This article focuses on various ways in which family formation pathways and the characteristics and functioning of families have changed over the decades. The picture is largely one of increasing diversity, with important implications for policies and legislation designed to protect the wellbeing of all families—the bedrock of society.

Trends in marriage

Most young people want to marry and have children (Qu & Soriano, 2004; Smart, 2002), and although most people still marry at some stage in their lives, marriage rates have declined since the “Golden Era” of the post-World War II period. A broader perspective, however, reveals that the crude marriage rate has fluctuated greatly over the years, with the highest rates occurring in 1940–42 (when the prospect of military service appears to have sparked hasty marriages), and directly after World War II in 1946–48 (9.7–10.6 marriages per 1,000 people in the resident population) (see Figure 1 on page 77).

The rate increased again in the 1960s due to continued economic prosperity, the fall in age at first marriage, continuing strong social disapproval of sexual relationships outside marriage; and the introduction of the oral contraceptive pill. From 1972 onwards, the crude marriage rate has mostly fallen, with the lowest rate (5.3) occurring in 2001. Since this time, the rate has fluctuated between 5.4 and 5.5. The trend over the most recent decades has been accompanied by increases in age at marriage and increases in rates of cohabitation (i.e., de facto relationships). Before outlining the latter trends, however, we will focus on divorce, given that it is only through marriage that divorce is possible.

Trends in divorce

While marriage trends play an essential role in shaping those relating to divorce, divorce trends have also been heavily influenced by the interaction of several other factors, including women’s increased opportunities to achieve financial independence; improvements in the
“safety net” provided to financially vulnerable families; a weakening of the social stigma attached to divorce; and legislative reforms. In addition, as constraints to separation have abated, the future of a couple’s relationship has increasingly depended on the extent to which the relationship meets each partner’s emotional needs. As a result, several social commentators have pointed out that the threshold for remaining together has fallen (see Qu & Soriano, 2004).3

In the first decade of the 20th century, the number of divorces recorded each year ranged from 300 to 500. As Figure 2 (on page 78) shows, the crude divorce rate rose slightly in the 1920s to mid-1940s, peaking at 1.1 divorces per 1,000 resident population in 1947, partly reflecting the instability of hasty wartime marriages and the disruptive effects of the war on marriage (Carmichael & McDonald, 1987; Coughlan, 1957).

The rate then declined slightly until the 1960s, when it changed direction again. The rise followed the introduction of the Matrimonial Causes Act 1959, which came into operation in 1961. The Act established uniform legislation across all Australian states and territories and provided 14 grounds for divorce, with people having to either prove fault or undergo five years of separation.

In response to increasing social pressure, the Federal Government, after much debate, introduced the Family Law Act 1975, which came into operation in January 1976. The Act allowed divorce based on only one ground—“irretrievable breakdown”—as measured by at least 12 months of separation. The crude divorce rate soared to its highest peak of 4.6 divorces per 1,000 resident population in that year, reflecting the formalisation of some long-term separations and the bringing forward of some divorces that had been filed in the previous years but had not yet been finalised. The highest number of divorces was also recorded in that year (63,230). Since then, the crude divorce rate has mostly fluctuated between 2.5 and 2.9, with a trough occurring in the mid-1980s. However, the rate has fallen in the most recent decade (from 2.8 in 2001 to 2.2–2.3 between 2007 and 2012).

Although many divorces occur to couples with children under 18 years old, the proportion of all divorces that involve children has declined since the early 1970s—from 68% in 1971 to 61% in 1980, 56% in 1990, 53% in 2000, and 48% in 2012. Since 2000, around 43,000 to 54,000 children under 18 years have experienced the divorce of their parents each year.

Rise in cohabitation and its fragility

Marriage and divorce trends have weakened greatly as proxies for couple formation and dissolution, given the rise in cohabitation and its relative fragility. The proportion of all couples who are cohabiting appears to have increased by one to three percentage points across each Census year, from 6% in 1986 to 16% in 2011. Cohabitation is especially common among young people. For example, the majority of
partnered teenagers and those in their early 20s were cohabiting in 2011, while the opposite applied to those aged 25 years and older.

