Rural and regional families

Pressures on families arise from many fronts and occur on a range of scales. Recent events in Australia, New Zealand and Japan have demonstrated, yet again, just how dramatically major external events such as droughts, floods, earthquakes and tsunamis can affect families and communities.

Given the impact of the catastrophic events of past months, and ongoing concerns about the effects of climate change more generally, there is considerable interest among policymakers in better understanding the diversity and course of the effects that such events have on families and communities, especially those who are already vulnerable. In particular, recognition is growing of the need for research that informs the development of programs of support, in the short-, medium- and longer terms, for affected families and communities. Building on the research already completed by the Institute on the social and economic impacts of drought and on carers in regional and remote Australia, the Institute is extending this focus to include examination of the longer term impacts of widespread natural disasters on families and communities.

The recently released Facts Sheet—Families in Regional, Rural and Remote Australia—compares families living in regional, rural and remote areas of Australia with those living in major cities. Drawing on data from the Australian Census, the ABS General Social Survey and the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC), it shows that there are many similarities in families across areas of varying remoteness, though distance can still be a tyranny.

Focus on resilience and vulnerability

Life at 5

The latest chapter in the ABC’s Life television series—Life at 5—focused on the resilience of children and their transition to school, with two episodes screening on 15 and 22 February on ABC1. The series has been following 11 children and their families since the children were babies, and explores factors that help to give a child the best chance at life. While the children and families are not participants in LSAC, the series draws extensively on analyses of the data from the study, and includes expert commentary from academics who are part of the Consortium Advisory Group for LSAC, as well as involvement of the Institute’s researchers. The focus of the Life series on resilience and vulnerability is timely and parallels the analyses that Institute researchers and others have been undertaking using the LSAC data. This focus is particularly relevant to a range of national policy priorities for governments.

Supporting Vulnerable Families

Concerns about the impact of the geographic concentration of disadvantage on the wellbeing of children and their future life chances has underpinned the development and implementation of place-based or area-based initiatives in a number of countries, including Australia. The major area-based intervention designed to enhance the development of children in disadvantaged communities around Australia is Communities for Children (CfC), a key element of the Australian Government’s Family Support Program (FSP).

LSAC informed the design of the evaluation of CfC, which was commissioned by the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) and undertaken by the Institute and the Social Policy Research Centre (SPRC) at the University of New South Wales (UNSW). The evaluation reports were published in 2009 by FaHCSIA as Stronger Families in Australia Study: The Impact of Communities for Children (Occasional Paper No. 25) and National Evaluation (2004–2008) of the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy 2004–2009 (Occasional Paper No. 24).
The evaluation, in turn, informed the extension of the CfC initiative to bring a stronger focus on child protection services under the aegis of Communities for Children Plus. Commonwealth, state and local governments and the non-government sector are working together to plan and deliver targeted services according to local needs. This will help enable known success factors from the current CfC model to be extended and strengthened towards providing the services and supports that families require to ensure the safety and wellbeing of their children.

Out-of-home care

LSAC has also influenced the design of a groundbreaking study being undertaken with Community Services, New South Wales Department of Human Services. With staff of the SPRC, the universities of Adelaide and Sydney, and researchers from Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, the Institute has been contracted to assist with Stage 2 of Pathways of Care, a longitudinal study of out-of-home care. Children aged 0–17 years entering out-of-home care for the first time in New South Wales and who have final Children’s Court orders, will be eligible for inclusion in the study. The study has commenced data collection, with information collected from carers, caseworkers and the children themselves, along with data sourced from administrative systems and other agencies.

Past adoption practices

In 2011, the Institute will commence a national research study about the extent and impact of past adoption practices. This project builds on an earlier project completed in April 2010 for FaHCSIA. The earlier review found that past practices relating to adoption have the potential for lifelong consequences for the lives of the women and their children, as well as others. In June 2010, the Community and Disability Services Ministers’ Conference announced that the ministers had agreed to a joint national research study into past adoption practices, to be conducted by AIFS. The aim of the research study is to utilise and build on existing research and evidence about the extent and impact of past adoption practices to strengthen the evidence available to governments to address the current needs of individuals affected by past adoption practices and support improved service responses. The study will involve a large-scale survey and a qualitative study.

