The key objective would be to determine if those providing a caring role provide a level of care and affection necessary to ensure children's satisfactory development, particularly at critical developmental stages, and thus to determine the types of care arrangements, parenting styles and family circumstances that best meet children's developmental needs and produce the best outcomes for children.

In addition to these core project proposals, the Institute is the lead agency in a consortium which has recently submitted a bid for a major new contract which will build on our existing core research on child care and child wellbeing.

6. Program Area B: Family and Marriage

6.1 Key question

Given its origins in the Family Law Act, the Institute has tended in the past to put more emphasis on arrangements surrounding the failure of marriages than on the factors contributing to their success. It is important that we continue to reflect on and inform the operations of the Family Court, but in the future, perhaps, we should strike a better balance between these two concerns. It would be useful to know what it is about successful marriages that enables these couples to resolve the stresses and tensions which in other marriages result in divorce.

Given the increased number of de facto unions with children, and given that these tend to be more unstable than marriages ending ultimately in divorce, it is clear that this research program should cover both married couples and unmarried couples living together with children.

The core question for projects developed in Area B can be expressed as follows:

How do stable families come to be formed, how do they succeed in managing problems and in adapting to change, and what are the best arrangements for managing the break-up of families when they can no longer function successfully?

6.2 Current core funded project: Australian Divorce Transition

Background:

The central purpose of the Australian Divorce Transition Project is to analyse procedures surrounding the breakdown of marriages, or of de facto unions with children, in order to reduce the damage to children and to maximise the fairness of the outcome for the adults involved.

There are very considerable risks associated with the reorganisation of the family unit throughout the divorce transition. These risks translate into social and economic costs, and personal suffering and ill-being of varying degrees, for both parents and children. Previous work suggests that there is great variation in the ways in which the divorce transition is effected and in the intensity and duration of economic hardship, social disorganisation and personal distress. There is also wide divergence in access to and use of services (e.g. the Family Court, social security, legal and community services).

This project builds on previous work on these issues, including Institute studies of the consequences of marriage breakdown carried out in the 1980s. The project also reflects priorities identified in a joint Family Law Research Planning Seminar, held in November 1995 convened by the Family Law Council and the Australian Institute of Family Studies at which potential gaps in current family law research were identified by members from a range of family law organisations. These organisations included: the Federal Attorney-General's Department, the Family Court of Australia, the Family Court of Western Australia, the Law Council of Australia, National Legal Aid, the Australian Law Reform Commission, Family Services Council, Relationships Australia, and the National Alternative Dispute Resolution Advisory Council. Academics from several Australian universities were also invited.

One area thought to be in need of update was the economic and social consequences of divorce – specifically a follow up to similar studies previously conducted by the Institute in the *Settling Up – Settling Down* series. These two landmark studies were based on a sample of 1981 and 1983 divorces. Consequently a strong plea was made by many seminar participants for a follow-up study to explore areas of change that might have occurred over the past decade. The Australian Divorce Transition Project grew out of this plea.

Two guiding principles have been applied in selecting the research issues to be addressed in this project. First, priority has been given to securing national data on the divorce transition, in that population estimates are a fundamental plank in any agenda for family law reform or for the review services and support provisions. Second, importance has been placed on identifying particular groups among those divorcing so that the diversity in this population is recognised, allowing appropriate access and equity to justice and services. The provision of detailed information about certain groups (perhaps relatively rare in the population) is also important in that some of these groups consume a large proportion of the service budget, so that careful study may assist in planning appropriate services and containing costs. For example, highly conflicted divorces make up less than 5 per cent of cases but consume enormous resources, and involve considerable suffering and personal ill-being for adults and children.

Objectives:

The project is designed to address three major issues under an umbrella national survey:

- The process of divorce and its consequences for parents. This part of the study re-examines and extends the economic and social aspects of divorce presented in *Settling Up*, and provides a contemporary basis for the evaluation of the impact of changes in family law and social policies over the last decade.
- A child's perspective on divorce which extends and updates the work in *Remaking Families*. This part of the study should provide a benchmark for evaluating the new legislation concerning children in the Family Law Reform Act (1995) as well as informing the pressing issue of how children are to be appropriately represented in legal proceedings.
- The impact of divorce on an older cohort for whom the issues of employment, housing, superannuation and future security are important concerns. Such concerns are important as matters of justice and equity in family law and in terms of employment, retraining and social security provision. This part of the study also extends and updates information on this age group contained in the original Australian Institute of Family Studies Consequences of Marriage Breakdown Study (*Settling Up* and *Settling Down*).

