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Couple relationships in Australia today: Changing attitudes, influences and sharing of assets and financial and family responsibilities

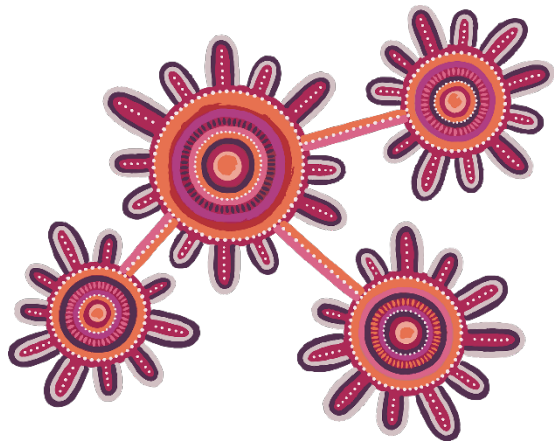
Dr Rachel Carson – Australian Institute of Family Studies

AIFS Conference 2026 – 10 September 2026

Acknowledgement of Country



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The Australian Institute of Family Studies acknowledges the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Australia and recognises their continuing connection to lands and waters. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, and to Elders past and present.



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Trends in the family formation and couple relationships

Families in Australia – key statistics



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- 5.5 million (5,552,973) **couple families**: 43.7% of Australian families)
- 1.1 million (1,068,268) **single/lone parents**: 15.9% of Australian families)
- 2,608,834 million **couple families do not have children** (38.3% of all families and trend increasing steadily)

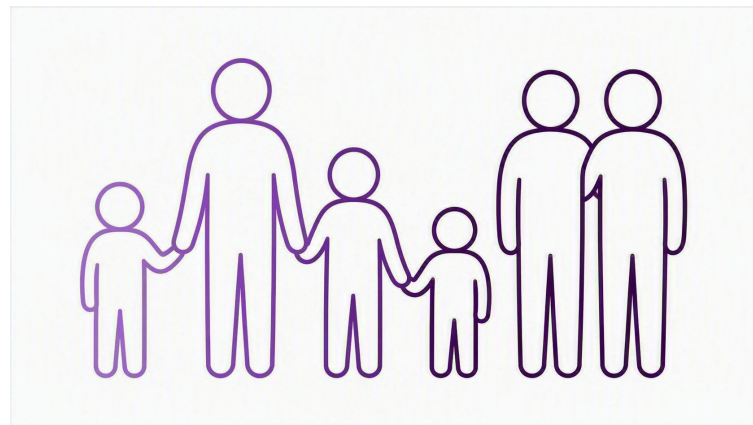


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Families in Australia – key statistics



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- **78,425 same-sex/gender couples living together:**
 - mainly in NSW and Vic
 - 1/3 were married
 - median age of same-sex/gender partners is 40 years
- **Relationship status of those aged over 18:**
 - 8,747,135 people are married
 - 2,168,351 people are in a de facto relationship (including same-sex/gender)
 - 7,863,327 people are not married

Key trends – relationship formation



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- 2025: **marriage rate** continues the long-term downward trend after a temporary pause in 2024, and couples are marrying later.
 - Australia's population has more than doubled since 1970, but the latest marriage data released by the ABS show only 118,804 marriages registered in 2025 (cf. 116,066 registered in 1970).
 - The **crude marriage rate** (number of marriages per 1,000 eligible residents) has declined since the 1970s
 - 1975: 10.6
 - 2025: 5.3

Crude marriage rate

per 1,000 eligible residents

10.6



1975

5.3

2025

Halved in 50 years

Source: ABS: Marriages and Divorces, 2026.
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Key trends – relationship formation



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- Most marriages are **first marriages**: 74% in 2024
- **Median age** at marriage:
 - 1971: 23.4 years for men and 21.1 years for women
 - 2025: 32.7 years for men and 31.2 years for women

Key trends – relationship formation



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- **Most couples now live together before marrying:**
 - 81% of marriages preceded by cohabitation in 2024 (cf. 16% in 1975).
- Most marriages are by a **civil celebrant**: in 2024: 83.2% (cf. 11.9% in 1970).
- Most marriages were by a **minister of religion** in 1970: 88% (cf. 16.4 in 2024).
- 4,636 **same-sex/gender or non-binary gender marriages** were registered in 2025 down by 2.3% from the 4,746 marriages registered in 2024.

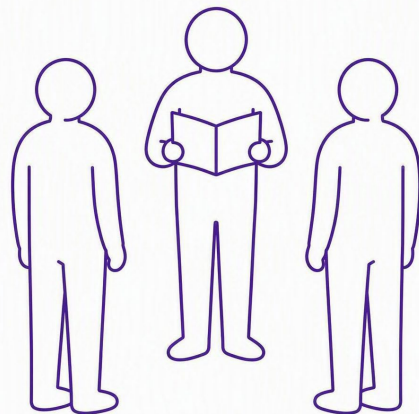


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Changing attitudes and influences on marriage and de facto relationships

Social changes



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- **Changing social attitudes** towards marriage, cohabitation and of LGBTIQ+ people and their relationships, with greater acceptance of diversity growing in Australia.
- **Cohabiting relationships have become increasingly common**, especially among young people, and cohabitation without the intention of marrying has also become increasingly accepted.
- There is also **general acceptance for an unhappy marriage to end**, even if there are children involved.
- **Knowledge of the law relevant to couple relationships** may influence relationship arrangements.
- **Relationship intentions and goals** can also inform choice of relationship arrangements.



How do Australian couples manage their assets and share family and financial responsibilities?

Insights from HILDA and other research



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- Arrangements for assets and financial resources:

- pooling approaches
- individualised approaches
- mixed approaches

(See Evans & Gray, 2021; Fehlberg, 2025; Hewitt & Vidal, 2025; Huang et al., 2016, 2019; Perelli-Harris et al., 2019)

- Arrangements for financial and family responsibilities:

‘Specialisation’ in relation to paid employment and family and household tasks:

- highest among women who were married and had not cohabitated before marriage
- lowest among de facto couples
- somewhere in-between for couples who cohabitated before marrying.

See Stratton, 2023; Cano & Gracia, 2022; Fehlberg et al., 2025; Herzberg-Druker, 2025, Alexander 2024, Baxter, 2021, Warren et al., 2020)



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Is the law keeping pace?

Questions for future research



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- What role should the law play in addressing disadvantage for women and children, especially where there is unequal bargaining power when negotiating relationship arrangements for the management of assets and family and financial responsibilities?
- To understand whether more or less intervention is needed to address disadvantage, further data are needed on:
 - how and why couples in Australia make their financial and family arrangements
 - the dynamics at play when these arrangements are made
 - the context and dynamics when post-separation arrangements are made and the factors informing these outcomes.

See further Fehlborg, 2025.