Information and publishing developments

AIFS Records Authority

Government records authorities specify the process for the storage of records and their transfer to the National Archives of Australia (NAA) to form part of the historical collection of the nation. The Institute commenced work on the development of its new Records Authority in December 2009 and on 4 February, Ross Gibbs, Director-General of the NAA, visited the Institute for the signing of the finalised Authority. The new Records Authority will now guide the Institute in the effective management of its records, especially in light of new developments in information technologies.

Creative Commons and Family Matters

The Australian Government has recently mandated that as much Australian Government public sector information as possible should be made freely available under the Creative Commons licensing system. Planning is underway to ensure that the Institute meets this requirement and applies the appropriate licensing options to our publications, datasets and other information.

This national approach to licensing arrangements for public sector information has also stimulated discussion of the Institute’s...
The Institute is currently considering the editorial structure and role of external reviewers. We have also decided to move to two editions per year while maintaining the total number of articles published. From 2011–12, AIFS will also make each edition freely downloadable from the date of publication while continuing to make print editions available on subscription (see page 5 for more information).

Visits and conferences

Indonesian delegation

On 7 December 2010, the Institute hosted a delegation from the Indonesian Ministry of Social Affairs. Their focus was on learning more about the family law system in Australia and the Institute’s role in evaluation and dissemination, focusing particularly on the work of the Australian Family Relationships Clearinghouse (AFRC). Ms Ruth Weston and Dr Lawrie Moloney also briefed the delegation on the Institute’s Evaluation of the 2006 Family Law Reforms and developments in mediation and family support, especially as provided by Australia’s network of Family Relationship Centres.

Family and Community Strengths Conference

In December, I delivered my final keynote address for the year, entitled Modern Families But Enduring Myths, to the 6th Australian Family and Community Strengths Conference, held concurrently with the international Strengths and Assets Summit at the University of Newcastle. The university usefully sought the advice of delegates who were attending these events regarding the prospects for expanding its cross-disciplinary offerings in family studies, building on the work of the university’s Family Action Centre.

Catholic Care Conference

My first conference presentations for 2011 took place on 24 February. I was very pleased to participate in the 25th Anniversary of CentaCare Sandhurst Conference, themed “Being and Celebrating Family Today”, and delivered the opening keynote address, entitled Australian Families in the 21st Century: Recent Research Insights Into Family Form and Functioning.

That evening, I had the pleasure of delivering the speech at the 25th anniversary celebration. My topic was In Celebration of Families Today. CentaCare Sandhurst is part of the Catholic Diocesan family welfare organisations located throughout Australia and provides a wide range of family support services to its region via centres at Bendigo, Wedderburn, Echuca, Shepparton, Cobram, Wangaratta and Wodonga. I think that it is very important for the Institute to maintain its outreach to regional Australia.

Concluding thoughts

As we are all well aware, the recent widespread floods in many areas have broken the drought in a catastrophic way. The cyclones have been equally devastating in their impacts. And the destructive earthquake in New Zealand and tsunami in Japan have shaken us all. Like the Victorian bushfires, floods, cyclones, earthquakes and tsunami are events beyond the family sphere that can have profound impacts and leave indelible imprints. On the one hand, the courageous and compassionate responses of so many highlight the best of humanity. On the other, these immediate responses tend to be short-lived, and some of the multi-faceted problems faced by victims can remain with them across a lifetime, and may even span generations. Furthermore, the more widespread the problems are, the greater is the likelihood that support is eroded, given that many others are also engulfed by the same tragic circumstances, and other events progressively overtake those not so directly involved. While the support of family tends to endure, assistance from neighbours, our communities and governments is vital to ensure recovery and to maintain family resilience. It is also easy to lose sight of the fact that such disasters do not displace the more commonplace pressures that Australian families face. Many couples face ongoing, everyday problems that place family life under pressure. The partnerships of families, communities and governments can provide the timely supports that keep families on track and enable them to bounce back when life brings its inevitable challenges.
New appointments

