Celebrating 30 years of research

This year, the Institute celebrates its 30th year of conducting research to further our understanding of issues affecting families. It is important to acknowledge the foundations that have been laid by those who have come before us. Like any organisation, we stand on the shoulders of the many members of staff who have contributed so much to building the Institute and sustaining over the last three decades its capacity to contribute research that stimulates debate and informs policy. The vision of our founding Director, Don Edgar, and my other predecessors—Peter McDonald, Marie Coleman, Harry McGurk, David Stanton and Ann Sanson—remains alive today and continues to inspire all at the Institute to work with dedication to ensure that our research remains rigorous, relevant and responsive to the needs of Australian families and those responsible for developing policies that affect them. In this our 30th year, we reaffirm our commitment to researching issues and providing information that assists policy-makers and practitioners to support Australia’s families as we move together towards a vibrant though inevitably challenging future.

It is interesting to note through a quick review of Family Matters editions from the 1980s and early 1990s that many of the issues that were topical then are still of relevance now, although some of the terminology may have changed. Some of the issues that have been of continuing import include work–family balance, family law reforms, child care, families in rural and regional areas, family violence, Indigenous families and grandparenting. While these broad topics remain relevant and no doubt will continue to be important to policy-makers and the general public alike, over the years the emphases of the research have been fine-tuned and re-oriented as our understandings have deepened and become more refined, and as the local, national and international contexts have changed. No doubt new challenges await us, but the Institute will continue to focus on those issues that are of most relevance to families now and in the future.

2nd Longitudinal Study of Australian Children Conference

On 3 December last year, I had the pleasure of opening the 2nd Growing Up in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children Research (LSAC) Conference and welcoming delegates to this two-day event, once again held in Melbourne. Participants came from throughout Australia as well as from New Zealand, Singapore, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States. The conference attracted researchers, policy-makers and practitioners. Their involvement attests to the value of the findings from LSAC as a sound evidence base for a range of policy areas and programs to support children and families. Over 40 papers were presented by leading child development, health and family wellbeing researchers, addressing a diverse range of topics, including child health, disadvantage, education, work and family balance, time use, language acquisition, family factors in child development, and advances in longitudinal methodology.

Professor Andrew Leigh from the Australian National University provided the first keynote address, presenting newly completed analyses of LSAC data (with Chikako Yamauchi) that explores non-parental care and the extent of benefits for children from different backgrounds. LSAC Principal Scientific Adviser, Professor Ann Sanson, from the University of Melbourne, presented the second keynote address. Co-authored with Diana Smart and Sebastian Misson, Professor Sanson’s presentation explored the determinants of children’s physical, cognitive and socio-emotional outcomes.

Aside from opening the conference and launching the 2008–09 LSAC Annual Report showcasing the recent achievements of LSAC, I had the pleasure of announcing the new memorandum of understanding (MoU) between the Institute, the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) and the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). The MoU continues LSAC for another 4 waves to 2019, taking the younger cohort of children in the study to 14 and 15 years old and the older to 18 and 19 years. With this extension of the study, LSAC will provide yet further information on the pathways Australian children take through life and the factors that influence their outcomes from infancy to young adulthood.

Media interest—in the lead-up to, during and after the conference—again was extensive, with around 30 separate press articles based on conference material and many syndicated Internet articles, television and radio broadcasts. The extent of media coverage highlights the interest in LSAC nationally and internationally.

The conference showcases the continued success of the study. The LSAC team—led by General Manager (Research), Diana Smart—are a vital ingredient in that success, as is the continuing willingness of the participants to provide such rich information to be used by an ever-growing band of researchers here and abroad.

Evaluation of the 2006 Family Law Reforms

For the past three years, the Institute has been working under commission to the Australian Government to undertake a national evaluation of the 2006 reforms to Australia’s family law system. Just before Christmas 2009,
the Institute submitted its final report to the Attorney-General’s Department.

Launched by the Attorney-General, the Hon. Robert McClelland MP, on 28 January, the Institute’s three-year long evaluation is the most comprehensive examination of the family law and service system undertaken in Australia, and arguably in any country. The report shines light on how families and children fare in the system following separation and divorce. Specifically, the Institute evaluated the extent to which the intended objectives of the reforms have been met and their effects.