In addition to these three core objectives, data collected for the Australian Divorce Transition Project were extended to accommodate a survey of the prevalence and nature of spousal violence for divorced women and men and its relevance to post-separation financial outcomes (i.e. property settlements and living standards). The survey was commissioned by the Office of the Status of Women – Legal, Violence and International Division.

To date, no studies have examined empirically the linkage between spousal violence and the economic consequences of divorce (property settlement outcomes, in particular, and post-divorce financial outcomes, in general). There is thus no nationally representative benchmark on which to evaluate (a) the current law for parties who have experienced spousal violence and (b) recent proposals for legislative reform concerning the inclusion of spousal violence as a factor for consideration in the division of matrimonial property.

The spousal violence study had three principal aims:

- to estimate the prevalence of spousal violence in a population of divorced women and men, and to examine the nature and severity of this violence;
- to examine the post-divorce economic circumstances of women and men who have experienced spousal violence during marriage or post-separation;
- to determine whether divorced women and men who have experienced spousal violence were disadvantaged in the share of matrimonial property they received at settlement.

Research design:

Data have been collected from three national samples:

- people separated after January 1988 with a dependent child at that time (N = 513);
- people separated since 1988, from marriages of at least 15 years duration and which the wife was aged at least 45 years (N = 137);
- the children (12–18 years) of adults interviewed in each of the above samples (N = 63 cases).

Data on spousal violence have been based on interviews with the adults who participated in the first two of these samples (N= 398). In all cases, data were generated from CATI interviews.

Because the data set is a rich one, a decision has been taken to extend the original end-date of the project to the end of 2000, and to devote more staff to it, to enable full analysis to take place. Work will also begin shortly on the children's data, and a monograph reviewing all the major findings from the project will begin in early 2000.

6.3 Current non-core funded research: Sibling Relationships and Adjustment to Parental Divorce

Background:

One of the goals of the Family Court is to make decisions related to parental divorce which are in the best interests of the child or children. There is, however, very little information available to guide the Court's judgements on whether siblings should be kept together with the same residence arrangements, or whether separating them may in some circumstances be preferable. This study is designed to increase understanding of the role of sibling relationships during the divorce transition. The project builds upon previous work by members of the research team on adolescent sibling relationships, and is funded for three years from 1998 under a Strategic Partnership with Industry – Research and Training Support Grant.

The project has been developed jointly between researchers from the University of Queensland Family Centre, The Family Court of Australia and the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

Objectives:

The project aims to explore the function of sibling relationships for children during and following the divorce of their parents. It will discover whether children with a sibling cope better with the divorce than those with no siblings, and will examine the potential impact on sibling relationships and child adjustment of different residence and contact arrangements for children of the same family.

Research design:

Two hundred families with children aged between 10 and 18 years will be recruited through the family court registries in Brisbane, Melbourne and Dandenong. Structured interviews will be conducted with parents and children (separately) in their homes, and standardised measures of family relationship, child adjustment and differential parenting, among other constructs, will be administered. The interview will be conducted as soon as practicable after filing for divorce and follow-up interviews will be conducted approximately 12 months after the initial interview.

6.4 Future research in Program Area B

The Australian Divorce Transition Project was originally scheduled for completion in mid-2000 but we have decided to extend analysis and write-up through to the end of 2000. In the course of 1999 we shall make strategic decisions about what kind of project will replace it in 2001, and about what other kind of work should be developed to run along side it. In principle, we seek to develop one new project broadly focused on factors contributing to marital stability and longevity, and starting in 2001, a new project relating to some aspect of divorce and separation.

