New administration arrangements

Following the election of the new Government and associated administrative changes to Commonwealth departments and agencies, the Institute has joined the Prime Minister and Cabinet portfolio. The Institute remains a statutory agency and retains its strong links with other departments and agencies, including the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) and the Attorney-General’s Department (AGD).

Several departments have changed their responsibilities and names following the change of government, including the Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaCSIA), which is now the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA). In this edition, the previous names are used, which reflects the situation at the time of the writing of the articles.

Family relationships

The British philosopher John Macmurray (1961) observed that “the personal is constituted by the relation of persons” (p. 51). In large part, who we are reflects the relationships that have influenced our lives. Relationships affect us both directly through their behavioural and emotional impacts as well as through the ways in which we interpret and reflect on them, over time. As a social species, humans are vitally sensitive to the quality of their relationships and the contents of their interactions. The focus on relationships is both perennial and timely. Relationships can be the glue that binds us together and the wedge that cleaves us apart. Strong family relationships are fundamental to the cohesiveness and character of a society: fractured family relationships can be the source of damage and distress that spans lifetimes and crosses generations. The contemporary focus on supporting family relationships is welcome. A growing emphasis on early intervention and prevention is balanced by a practical recognition of the need to minimise harm to all concerned, but especially to children, when relationships break down. I congratulate Rae Kaspiew, Catherine Caruana and Ruth Weston for the excellent executive editorship of this themed issue of Family Matters. It is a theme that is central to the Institute’s work and the assembled articles provide a fresh set of insights into the state of contemporary Australian family relationships, their prospects, problems and current approaches to their support.

Relationships and family law reform

National evaluation

As I have previously indicated, the Institute is conducting an evaluation of the family law reforms. The elements of the evaluation include an examination of the new service delivery model funded from the Australian Government’s Family Relationship Services Program (FRSP). This program provides expanded funding for a range of existing services, as well as the establishment of 65 new Family Relationship Centres, designed to provide family dispute resolution services, a single-entry point to other services that families may need to build strong, healthy relationships, and assistance with child-focused arrangements in the event of separation. The team has been consulting widely with the family services sector, advising them of the evaluation, and getting their feedback on the proposed methodology. This consultation included attendance at the second biennial FRSP conference in Melbourne on 1–2 August.

The evaluation will also examine the impacts of the changes in the law in this area, as set out in the Family Law Amendment (Shared Parental Responsibility) Act 2006. This Act introduced far-reaching changes to both the process and the substantive legal principles for resolving parenting disputes and is integral to the policy objectives of shared care, protection from violence and abuse, and non-court-based resolution of parenting disagreements.

Another key element is the Longitudinal Study of Separated Parents. This large-scale survey will provide insight into the pathways that family relationships take following separation. It will also examine the impacts of the recent changes to the Child Support Scheme, rules about shared care. Other related studies will include surveys of parents who separated prior to the new family law reforms coming into effect on 1 July 2006, and of adolescents from separated families.

Family violence report

The report, Allegations of Family Violence and Child Abuse in Family Law Children’s Proceedings: A Pre-Reform Exploratory Study (by Lawrie Moloney, Bruce Smyth, Ruth Weston, Nicholas Richardson, Lixia Qu and Matthew Gray) has stimulated a great deal of interest from policy makers, practitioners and the public. Institute staff have been invited to present the results to a range of meetings, seminars and conferences, including the Annual Judges Conference (Melbourne, 11 August), the Legal Aid Commission of NSW Family Law Conference (Sydney, 3 August), and the Relationship Support Network Meeting (Australian National University, 17 July).

Magellan Project

This project was commissioned by the Family Court of Australia and examines the effectiveness of the Court’s Magellan case management system for responding to allegations of sexual abuse or serious physical abuse of children. The project’s final evaluation report (Higgins, 2007) was completed in October. This too is an important project that will inform the way the Court manages allegations of sexual and physical abuse of children. This is another example of how the Institute’s research informs the development of policy and practice.

The Australian Family Relationships Clearinghouse

The Institute’s national clearinghouses are a vital part of fulfilling the key objective of informing the Australian community about research into family issues. They have successfully met this objective. In 2006–2007, the Institute added a fourth clearinghouse – the Australian Family Relationships Clearinghouse (AFRC). It specifically aims to improve the well-being of families and children by supporting practitioners, service providers and policy makers in the development and delivery of family and relationship programs, ranging from prevention and early intervention to post-separation services. The AFRC became fully operational in September 2006 with its website launch. The material disseminated by the AFRC will enhance understanding of research into family relationships, and will inform the development and evaluation of high-quality services.
programs to support Australian family relationships. It is a very significant addition to the Institute’s capacity, and one of the most exciting changes to its profile this year. Interest in the clearinghouse has been impressive, with more than 50,000 pages downloaded from its website in its first nine months of operation.

