The focus of this issue of *Family Matters* on ‘Caring’ is timely. As the two Australian Government intergenerational reports indicate, across the next forty years Australia faces major challenges related to demographic and social change. Demographically, the ageing of the population and the decrease in the proportion of Australians aged 15 to 64, together with the steady increase in those aged over 65 and the relative reduction in the child population, means that the ratio of Australians of working age to those aged 65 and above will reduce from around 5:1 to around 2:1, by 2047. Over that time, the population of those aged 85 and over will quadruple with clear implications for the health budget and the funding of aged pensions. Socially, the trend to an increasing proportion of families with both parents in the labour force is one with the likely increase in the proportion of single parent families also has implications for families and their caring roles. As several of the articles in this issue highlight, the unpaid contribution of carers is substantial. Access Economics estimates that annually this contributes unpaid work to the value of $30.5 billion. Demographic change means that social change in a way that will have clear implications for many families. Changes in the proportion of working families, likely trends for people to remain in employment for longer, the increasing proportion of families who have responsibility both for the care of dependent children and for their own parents - the “sandwich” generation - and the changing context of parenting in Australia. I congratulate Dr Daryl Higgins for assembling papers that address a wide range of issues relating to caring for this themed issue of *Family Matters* and for his excellent executive editorship.

**Research Developments**

**The impact of drought on Australian families**

While the recent drought is one of the most severe in at least 100 years, drought occurs frequently in many parts of Australia. Its economic and social impacts are far-reaching. It also has impacts on health and on the stability of families. Most of the previous research has focused on economic impacts and there are few studies specifically examining the impact of drought on the wellbeing of families and communities in rural regions of the nation. Its impacts however are not only on those families directly involved in primary production but also on the many families whose work supports and caters to the needs of farm families. The Institute has recently deployed some of its own resources to fund a study that will address the impacts of drought on families. Much more needs to be known about not only the financial impacts, but also the effects on family relationships and wellbeing, the extent to which families are forced to relocate, to change their decisions around the education of children, to alter their demand and use of services, as well as the overall effects of drought on the social capital in drought affected communities. This is a ground-breaking study and I look forward to the reports flowing from this work. Dr Matthew Gray, Deputy Director (Research) is leading the team with involvement of Dr Boyd Hunter from the Australian National University and Professor David De Vaus from La Trobe University.

**The Family Law Evaluation**

As I have indicated previously, the Institute is actively involved in the evaluation of the family law reforms. The evaluation examines aspects of the service provision through qualitative studies, staff surveys, client surveys and analysis of program data, primarily from the Family Relationships Services Program on-line. In addition, the work that the Institute completed prior to the introduction of the first elements of the reforms on 1 July 2006, will be repeated to enable evaluation of the changes occurring subsequent to the implementation of the reforms. A general population survey will be repeated in mid-2008, as will analyses of other data sources including those from the Australian Bureau of Statistics and from the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey, and Growing Up in Australia: the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC). In addition, legislative and legal processes will be examined by repeating the Survey of Family Lawyers and conducting a study of court processes. Children’s views will feature prominently with planning underway for a possible adolescent study. Following from the recently released report on the Allegations of family violence and child abuse in family law children’s proceedings, a major focus of all components will be how the system handles issues of family violence. The evaluation will focus on the policy objectives of the reform package to help prevent separation and build strong, healthy family relationships; to encourage greater involvement by both parents in their children’s lives after separation and also protect children from violence and abuse; to provide information, advice and dispute resolution services to help parents agree on what is best for their children rather than contesting parenting proposals in the courtroom; and to have a new entry point that provides a doorway to other services that families need and which facilitates access to those services. Ruth Weston and Michael Alexander lead an expanded Relationships and Family Law Team.

**Family wellbeing**

From the outset, the Institute has had a prime focus on family wellbeing. In addition to its own research, Institute researchers contribute to a number of groups focused on family wellbeing. A new project we are about to undertake will synthesise existing data on the wellbeing of Australian children and families. The aim is to compile up-to-date information that enables policymakers to address the key factors that build family wellbeing and promote the cohesion and strength of relationships, as well as identifying the factors that contribute to vulnerability and risk.

**Longitudinal Research**

The Institute is involved in a suite of longitudinal studies. We are progressively expanding our capacity both for the management of these projects and the analysis of the data they generate.