6.4(1) A new project on 'Happy Families'

We have just started a six-month qualitative study, arising out of the *Life Course* panel, on what makes for happy and stable relationships. As noted earlier, the Australian Family Life Course Study is no longer going ahead as a separate project, but is instead forming the basis for the development of our core data base of 10,000 respondents which will serve various different projects across the three program areas. However, the planned

Stage 2 of the Life Course study did envisage a qualitative component (mainly focus groups) as well as a second phase of CATI data collection, and this qualitative work will now go ahead specifically in order to address the question of what makes for 'happy families'? We see this six-month project as a springboard for a possible major future Institute project in this area.

Concerns about the personal, family and community consequences and costs of continued high rates of marriage breakdown and divorce have focused attention at a national level in Australia and overseas on developing policies and implementing strategies to strengthen marriage and family relationships. Research in this area has identified a 'trajectory toward marital dissolution in which couples remain unhappily married for some time, seriously consider dissolution, actually separate, and then divorce'. This raises important questions of what happens over the course of marriage that leads to an erosion of satisfaction and commitment in some couples and what enables other couples to weather the inevitable stresses and strains that occur in all families. In short, what makes strong families (married and de facto)?

The first stage of this study will analyse the Life Course data to determine the differences between couples who claimed to be happy and those who were not. The second stage will then involve six to eight focus and/or case studies, probably drawn from Life Course respondents. The project will run from April to October 1999 and will culminate in the production of a Working Paper which will not only summarise the findings but will also outline the feasibility and possible design of a new core project on this issue.

6.4(2) Possible successors to the Divorce Transition Project

The second project will relate to some aspect of relationship breakdown. The following themes are currently under consideration:

- A review of the impact of the 1975 Act, quarter of a century on. This would be a major undertaking and would have to involve extensive collaboration with universities and other outside agencies, but given that Australia was the first country to introduce no-fault divorce, and that the Australian Institute of Family Studies was established in some sense to monitor its impact, there is a strong case for the Institute to lead a review aimed to answer the question of whether no-fault divorce has worked better than the system it replaced, and whether it has encouraged or enabled more marriages to break up than would otherwise have occurred.
- An analysis of why rates of break-up of cohabiting unmarried couples with children are so much higher than those of married couples. This project would aim to develop policy proposals aimed at strengthening family ties among those who choose not to marry.
- A study of popular conceptions of 'fairness' and 'social justice' as they relate to no-fault divorce. There is clearly support for the principle that couples should be able to divorce if the marriage has broken down, irrespective of 'fault', but is it 'right' that fault does not figure in the arrangements for property division, child access, and so on?
- More in-depth work on the impact of divorce on children (e.g. 93 per cent of homeless children come from 'broken homes'), and/or the impact of divorce on subsequent family formation.

7. Program Area C: Family and Society

7.1 Key question

As well as adjusting to internal changes, families must also adapt to changes in their external environment. Families contribute to, and are in turn affected by, change in the economy, in community life, and in the organisation of state welfare provision.

To understand the contemporary family in Australia, we have to understand the changing relations between it and these other three sets of social institutions. For example, a decline in the number of traditionally male manual jobs will force an adjustment in the way men and women organise their roles and responsibilities within the family, and reforms in the organisation of the welfare state may require families to meet certain of their needs in new ways. Equally, changes in the family will spill over into other areas of society. For example, changes in the domestic role of women have had profound implications for the world of employment, and the increase in rates of single parenting have resulted in increasing levels of demand on state spending.

This third program area thus focuses broadly on the relation between family change and economic, political and social change. The question to be addressed is:

How are contemporary changes in the economy, the organisation of government services and local community life impacting on the stability of families, and how is family change affecting the functioning of the economy, the demands made on government, and the overall cohesion of Australian society?

7.2 Current core funded project: Families, Social Capital and Citizenship

Background:

The key aim of this project is to document and understand the extent and diversity of formal and informal civic engagement supported by different types of families living in different sorts of communities. This information will be used to inform policy makers of the likely success or failure of different types of intervention (or non-intervention) in different types of areas. In some circumstances, appropriate government intervention can enable family and community life in an area to flourish. In others, government can do more harm than good by unintentionally obliterating or undermining the voluntary self-activity and mutual cooperation which is already going on in an area. The task is to identify the necessary and sufficient conditions which underpin strong community life.