**Stronger Families in Australia**

The evaluation of the Stronger Families and Community Strategy, including the Communities for Children (CfC) program, involves a multifaceted approach undertaken by the Institute in collaboration with the lead agency, the Social Policy Research Centre at the University of New South Wales. A core component of the evaluation of the CfC program is a longitudinal study of families, the Stronger Families in Australia (SFIA) study, which the Institute manages.

The SFIA study is following 2,202 children, aged two years at the time of the first wave of the survey, and their families. Approximately 145 parents of two-year-old children in each of the fifteen communities were interviewed at Wave 1. Interviews for the first wave were conducted over the period June to August 2006 (baseline). This was prior to the CfC program being implemented. The second and third waves of interviews are being conducted after the implementation of the CfC program. The second wave has been conducted over the period March to June 2007, with a response rate of 92 per cent of families that participated in Wave 1. The third wave is scheduled to commence in February 2008.

As part of the survey, the primary carer of the child (usually the mother) is interviewed. Primary caregivers are asked a range of questions on the wellbeing of the child and the family. Questions are also asked about the use of services. The measures of wellbeing that have been included in the survey relate to the four priority areas of the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy: healthy young families; supporting families and parents; early learning and care; and child-friendly communities.

Given the complexity of the study, a principled approach to the statistical analysis is being used to evaluate the CfC program using data from SFIA. A report outlining the data considerations and statistical methods to be employed has been completed. Preliminary data analysis on Waves 1 and 2 is currently underway.

**FaCSIA Family Wellbeing Framework**

The Institute hosted a series of family wellbeing workshops with the Australian Government Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaCSIA), from 16–18 July, 2007.

A draft Family Wellbeing Framework is being developed by FaCSIA as a departmental tool to provide a better understanding of the influences on family wellbeing, the changing nature of Australian families, and the impacts of interventions.

The key principles that underpin the draft FaCSIA framework include:

- A primary focus on families and, in particular, measuring the things that families do that are distinct from measures of individual, community and societal wellbeing;
- A need to understand families as agents in the wider environment;
- Recognising that families help to shape social and economic life; and
- Understanding that families are defined by what they do rather than what they are.

The series of workshops hosted by the Institute provided an important opportunity to discuss and reflect on the empirical evidence describing the factors that impact on families in Australia.

**Partnerships and networks**

The Institute places priority on developing stronger partnerships and networks across government and with the community. Strategic partnerships extend the research capacity of the Institute, and enable more effective knowledge transfer to those with prime responsibility for the development of policy and services for Australian families. Recent examples include the strengthening of our partnerships with FaCSIA and the Attorney-General’s Department, signing a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), and developing closer working relationships with the Australian Centre for Child Protection at the University of South Australia and Odyssey House. These add to our collaborative links with the University of Melbourne, La Trobe University, the University of Adelaide and the Social Policy Research Centre at the University of New South Wales. A new relationship is being developed with the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, particularly the newly established Office of Work and Family and the Social Inclusion Unit.

**New Zealand Families Commission**

In March 2007, Matthew Gray and I travelled to Wellington, New Zealand, to take part in collaborative exchanges with the New Zealand Families Commission. This partnership opportunity provides a valuable extension of the Institute’s capacity and influence, as well as exciting prospects for staff exchanges.

**Collaboration with the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare**

In 2006, the Australian Institute of Family Studies signed an MoU with the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. This year, the Institute and AIHW commenced what we hope will be the first of many fruitful collaborations between the two organisations with the joint undertaking of the Comparability of Child Protection Data project. The project is being conducted by staff from the National Child Protection Clearinghouse at the Institute, in collaboration with staff from the Children, Youth and Families Unit at AIHW, and under the guidance and direction of the National Child Protection and Support Services (NCPASS) Working Group. Prue Holzer from the Institute has completed a four-week placement at AIHW where she worked collaboratively to scope the project, determine the methodology, and develop the data collection materials. The project provides an excellent example of the way in which the complementary skills and knowledge held within the Institute and AIHW can be paired through collaboration to enhance the outcomes of projects in which we are involved.