For most of the 20th century, almost all heterosexual couples married then moved in together, whereas the reverse is true today: most couples who marry have already been living with each other for some time. The proportion of marriages preceded by cohabitation increased at a more or less steady rate between 1975, when only 16% of couples who married had been cohabiting, and 2011, when 78% had been cohabiting.

However, a cohabiting relationship is far less stable than marriage, regardless of whether couples have children (Qu & Weston, 2008, 2012). The increase in cohabitation in general and associated instability of these relationships has highlighted the potential financial vulnerability to which people in longer term cohabitation may be exposed and some of the difficulties faced by parents in settling property and parenting matters. These are issues that contributed to the Family Law Amendment (De Facto Financial Matters and Other Measures) Act 2008, which came into operation on 1 March 2009 (and 1 July 2010 for South Australia) and applies in all states except Western Australia.

Under the so-called “de facto property regime” established through this legislation, cohabiting couples who meet certain criteria (e.g., they have lived together for at least two years, or have a child of the relationship) are treated in the same way as married couples. Before its passage, the new legislation’s treatment of cohabitation of at least two years in the same way as marriage sparked a great deal of controversy, highlighting the tension between respecting people’s private decisions to live together outside marriage and protecting their potential vulnerability in nationally consistent ways should the relationship break down (see Parkinson, 2008). However, little is known about cohabiting couples’ understanding of the legal consequences of their staying together for at least two years, should they have begun their relationship after the “de facto property regime” was established.

### Resulting family forms

Trends in couple formation and the stability of relationships, along with fertility, have contributed to the relative prevalence of different family forms—an issue examined in this section. For statistical purposes, the ABS defines families as follows:

Two or more persons, one of whom is at least 15 years of age, who are related by blood, marriage (registered or de facto), adoption, step or fostering; and who are usually resident in the same household. The basis of a family is formed by identifying the presence of a couple relationship, lone parent–child relationship or other blood relationship. Some households will, therefore, contain more than one family. (ABS, 2005, para. 21)

Under this “household family” definition, families may comprise: couples with or without co-resident children of any age; single parents with co-resident children of any age; grandparents caring for grandchildren; and other families of related adults, such as brothers or sisters living together, where no couple or parent–child relationship exists (although this excludes relatives beyond first cousins).

However, it is important to keep in mind that the concept of “family” is neither unitary nor unchanging. It involves the drawing of boundaries delineating “who is in” and “who is out”, with the boundaries changing as individuals move through their life course. The boundaries drawn by analysts and policymakers vary according to the purpose behind their focus on families, and even members of the same household may hold different ideas about whether a particular co-resident is a member of their “family”. This may arise, for example, when a parent re-partners. Virtually all people also have family members who are spread across households and communities. Grandparents, for instance, are very likely to see their adult children and grandchildren as “family”, even if separated by vast distances, and also probably include their own siblings and wider kin in this extended sense of family. The two households formed in the process of
parental separation is another clear example of families crossing household boundaries.

Defining Indigenous family boundaries is particularly challenging, for some Indigenous communities adopt kinship terminology that differs from each other and from that used in the “Anglo-Celtic” system (Morphy, 2006). Especially in remote areas, households comprising Indigenous people tend to be complex and fluid in their composition, with kinship networks overlapping, and adults and children often moving between households (see ABS & Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2011).

Figure 3 shows the extent of change in basic family forms since 1976. Couple-only families and couple families with dependent children were the most common family forms in 2011, representing 38% and 37% respectively of all families. In total, 11% of all families were one-parent families with dependent children and 8% were couple families with non-dependent children only. The remainder (hereafter referred to as “other families”) accounted for 7%, and include one-parent families with non-dependent children only, along with families comprising related individuals, who are neither living with a partner nor having a parent–child relationship (e.g., siblings living together). Of all these “other families”, about three-quarters comprised one-parent families with non-dependent children only.