Daryl Higgins

I am pleased to announce the appointment of Dr Daryl Higgins as Deputy Director (Research) of the Australian Institute of Family Studies, which he took up on 3 March 2011. Dr Higgins has been one of the Institute’s General Managers, with responsibility for a wide range of research, evaluation and dissemination projects focusing on policy- and practice-relevant issues. In particular, he led the clearinghouses at AIFS, which are focused on responding to adult sexual assault, protecting children, enhancing family relationships, strengthening families and communities, and overcoming disadvantage for Indigenous Australians. Prior to joining the Institute in 2004, Dr Higgins was a Senior Lecturer in Psychology at Deakin University. He has extensive experience in managing and supervising research, and has led projects looking at children in out-of-home care, child-safe organisations, Family Court processes for responding to allegations of child abuse, caring for a family member with a disability, welfare reform, jobless families, past adoption practices, and community development approaches to children at risk in Indigenous communities. Dr Higgins has considerable expertise in evaluation methodology and frameworks across areas such as child protection, out-of-home care, sexual assault, childcare, parenting, care for family members with a disability, and family and community wellbeing. Together with Ruth Weston, Daryl most recently shared the role of Acting Deputy Director (Research). Ms Weston will also remain part of the Executive Team, in the new position of Assistant Director (Research).

Sue Tait

It is also my pleasure to announce the re-appointment of Ms Sue Tait as Deputy Director (Corporate and Strategy). Ms Tait brings a wealth of experience as a senior executive in the public sector. She joined the Institute in 2005, and has occupied the role of Deputy Director (Corporate and Strategy) for most of this period. In this role, she has led the Institute’s transition from operating under the Commonwealth Companies and Corporations Act 1997 to the Financial Management and Accountability Act 1997 (FMA), a major undertaking that involved comprehensive review and redevelopment of the Institute’s governance and accountability frameworks and systems. She has also overseen a range of other initiatives, including relocation of the Institute to new premises in 2007, and has been central to ongoing strategic planning and resource development. Ms Tait has been instrumental in the development of partnership arrangements and memoranda of understanding with a range of key stakeholders in Australian government departments and agencies, states and territories and international research organisations. Prior to joining the Institute, she had extensive experience in the Victorian Department of Education and Training, including roles as Regional Director and General Manager in the Office of School Education. She has also served as Non-Executive Director of a range of community- and education-focused boards, and currently sits on the Audit Committee of two other FMA agencies.

Changes to Family Matters publication and subscriptions

The Australian Government has recently introduced a policy that encourages making public sector information freely and easily available for use and reuse, where possible.

In line with this new policy, from issue 89, access to Family Matters will change. Instead of the current three issues of the journal being only obtainable on subscription, all issues will be available for free download from the AIFS website as soon as they are published.

However, should readers wish to continue to receive printed versions of the journal, Family Matters will still be available in hard copy, on a subscription basis.

In conjunction with these changes, from issue 89, AIFS will also move to publishing only two issues of Family Matters per financial year, although each issue will be longer than in the past, resulting in a similar number of articles being published over that period. The annual subscription price will therefore remain the same.

If you wish to receive printed copies of the journal, please complete the subscription form on page 72. Alternatively, you can sign up to aifs-alert at <www.aifs.gov.au/institute/lists/aifs-alert.html> or follow us on Twitter or Facebook to be notified when the latest issue of Family Matters becomes available on the AIFS website <www.aifs.gov.au/institute/pubs/fammats.html>.

Whichever way you choose to read Family Matters, you will still have access to our usual high-quality and accessible articles and we hope you continue to enjoy our journal.