The evaluation comprised several interconnected projects collectively designed to measure the impact of the 2006 changes on the court system, on service provision and on families themselves. The projects tracked the impact of key themes in the package—the sharing of parenting responsibilities, child safety and child focus—on the practices and attitudes of parents, service system providers and legal system players.

With more than a million Australian children currently living in separated families, it is clearly very important to have reliable evidence about the ways in which separated couples—both within and outside the family law system—resolve parenting arrangements, make decisions about their children and conduct their relationships. AIFS is proud to have had the opportunity, through its evaluation, to help build a strong evidence base in this complex and often fraught area of social policy.

**Evaluation findings**

Drawing on the experiences of 28,000 Australians, the Institute’s evaluation found that, overall, the recent reforms are working well for the majority of children and their parents. There is greater use of family relationship services, a decline in court filings and some evidence of a shift away from people going straight to court to resolve post-separation relationship difficulties.

However, the Institute also found significant concerns about how the family law system responds to families and children who are exposed to abuse and violence. There was clear evidence that, while there have been some positive developments, the family law system has some way to go in effectively responding to family violence and child abuse, mental health and substance misuse. Safety concerns reported by parents were linked to poorer outcomes for their children in all types of care arrangements, and the worst outcomes being experienced by children in shared care arrangements where there were ongoing concerns about safety.

The Institute concluded that there is a need, across the system, for greater access to finely tuned assessment and screening mechanisms undertaken by highly trained and experienced professionals, and for information to be shared more effectively between family relationship services, lawyers and the courts.

**Partnering with government**

The Institute made a submission in November 2009 in response to the consultation paper circulated by the Advisory Committee on the Reform of Australian Government Administration. We were pleased to note in our submission that, in recent years, the Institute has steadily evolved in a manner that is congruent with the approaches flagged in the consultation paper for the public sector in the future.

To promote knowledge flows to those with prime responsibility for the development of policies and services, the Institute is strategically extending and strengthening our partnerships and networks with governments, research and community sectors as well as facilitating local, national and international collaborations. Building partnerships and actively participating in networks within and across government agencies and between the research and community sectors, has become our standard approach to conducting research and disseminating research findings. Our multidisciplinary reference and advisory groups and our five clearingshouses further demonstrate the Institute’s commitment to knowledge sharing and knowledge transfer.

Strategic partnerships with a range of organisations have assumed increasing importance for the Institute. In 2009–10, the Institute entered into new memoranda of understanding (MoUs) with the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), and with the Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC). Our MoUs with FaHCSIA and with the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) were each renewed in 2009 for a further three and five years respectively. Together, these extend the Institute’s organisational capability to generate the research and analysis to address the increasingly complex needs of Australian families today.

**Carer’s Week**

In October 2009, Drs Ben Edwards and Matthew Gray and I attended the launch of Carer’s Week by the Governor-General, Ms Quentin Bryce AC, at Old Parliament House, Canberra. Among others, Ministers Justine Elliott and Jenny Macklin spoke and Dr Edwards provided an excellent speech summarising the findings of the report *The Tyranny of Distance? Carers in Regional and Remote Areas of Australia*, co-authored with Matthew Gray, Jenny Baxter and Boyd Hunter (of the ANU). The report, commissioned by Carer’s Australia, with funding from Commonwealth Financial Planning, has generated considerable media interest, especially in regional Australia. This was the first study in Australia to look at carers in rural and regional Australia, and the first to examine the impact of the drought on carers’ employment. The report documented the geographic spread of carers and identified the outer regional and remote areas that have the highest concentrations of carers.
carers. It examined the ability of carers to access services and how this varies according to geographic remoteness, as well as documenting the social, health and economic wellbeing of carers according to geographic remoteness. It particularly investigated the impact of drought on carers.