Over the last 45 years, the greatest changes that have occurred relate to the two most common family forms—couple-only families and couple families with dependent children:

- In 1976, couple families with dependent children predominated, representing 48% of all families, while only 28% were couple-only families.
- By 2006, these two family types were equally common, with each representing 37% of all families.
- In 2011, however, couple-only families were marginally more common than couple families with dependent children (38% vs 37%).

The proportion of one-parent families with dependent children also increased (from 7% to 11%). At the same time, the already small proportion of couple families with only non-dependent children fell (from 11% to 8%). Finally, the proportion of families that lie outside the above classifications (i.e., “other families”) changed little (representing around 6–7% across the time periods).

Family functioning

While the changes in the representation of the different family forms are considerable, they represent the net effects of even greater levels of change in the life courses of individuals. For instance, some single parents with dependent children will have re-partnered, thereby becoming couples with dependent children, while some couples with dependent children will have separated, with the mother and children typically forming a one-parent family for a time.

Transitions into different family forms can have important financial implications, with flow-on effects on functioning. For example, most one-parent families with dependent children are formed through relationship dissolution, and most are headed by mothers (86% in 2011). These families tend to be considerably worse off financially than other families. On the other hand, re-partnering is likely to improve their financial circumstances. (For further discussion on the financial effects of relationship dissolution, see Australian Council of Social Services, 2012; de Vaus, Gray, Qu, & Stanton, 2010; Hayes, Qu, Weston, & Baxter, 2011.) Whatever the change in financial circumstances, these transitions carry other risks, including those associated with children’s acceptance of a new step-parent and the negotiation of parenting roles (see Cartwright, Farnsworth, & Mobley, 2009).

But of all the changes in family functioning that have occurred within family forms, perhaps the most generic and spectacular is the changing

Note: *Other families* include one-parent families with non-dependent children.
Source: Hugo (2001)

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role of parents; that is, the switch from the male breadwinner/female homemaker model to one where parents increasingly share the breadwinning role. It was not until 1966 that the Federal Government permitted married women to be appointed or remain as permanent officers in the Commonwealth Public Service and to return to their jobs after the birth of their children. Increasing proportions of women over the last few decades have maintained some attachment to the labour force upon having children.

The surge of mothers in the workforce is well illustrated in Figure 4. Among couple families, those with a single-income earner clearly predominated in 1983, representing almost half the families; however, by 2012, this proportion had fallen to 30%. Single mothers’ rates of both full-time and part-time paid work (especially the latter) have also increased over this period. Whereas in 1983, 20% of single mothers had full-time paid work and 12% had part-time paid work, in 2012, the rates were 27% and 29% respectively.

Some less common family forms and living arrangements

Each of the above family forms is characterised by a great deal of diversity. Two of the less common forms represented within these broader categories—same-sex couple families and grandparent families—are briefly mentioned below. In addition, the living arrangements of some people do not fit neatly into the classification of households and family forms outlined above. For example, there are families entailing separated parents whose children spend virtually the same amounts of time in the two homes, and individuals who live apart from their partner.

Same-sex couple families

According to Census figures, the proportion of all couples (married or cohabiting) that are of the same sex increased from 0.3% in 1996 to 0.7% in 2011. The rise in same-sex relationships was notable for persons aged under 65 years. As the ABS (2012b) pointed out, this increase may reflect an increasing willingness for same-sex couples to disclose their relationship. It may also be the case that same-sex partners are now more prepared to form a couple household, rather than to maintain separate homes (i.e., to adopt a “living apart together” arrangement).

The 2011 Census data indicate a marginally higher proportion of males than females among same-sex couples (52% vs 48%). Most same-sex couples have no children living with them. However, female couples were seven times more likely than male couples to be living with children (22% vs 3%). More than half of the same-sex couples with children had only one child (59% of male couples and 52% of female couples), compared with 36% of opposite-sex couples with children. In total, 0.1% of all dependent children in families were living in same-sex couple families in 2011 (ABS 2012c).

