



Director's report

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So far this year, the Institute has once again seen a high level of research and dissemination activity.

National Families Week 2011

Families in Australia 2011: Sticking together in good and tough times

Held from 15–21 May, National Families Week is an initiative of Families Australia that celebrates the many contributions of families. Communities across the country hold a diverse range of activities that grow each year in their scope and scale. In previous years, the Institute has produced a factsheet to fit with the theme adopted for each week. This year, however, the Institute was asked to produce the first of what will become an annual report drawing together recent statistics to provide a picture of selected aspects of Australian families. This year's report—*Families in Australia 2011: Sticking Together in Good and Tough Times*—was again focused on the theme for Families Week. It explored the factors that contribute to the resilience or vulnerability of families, by briefly outlining some of the demographic and social changes that set the scene for contemporary family life and then considering patterns of participation in work and family life; engagement in community through voluntary work and caring for others; expectations about the availability of support in times of need; and sources of government assistance to families and individuals. The final sections of the report explored economic wellbeing and life satisfaction. The report attracted extensive media interest from print, television and radio media outlets. Support for this annual celebration of families is a priority for the Institute and we are very pleased to use this as an ideal opportunity to report on the progress of families in Australia.

Family law

Family relationships and family law have been consistent areas of research priority for the Institute since its inception in 1980, in line with

the Institute's legislative base—the *Family Law Act*.

National and international interest in the findings of the Institute's evaluation of the *Family Law Amendment (Shared Parental Responsibility) Act 2006* (Cth) continues. I was delighted that Dr Rae Kaspiew was invited, in May, to give evidence to the UK House of Commons Justice Select Committee inquiring into the operation of the family courts. The committee asked Dr Kaspiew to comment on the aspects of the 2006 family law reforms that had been successful and those that had been less so, as well as the overall impacts of the Act. The UK Family Justice Review has recently released its interim report with recommendations for reforms of the UK family law system. The Review Committee has indicated its continuing interest in the Institute's family law research and in tracking the developments that are occurring across the Australian family law system.

Nationally, the Institute has been called upon to provide submissions in response to the Exposure Draft of the Family Law Amendment (Family Violence) Bill 2010, circulated by the Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department (AGD); the Inquiry by the Senate Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs into Family Law Legislation Amendment (Family Violence and Other Measures) Bill 2011; the Family Court of Australia and Federal Magistrates Court's consultation paper on *Best Practice Principles for Use in Parenting Disputes When Family Violence or Abuse is Alleged*; and input to the AGD consultations on Children's Contact Services and possible measures to address the practices of forced and servile marriage.

Recently released publications have reported further analyses of the data from the Longitudinal Study of Separated Families (LSSF)—a national study of 10,000 parents with a child under 18 years old, who separated after the reforms were introduced. The report revealed a generally positive picture for the families two to three years after their separation.

Most parents indicated that they were able to maintain a harmonious relationship with their child's other parent and that their children were progressing well. Nevertheless, a substantial minority experienced continuing safety concerns relating to their children's ongoing contact with the other parent, their experience of emotional abuse, and other negative inter-parental relationships.

Another study, commissioned by the AGD and the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA), explored how adolescent children of parents in the LSSF view their experiences of parental separation. The study surveyed 623 adolescent children aged 12–18 years whose parents separated after the introduction of the family law reforms in July 2006. The findings shed new light on the extent of adolescents' involvement in the decisions parents made about them following separation, what they wanted in their care-time arrangements, how they expressed their views, who they turned to for support, their relationships with parents and other family members, and their understanding of issues concerning parental conflict.

Past adoption experiences

AIFS is currently seeking participants in a forthcoming study into past adoption experiences. It will be the largest study of this nature ever conducted in Australia. The research commenced in August and is exploring the effects of "closed adoption" processes, which were in place in Australia until the 1980s. The purpose of this research is to understand the current service and support needs of people affected by past adoption experiences. Input is being sought from people who were involved in any way, including birth parents, people who were adopted, adoptive parents, and other family members, including other children, spouses and grandparents.

People can participate in the survey through: <www.aifs.gov.au/pastadoptionpractices> or by calling (03) 9214 7888.

Closing the Gap on Indigenous disadvantage

The Closing the Gap Clearinghouse was launched in May at Parliament House, Canberra, by the Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, The Hon. Jenny Macklin. This clearinghouse, operating in partnership with the Australian Institute for Health & Welfare (AIHW), provides evidence-based research on overcoming

disadvantage for Indigenous Australians. It will become the nation's premier collection of quality-assessed information on what works in overcoming disadvantage for Indigenous Australians. Publications released at the launch are available from: <www.aihw.gov.au/closingthegap>.