The research aims to inform the growing political and policy concern about the erosion of community networks and social civility, or 'social capital'. Both the right and left of the political spectrum agree that the welfare state 'social contract' between government and its citizens needs to be rewritten.

- The right believes that the welfare state has inadvertently helped to destroy social capital, and has therefore undermined social cohesion, even though it set out to do the very opposite. The welfare state was intended to cement society together by giving everybody equal citizenship rights but is argued to have supplanted the traditional roles of families and communities and to have created a new and growing class of welfare dependents who have little sense of individual responsibility.
- The left, by contrast, blames the market system. It believes that the role of economic exchange has become too dominant in our lives, and that commercial transactions have supplanted the caring, obligation and reciprocity of family and community. As more and more aspects of social life are invaded by the cash nexus, people stop doing things for each other unless there is a payment at the end of it. Social relations are stripped of all but their materialist content and are in consequence reduced to individualised, calculated market exchanges.

It is possible, of course, that both of these explanations are correct. It may be that trust and social capital are eroded by government and by the market, by state welfare and by commercialism. This is where recent interest in the so-called 'third way' becomes relevant, for the 'third way' is precisely based in the claim that we do not have to lock ourselves into the familiar left–right dichotomy of more state versus more market. Where both right and left might be able to agree is that we need to put more emphasis on the third 'pillar' of contemporary society – 'civil society', or the informal, voluntary aspects of association.

The term 'social capital' refers to those aspects of social relations that enable individuals, groups and institutions to interact with each other on a regular basis without the need for coercion or constant resort to legal argument. Social capital will only develop where people are participating in social networks characterised by norms of trust and reciprocity. The family is likely to be crucial for the development of these norms of trust and reciprocity. Our key research question thus concerns the link (if any) between different patterns of family arrangements and the generation of social capital.

This project represents a development of the proposal in an earlier draft of the Institute's research plan for a project on 'Social Exchanges of Australian Families'. The re-orientation has taken account of constructive criticisms of the Social Exchanges project raised by the Board of Management, Institute staff and key personnel of the Department of Family and Community Services, and it has also evolved in response to a high degree of policy interest in the question of social capital expressed by the DF&CS, Prime Minister and Cabinet and other departments, as well as by the World Bank. The Department's interest in this area relates to strategic outcomes of family and community capacity building, and was clearly demonstrated at the recent Institute conference on 'Social Capital and Social Policy' which drew an attendance of 200 policy makers and academics.

Objectives:

The project is designed to investigate the following issues:

- identify a set of indicators measuring social capital at the family and community levels;
- analyse the circumstances in which family networks (within and beyond the household) generate and sustain the norms of trust and reciprocity that build social capital;
- identify the processes and circumstances that lead to the transfer of family level social capital to the civic arena, and distinguish the forms of civic engagement which are promoted by family level social capital;
- understand how different modes of civic engagement (e.g. hierarchical and non-hierarchical organisational structures) may enhance or inhibit the development of social capital in an area;
- conclude from all this regarding the appropriateness of different kinds of government interventions in different kinds of family and community circumstances.

Research design:

Data for the project will mainly be collected from a national random sample of adults via telephone interviewing of the Institute's panel of 10,000 families. A key respondent in each family household will be interviewed to collect information about the family's activities within and beyond the household and within and beyond the locality.

The survey instrument will require valid indicators of the key aspects of social capital including participation, networks, trust and reciprocity. The Australian Living Standards Study, Family Formation Surveys and the Australian Family Life Course Survey, all conducted by the Institute, provide numerous examples of indicators of family size, family participation, and to some indicators of community networks. Little work has

been done previously in the Institute on measuring trust and reciprocity in family and community networks. Most of the current literature on social capital at the family level is derived from surveys not designed for the purpose. The development of indicators to measure social capital at the family level will therefore be an original methodological contribution of the research.

By cross-referencing Institute data with Australian Bureau of Statistics 1996 Census data, the analysis will identify the socio-demographic profiles of types of localities that are characterised by high and low social capital. The project will thus not only reveal the impact of differing family arrangements for social capital, but also what sorts of community level variables are associated with high and low social capital. Combined, these findings will establish the types of locations in which particular forms of government intervention may succeed and why they are likely to do so.