Grandparent families

The forms families take, as specified by the ABS, are based on the relationships between the reference person9 and other household members. Where there are grandparent–grandchild relationships in the absence of parent–child relationships, then the family is classified as a grandparent family.10 It should be noted that no information is available concerning the extent to which these children are being supported financially by the grandparents. The ABS (2012a) therefore cautions against assuming who has the caring role within such families, and points out that in some cases a young adult grandchild who is a full-time student may move to live with their grandparents in order to provide help to them.

Nevertheless, it seems to often be the case that grandparent families are formed when the parents are unable to care for their children, owing to a combination of traumas, such as mental health problems, alcohol or substance addictions, family violence, child abuse, parental incarceration, or death (COTA

According to the 2011 Census, there were 46,680 grandparent families in total, representing just under 1% of all families. Of all grandparent families, 64% comprised couple- or single-grandparent families with dependent grandchildren (whether under 15 years old, or older dependent students) and 36% comprised grandparent families with only non-dependent grandchildren.

Comparable data on grandparents are not available for earlier Census years. However, three ABS surveys on family characteristics, conducted in 2003, 2006–07 and 2009–10, identified grandparent families in which the grandparents were the guardians or main carers of resident children aged under 18 years. The data suggest that the number of grandparent families with children under 18 years old fell slightly between 2003 and 2009–10 (23,000 in 2003, 14,000 in 2006–07 and 16,000 in 2009–10) (ABS, 2008, 2011b).11

**Separated families with equal shared care time**

One of the key objectives of the 2006 changes to the family law system was to encourage greater involvement of both parents in children’s lives following separation, provided that the children are protected from family violence, child abuse or neglect. As part of this general goal, the reforms were also specifically designed to encourage substantially shared care time where such arrangements are reasonably practicable and in the child’s best interest. It seems reasonable to suggest that, in general, the more equal the overnight stays with each parent, the more likely it would be that, when completing a Census form or survey, each parent of the same children would see the children as members of his/her household.

Figure 5, derived from repeated ABS surveys, shows the proportion of children in four different age groups with equal care-time arrangements (here defined as 48–52% of nights with each parent) in 1997, 2003 and 2006–07. These results are based on the reports of parents who indicated that they cared for their child for at least half the nights.

It appears that equal care time is an uncommon, but nonetheless increasing, arrangement for children whose parents have separated. The proportions in equal care time in the 1997 survey were very low, with negligible differences apparent across the age groups. The proportion of all children under 18 years of separated parents experiencing equal care time increased from 0.7% in 1997 to 1.9% in 2003, and 4.0% in 2006–07. In other words, equal care-time arrangements, though very uncommon, appeared to be increasing even before the 2006 reforms were introduced. Although most of the age-related estimates are unreliable, owing to the small number of children on which they are based, children aged 5–11 and 12–14 years seemed more likely than the other two age groups to experience equal care time.

It is important to note that the parents of some of the older children represented in these ABS surveys would have been separated for several years. Data from the first two waves of the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) Longitudinal Study of Separated Families (LSSF) (Kaspiew et al., 2009; Qu & Weston, 2010) suggest that equal care time is now relatively common among families—at least during the first couple of years of separation.12

According to the reports of all parents who participated in Wave 1 of the LSSF, equal care time was experienced by 7% of the children some 15 months after separation. This arrangement was most commonly experienced by children aged 5–11 years and 12–14 years (11–12%), followed by those aged 3–4 years (9%), then teenagers aged 15–17 years (6%). Only 2% of children under 3 years old experienced this arrangement. The second survey wave suggested that, some 12 months...