The key findings of the study include the following:

- the difference between carers’ and non-carers’ employment population ratios in drought-affected areas is 8.2 percentage points, compared to the difference in above average rainfall areas of 4.5 percentage points;
- the full-time employment population ratio of carers was 35% in above average rainfall areas and 30.2% in drought areas, while the part-time employment population ratio of carers was 23.9% in above average rainfall areas and 23% in drought-affected areas;
- almost one-third (30.4%) of all carers reported having problems accessing services, compared to one quarter (25.3%) of those without caring responsibilities;
- almost half of carers (46.8%) in very remote areas were Indigenous, compared to only 1% of carers in major cities who were Indigenous;
- around 16% of carers in very remote areas were aged 15–24 years, compared to just under 8% in major cities;
- about 9% of carers in very remote areas were aged 65 years and over, compared to 17% in major cities;
- 20% of carers in outer regional and remote areas have a disability or long-term health condition, compared to just under 15% of carers in inner regional areas; and
- around 21% of carers in all regional areas lived in a jobless household, compared to 17% of non-carers in inner regional areas and 12% of non-carers in outer regional and remote areas.

AIFS Conference

Our attention is turning to preparations for the AIFS Conference 2010. This, the Institute’s 11th conference, is being held in Melbourne on 7–9 July 2010. Conducted every two years, this event is the pre-eminent Australian forum for exploring the latest family issues, policy developments and emerging social trends.

Structured around the Institute’s Research Plan 2009–12: Sustaining Families in Challenging Times, the conference will focus on the six major themes that shape the new plan: economic wellbeing of families; families and work; social inclusion; violence, abuse and neglect; family transitions and family law; and children, young people and their families.

The AIFS Conference 2010 is sure to be of broad appeal to policy-makers, researchers and service providers and will feature a comprehensive range of speakers, panel discussions and concurrent sessions. I am delighted that the following keynote speakers, all internationally renowned specialists in their fields, are confirmed to deliver major presentations at the conference in 2010:

- Professor Jane Millar, University of Bath, UK, a specialist in social security systems and particularly the labour market participation of single mothers;
- Professor Aletha C. Huston, School of Human Ecology, University of Texas, USA, who specialises in understanding the effects of poverty on children and the impact of child care and income support policies on children’s development; and
- Professor Bob Goodin, Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University, Australia, who works in the fields of social and political philosophy and their interface with public policy, with current research focusing on democratic theory and social welfare, and discretionary time.

In addition to the symposia, oral paper presentations and posters, the program will again include plenary panel sessions, with lead speakers including Naomi Eisenstadt CB, formerly Director of the Social Exclusion Taskforce in the UK Cabinet Office, and Judge Peter Boshier, Principal Family Court Judge of New Zealand.

Interest in the conference is high and I warmly invite you to join us to celebrate this milestone in the life of the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

Other events and collaborations

The end of 2009 proved to be a particularly busy time. In October we hosted visits by international guests, including Dr Jan Pryor, Chief Commissioner of the New Zealand Families Commission and Dominic Richardson from the OECD. Dr Pryor’s visit, the first in her term as Chief Commissioner, further strengthened links between the Families Commission and the Institute. Our discussions covered each organisation’s current research priorities and areas of possible collaboration, and continued information sharing and exchange of publications.

Dominic Richardson presented a seminar entitled “The role of family policies in the promotion of child wellbeing: Lessons from the OECD report Doing Better for Children”. In discussions with staff, he provided a briefing on Wikichild, an Internet site providing child wellbeing research and data that he coordinates, and explored the prospects for the Institute to contribute content to this new resource.

In November, the Institute’s Advisory Council met in Melbourne, the first meeting for its new chair, Reverend the Hon. Professor Brian Howe AO. November was a busy conference month for me, with addresses to the Australia’s Welfare Conference, in Canberra, the Annual General Meeting of the NSW Branch of Relationships Australia; and a keynote address at the Family Relationship Services Australia Conference.

As described above, December was marked by the achievement of two major milestones for the Institute—the successful 2nd LSAC research conference; and the finalisation of a landmark report on the Institute’s evaluation of the 2006 family law reforms. These achievements capped off an eventful year for the Institute and serve as a springboard for marking our 30th year of conducting leading research on the issues affecting families in Australia.