Fieldwork should begin around August 1999 and the project is scheduled to run until mid-2001. It will culminate in the publication of a monograph.

7.3 Current non-core funded research

There are two projects under way in this area involving collaboration with other partners where the Institute is playing a supporting rather than lead role, plus a new contract which has just begun on cultural transmission of income dependency.

7.3(1) Increasing Labour Market Inequality in Australia: Trends, Causes, Implications and Responses

Background:

Collaboration in this Australian Research Council funded, Strategic Partnership with Industry, Research and Training project provides the Institute with working relationships with Australia's leading labour market economists and a range of other important social policy and research organisations. From the Institute's perspective, it complements the focus of the 'Social Capital' core project (which looks primarily at the relation between the family and community) by looking at the relation between the family and aspects of the economy – specifically, employment and income.

The project is funded for three years from 1998–2000. The research is being led by Professor Peter Sheehan (Victoria University of Technology) and Professor Bob Gregory and Dr Jeff Borland (both of the Australian National University). Other collaborative partners include the Brotherhood of St Laurence, the Productivity Commission, the Australian Council of Social Service and the Victorian Government, Strategic Industry Research Foundation.

Objectives:

The aims of the project as a whole are to throw light on four matters:

- changes in the distribution of individual and household earnings, and in the distribution of labour market outcomes more generally over the period 1982–1994;
- the implications of these changes in the distribution of earnings and of other labour market outcomes for poverty and community welfare in Australia, including an assessment of changes in the incidence of low paid jobs and the reality of low paid jobs to poor people;
- the causes of those changes in the distribution of earnings, both for individuals and for families, with special emphasis on the impact of trade and changes in industry structure and of technology;
- the available policy options to reverse the trend towards greater inequality arising from labour market outcomes.

Within this framework of aims, the Institute's role is to study how families in different labour market circumstances draw upon and purchase a mix of services and support. Collaboration in this project also provides access to a new ABS data set to examine the impacts of long term unemployment on family and marital stability.

7.3(2) Australia's Housing Choices: Changing Opportunities and Constraints

Background:

Collaboration in this Australian Research Council funded, Strategic Partnership with Industry, Research and Training collaborative project brings us into working relationships with Australia's leading housing researchers and provides us with access to cross-tabulations of census data that have never before been analysed.

The project is funded for three years from 1998–2000. The research is led by Associate Professor Judy Yates, Department of Economics, University of Sydney, and Dr Maryann Wulff, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute. The other collaborative partners are the Department of Family and Community Services, the Department of Economics, Murdoch University, the School of Geography, Flinders University, the Department of Economics, University of New South Wales, and the Real Estate Industry Association. Ian Winter is the Institute's representative in this partnership, and the work continues earlier Institute research on the family and the housing market.

Objectives:

The aims of this project are to examine the subtle changes occurring in the apparent long-term stability of Australia's housing system over the past 30 years. An analysis of time series data on housing tenure, adequacy and costs, in relation to different age cohorts, income groups and household types is being developed to establish the extent of changing housing opportunities. The nature of these changes and their implications for future housing choices and constraints are of considerable socio-economic and policy significance.

Within the overall aims of this project, the Institute is examining housing system change in relation to its impact upon the structures and relationships of mutual interdependence. Our contribution is to study how households in different housing circumstances draw upon their families, the community, the state and the market to differing degrees and in different ways to meet their housing needs. This work thus represents an 'application' to the problem of housing of the sorts of issues being explored in the 'Social Capital' core project.

7.3(3) Transgenerational Income Support Dependence

Background:

At present there is only one core project under way in Program Area C. At some point we hope to develop a second project in this area on some aspect of welfare state dependency. With this in mind, the Institute (successfully) tendered for a Department of Family and Community Services four-month contract which called for research to explain the known correlation between income support dependency of adults, and a tendency for their children also to end up on some form of income support. The project runs from March to June 1999 inclusive.