Visits

The Institute continued to receive a steady flow of international visitors and delegations in the first half of 2011, including: Their Honours Judge Ogiwara (Tokyo District Court, Japan) and Assistant Judge Ueno (Okayama Family Court); Ms Han Jinjing, a research fellow at the Beijing Legal Aid Organisation (BLAO); Mr Carl Davidson, the Chief Commissioner of the NZ Families Commission; a delegation from the New Zealand Parliamentary Social Services Committee that has been undertaking an inquiry over the last year into the identification, rehabilitation, care and protection of child offenders; and an Indonesian Ministry of Social Development study group, sponsored by FaHCSIA, to discuss the conduct of qualitative research, drawing on the Institute's experience in this area, especially in relation to children's issues.

Reference groups Civil justice system

I have recently joined a reference group convened by the AGD that focuses on building an evidence base for the civil justice system. The reference group also involves the Law and Justice Foundation of NSW, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), the Australian



Launching the Closing the Gap Clearinghouse. l. to r.: Professor Alan Hayes, Professor Emeritus Meredith Edwards, Dr Fadwa Al-Yaman, Dr Daryl Higgins, The Hon. Jenny Macklin, and David Kalisch.

Social Science Data Archive, the Victorian Department of Justice, Family Relationship Services Australia, and experts involved in the management of justice and dispute resolution. The group will operate for two years and will provide advice to the AGD on how the systems for data linkage, research and evaluation might be strengthened.

Indigenous justice

In partnership with the Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC), the Institute has been funded by AGD to evaluate a number of programs aimed at preventing crime in Indigenous communities and diverting offenders from the criminal justice system. As part of the collaboration, the two institutes have convened an advisory group, which met for the first time on 24 March. It is chaired by Dr Adam Tomison (Director, AIC), and includes Commissioner Mick Gooda (Australian Human Rights Commission), Dr Jill Guthrie (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies) and a research team from AIFS and AIC. Dr Daryl Higgins represents me on the advisory group.

AIFS conferences

Growing Up in Australia and *Footprints in Time* Research Conference

This year's annual Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) conference, on 15–16 November, is a joint event with the Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children (LSIC). This important event has drawn international interest and promises to be a valuable opportunity to increase understanding of the factors that affect children's development and wellbeing through sharing analyses of this rich source of longitudinal data.

12th AIFS Conference

Planning is now well underway for the 12th AIFS Conference, to be held on 25–27 July 2012. It is the premier event for discussing cutting-edge research findings, policy priorities and topical issues important to family wellbeing in Australia, such as: social and economic impacts; family transitions and ageing; children, young people and their families; neglect, violence and abuse; family law and family relationships; and cultural diversity.

This conference is for researchers, policy-makers and service providers working with families—parents, children, young people and their extended family members.

Concluding thoughts

While major projects such as the Family Law Evaluation have been finalised, Institute staff continue to attract new research opportunities. The Institute's collaborative relationships with an increasingly diverse set of partners have resulted in a steady flow of work, consistent with our research plan and organisational capacity. A revised memorandum of understanding (MoU) with FaHCSIA in relation to the LSAC project reflects the increased role of the Institute in analysing and reporting the results of this flagship study. The study is a collaboration between the Institute, FaHCSIA, the ABS, and a consortium of academic advisors from a range of universities and institutes. The signing of a new MoU with the Department of Human Services (DHS) is an important development for the Institute that has already resulted in two new projects, the first focused on family violence and the second on the impact of life events on families.

Shaping the future direction of the Institute's research is well underway as we move to develop the Institute's next Research Plan (2012–15). Advice from the AIFS Advisory Council will be a key element in developing the plan, as well as close engagement with colleagues in the relevant Australian Government departments or agencies. Again, we intend to undertake a national consultation that will greatly assist us in shaping the new plan. The working title for the next plan is *Families in Australia: Transitions and Trajectories*, which captures the Institute's focus on the diversity of Australian families, dimensions of their stability and change, and the determinants of the paths they take through life.

As we plan our future research directions, we are also carefully considering our approaches to dissemination of the Institute's work, given the rapid developments in the new media. We have now adopted electronic publishing as our primary distribution method and the number of publications distributed in the last twelve months has increased by 6.5%, with a 5.8% increase in publication pages downloaded from the website. We are currently seeking advice on the opportunities that developments in online communication and social media present to extend the reach of the Institute and make our work more accessible to a wider and better targeted audience. Of course, the generation of high-quality research content remains the Institute's key priority.