**Stronger Families in Australia**

The Stronger Families in Australia (SFIA) study is a key part of the national evaluation of the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy, which the Institute is undertaking in collaboration with the lead agency, the Social Policy Research Centre at the University of New South Wales. Wave 1 of the study was completed in July 2006 and the data are currently being analysed. These data provide baseline information on 1,450 children in ten “Communities for Children” sites and 720 children in five comparison sites, matched on a range of demographic control population characteristics. Wave 2 of the study went into the field in February and was completed by the end of April, this year. The first longitudinal analyses using Wave 1 and Wave 2 data are progressing underway. The final wave is planned to be in the field by February 2008. This SFIA study is breaking new ground in applying longitudinal comparative evaluation methods to a major early intervention and prevention initiative.
Longitudinal study of relationships

To understand the factors that make families strong and that prevent relationship breakdown, it is vital to explore the pathways that Australians take from the initial formation of a relationship and its history throughout life. Starting with a study of a randomly selected sample of Australians that are currently involved with the new family law system, the Institute has been asked to scope a large-scale longitudinal study of parents who separated since the recent family law reforms were introduced. This will be a unique study in the Australian context and one with few comparable initiatives elsewhere.

Growing Up in Australia: the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC)

There is a very pleasing flow of reports detailing analyses of the first wave of LSAC data, both by the Institute’s researchers and a growing set of researchers nationally and internationally. Already over 40 major reports, publications and presentations have flowed from Wave 1. In addition, the second wave of LSAC data has now been collected and is in the process of preparation for release later this year. Planning of the third wave of data collection is now well underway and a questionnaire is being developed to be administered between Waves 2 and 3. Part of this questionnaire has been funded by the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR) and examines the impact of returning to work on the families participating in LSAC. Another part is funded by the Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaCSIA) and will address issues related to child support. Between-waves contact with respondents is beneficial for minimising sample attrition while collecting valuable information on specific topics not covered in the main waves of data collection. The Institute continues to work with Film Australia in the development of Life at 2, a web-based analogue of the very successful television documentary that screened last year, and planning is underway for the next television production Life at 3. The early success of LSAC and the pleasing expansion of the number of researchers actively using the information, along with its recognised policy value, highlight the importance of studies that track the development of children and families over life. It is hoped that LSAC will continue beyond the time for which it is currently funded.

Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA)

I was pleased to read of the commitment of $20.9 million over four years to extend the Australian Government’s HILDA survey. The Melbourne Institute is the lead agency for HILDA and our Institute is responsible for the design of items related to family variables. Like LSAC, HILDA is clearly demonstrating its value to policymakers and practitioners.

Indigenous Family Research

The response to the last edition of Family Matters on Indigenous families has been most gratifying. Dr Matthew Gray is to be congratulated on the outstanding success of that issue. It was especially timely given that this year marks the 40th anniversary of the 1967 referendum which removed references in the Australian Constitution discriminating against Indigenous peoples. The Institute is currently exploring ways to support the celebrations that are planned to mark this historic anniversary. We are also actively pursuing ways to support Indigenous researchers through traineeships designed to increase their research capacity.

International Links

In late March, Dr Matthew Gray and I had the opportunity to visit Wellington as guests of the New Zealand Families Commission and to meet with representatives of the New Zealand Families Commission. The early success of LSAC and HILDA are being congratulated on the outstanding success of that issue. It was especially timely given that this year marks the 40th anniversary of the 1967 referendum which removed references in the Australian Constitution discriminating against Indigenous peoples. The Institute is currently exploring ways to support the celebrations that are planned to mark this historic anniversary. We are also actively pursuing ways to support Indigenous researchers through traineeships designed to increase their research capacity.

Concluding Thoughts

I am impressed by the way in which staff at the Institute have adapted to our new premises at 485 La Trobe Street, Melbourne. The speed with which they returned to ‘business as usual’ was most impressive. There is a steady flow of completed research and pleasing growth both in our range of projects and our capacity to meet these commitments. Now that we have settled into our new home my eye is squarely on the future of some of our flagship research endeavours such as LSAC and the growing significance of our work in the areas of relationships and family law. We continue to extend our links across the Australian Government and to ensure that our work reaches, and is understood by, the widest possible audience. This is a very exciting time for the Institute and I continue to be honoured to lead an organisation that is so clearly committed to the pursuit of excellence.