Objectives:

This is a good example of the way the Institute intends in the future to use contract work to complement its core work. The Department has accepted our desire to use this material for our own purposes, once the final report has been submitted, which means we can effectively use this research as an exploratory study perhaps leading to a more substantial core project later in the year.

The immediate objectives of the study are to consider whether there is a 'culture of dependency' which is transmitted from parents to their children. The study will analyse young people's attitudes and values regarding employment, education, state dependency and future family formation, comparing these with the values and attitudes of their parents as well as with those of their peers. Essentially, we shall look to see if there is any evidence for the emergence of an 'underclass' culture among 16–18 year olds in Australia.

Research design:

The study is in two phases. In Phase I, interviews using CATI are being conducted with paired samples of parents and children drawn from our core data base (the old Life Course panel), and statistical analysis will determine whether there is a significant association between them. In Phase 2, 16 focus groups, recruited from among the friends of some of these interviewees, and reflecting a diversity of socio-economic and family backgrounds, will be conducted to get more in-depth material on youth attitudes to work, education, family and state welfare, as well as analysing the dynamics of peer group pressure on the formation and stability of such values.

8. Research on Youth Suicide Prevention

Lying outside of the three Program Areas is the Youth Suicide Prevention project. The future of this project in the Institute has recently been reviewed and a decision has been taken that it should remain as a 'free-standing' unit, funded by the Commonwealth Government.

The future model for this project is the National Child Protection Clearing House. As we saw (section 5.3), the Clearing House has a semi-autonomous role within the Institute and has recently developed its research functions. The Youth Suicide Prevention project is similar. The Youth Suicide Prevention Communications Project has assembled a data base of 919 projects Australia-wide which enables it now to provide information on a wide variety of activities and programs which are directly or indirectly involved in the prevention of youth suicide. It is proposed that this data base be used for developing a future research role (e.g. by responding to commissioning of research aimed at identifying 'good practice', or by analysing strategic approaches as they apply to specific risk groups). This is in addition to continuing the Clearing House role (publishing material on youth suicide prevention and support access by various user groups), and maintaining dissemination via the Youth Suicide Prevention Web site and the thrice-yearly Bulletins.

The Youth Suicide Prevention project is located at the Australian Institute of Family Studies for specific historical reasons, but we would hope that over time, it might develop as a possible 'fourth arm' of the research strategy, dealing specifically with youth, but not just with youth suicide. Just as the National Child Protection Clearing House deals with an 'extreme end' of the continuum of child rearing, namely physical and sexual abuse, so too the Youth Suicide Prevention project deals with the 'extreme end' of a continuum of youth issues. But just as the work of Clearing House has obvious connections with the wider issue of child rearing and parenting, so too the work of the Youth Suicide Prevention project inevitably spills over into other, related concerns such as youth homelessness, youth criminality, and youth drug abuse. One possibility, therefore, is that the Youth Suicide Prevention project might in time send up a number of 'new shoots' in related areas such as these – areas into which, given the resources, the Institute would be very keen to extend its research.

9. Staffing Profile Summary

At the time of going to press (April 1999), there are 18 members of research staff at the Australian Institute of Family Studies. They have in the past been spread over several different projects at the same time, but that is now being phased out as distinct research teams are established. At present, staff allocations are as follows:

Research Manager: Peter Saunders

Research Support Unit:

- Surveys Manager: Helen Glezer
- Statistician: Vacant
- Family Trends Monitoring: Christine Kilmartin
- CATI Manager: Diana Amos

Area A: Children and Parenting:

- Head of Program: Vacant
- Head of National Child Protection Clearing House: Adam Tomison
- Senior Research Fellow: Ruth Weston
- Research Officers: Violet Kolar*, Sarah Wise*

Area B: Family and Marriage

- Head of Program: Vacant
- Senior Research Fellow: Ilene Wolcott
- Research Fellow: Grania Sheehan*
- Research Officers: Jody Hughes, Jane Muggleton, Robyn Parker, Bruce Smyth

Area C: Family and Society

- Head of Program: Vacant
- Senior Research Fellows: Andrew Burbidge, Ian Winter
- Research Fellow: Christine Millward
- Research Officers: Lixia Qu, Wendy Stone

* denotes currently acting higher duties