**Director’s activities**

**National Families Week:** The week 13–19 May 2007 was National Families Week. To mark this occasion, and to inform the community about its work, the Institute developed and distributed a Facts Sheet that provided a snapshot of the way Australian families spend their time. This information sheet supported the aim of the week, which was to encourage families to spend more time together. I was delighted to take the role of Ambassador for Families Week 2007, to help in promoting the vital
importance of the family in Australian society, and to highlight the Institute’s role in supporting the needs of Australian families.

**Australian Social Policy Conference:** In July I attended the Australian Social Policy Conference, held at the University of New South Wales. The conference was excellent and the Institute had a strong presence. I was delighted at the extent of interest in the Institute and its publications.

**Wellbeing Symposium:** Matthew Gray, Daryl Higgins, Leah Bromfield and I attended the National Family Wellbeing Symposium held in Canberra from 20–21 June 2007. The Symposium was an initiative of Families Australia, in conjunction with the National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health at the Australian National University College of Medicine and Health Sciences.

**Inquiry into Impact of Illicit Drugs on Families:** On 19 June, Daryl Higgins, Matthew Gray and I appeared in Canberra before the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Human Services in relation to the Inquiry on the Impact of Illicit Drug Use on Families. The Inquiry was chaired by the Hon. Bronwyn Bishop, MP.

**National Work and Family Awards:** On 18 July, I attended the Work and Families Awards Dinner in Sydney, at which the winners of the 2007 National Work and Family Awards were presented by the then Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations. Michael Alexander and I are on the Judging Panel for the Awards. The site visits provide an invaluable window into the innovative practices developed by workplaces to ensure that they are family friendly.

**Australian Families and Children Council:** On 24 July, I attended the inaugural meeting of the newly formed Australian Families and Children Council (AFCC). The role of the AFCC is to provide expert and strategic advice on policy and program development to the Minister for Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, with a view to improving outcomes for children, families and the communities in which they live.

**International visitors**

During her recent July visit to Melbourne, the Institute had the pleasure of welcoming Professor Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, the Virginia and Leonard Marx Professor of Child Development at Teachers College and the College of Physicians and Surgeons at Columbia University. Professor Brooks-Gunn attended the Institute on 2 July 2007, where she met with researchers from the Family Law Reform Evaluation team and from the *Grozeing up in Australia*: the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) team.

On Friday 17 August, I was delighted to welcome Mrs Ismail Ellias, Deputy Director, Family Services Division, Singapore Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS); and Mr Lau Khee Pheng, Assistant Director/Guidance, Singapore Ministry of Education.

Other recent visitors included Karen Wong, Policy and Research Manager from the Families Commission of New Zealand, and Professor Beckie Adams from Ball State University, Indiana, USA.

**Conference**

**Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC)**

The inaugural Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) Research Conference was held from 3–4 December 2007 in Melbourne at the Oaks Hotel on Collins Street. The aim of the conference was to provide a forum for the discussion of research based on LSAC data and to highlight its research potential, and was an excellent opportunity for us to showcase our LSAC work and to share the work that colleagues are doing using LSAC data. Attendance at the conference was open to all persons interested in LSAC, and longitudinal survey research in general. It was an outstanding event.

The aim of the conference was to:

- promote the use of LSAC data;
- build a community of users;
- encourage policy-relevant research;
- improve the quality of research undertaken by using LSAC data; and
- provide a forum for the discussion of research based on LSAC data.

**Information and communication**

The Institute’s commitment to communicating its research to the broader Australian community continues through a very active program of publication, the dissemination capacity of its four clearinghouses, its Internet presence and engagement with the media. Again this year the media profile has been high, with a mix of media mentions that are directly about the Institute’s research, combined with contributions to the general public examination of family trends and related issues. The total media mentions in the last financial year was 972, and these were exclusively positive. Coverage was truly national, with our comment being sought from Townsville to Albany, Melbourne to Perth, Darwin to Devonport, and many cities and towns in between. Interest in the Institute’s work grew steadily and the impact of its publications was again demonstrated through substantial increases in the use of its website, and through the extensive media coverage of Institute research.

**Concluding thoughts**

The focus on relationships has been central to the Institute since its inception. As our work for the national evaluation of the family law reforms proceeds, it highlights the significance of Australia’s commitment to strengthening and supporting family relationships. The investment in greater capacity within the Institute to undertake this work has been a key strategic priority. The results of the groundbreaking evaluation will be progressively shared with readers of *Family Matters* and a range of other Institute publications.

**References**