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**Figure 5:** Proportion of children with equal care-time arrangements, by age of children, 1997, 2003 and 2006–07

Note: * These estimated percentages are based on a small number of cases and should therefore be interpreted with caution. ** These estimated percentages are considered too unreliable for general use.

later, equal care time was the most stable of the 11 care-time arrangements examined—applying to 86% of the children who had this arrangement in Wave 1.13

**Couples living apart together**

Some individuals in an intimate relationship may choose to live in a separate household from their partner. These circumstances are often referred to as living-apart-together arrangements, though opinions vary as to whether this arrangement should include or exclude couples who are married to each other but are residing in separate homes (e.g., Levin & Trost, 1999; Stroh, Seltzer, Cochran, & Mays, 2009). There is also a “grey area” regarding the point at which a developing intimate relationship between people who live in different households should be considered a living-apart-together relationship. Each partner may hold a different understanding of the nature of the relationship and their living arrangements.

Using Wave 5 of the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey (conducted in 2005), Reimondos, Evans, and Gray (2011) found that around 24% of respondents aged 18 years or more who were neither married nor cohabiting indicated that they were in an ongoing relationship with someone with whom they were not living. This represents 9% of all respondents who were 18 years or older. While 40% had commenced their relationship fewer than 12 months prior to interview, another 28% had been in this relationship for at least three years. Those aged 45 years or more were more likely than younger groups to have commenced their relationship at least three years prior to interview. Reimondos and colleagues also found that while nearly two-thirds of the respondents expected to live with their partner within the next three years, this was reported by only one-third of the older, previously married, individuals (mostly aged 45 years or more) with these living arrangements. In nearly three-quarters of all cases, the two residences were located in the same city and most of the others lived within the same state.

**Concluding thoughts**

Trends in the formation and stability of families have changed in striking ways over past decades, as have the roles of parents, whether they live together or apart. Indeed, families are constantly evolving in response to the many opportunities and constraints they confront during the course of their development, including those arising from the economy, technology, various forms of legislation, and societal values. Such factors themselves continue to evolve, with family transitions being key drivers of some of these changes.

Nevertheless, some of the fundamental things about families do not change. Most importantly, they represent the basic unit of society—a unit in which much “caring and sharing” between members is expected to occur—and, importantly, the site in which most children are raised. As such, families play a central role in shaping the health and wellbeing of all immediate family members. To quote Thornton, Axinn, and Xie (2007), “today, as has been true for thousands of years, the family is still a primary unit of human interaction, providing the basis for both generational renewal and individual linkage to the larger society” (p. 3). In Western societies, it is the parents who typically have the responsibility of raising their children to become healthy, well-adjusted and contributing members of society, to the extent that this is possible. They are also expected to ensure that their family is linked in productive ways with the larger society, and to draw on community resources to help meet their familial responsibilities. The meeting of basic needs common to all families can be enhanced or threatened by a variety of interacting factors relating to their characteristics and transitions being contemplated (such as childbearing or separating), along with external forces. Close monitoring of trends in family forms, transitions and functioning is essential for proactive policy development.

**Endnotes**

1. Unless otherwise specified, the trends outlined in this article are based on data provided by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), including Census data and statistics on marriages, divorces and fertility.

2. Carmichael (1984) pointed out that, rather than delaying marriages, the introduction of the contraceptive pill initially supported early marriages, for almost totally reliable contraception gave couples much greater opportunities than in the past to postpone having children after marriage, thereby allowing women to continue in paid work. But the pill also provided couples with opportunities to live together without marrying. As increasing numbers followed this pathway, the strong social condemnation about premarital sexual relations gradually weakened.

3. Interestingly, the emotional side of parental separation is also being given increased emphasis in policies directed towards helping separated parents develop their parenting plans and forge new pathways. As Kaspiew et al. (2009) pointed out, a key objective of the family law reforms introduced in 2006 was to create a cultural shift away from treating separation and disputes about the children as legal problems towards seeing them as relationship problems.

4. Given the difficulty in drawing a nationally representative sample of couples in same-sex unions,
little is known of their stability. Some overseas studies that have attempted to derive representative samples, however, have suggested that same-sex cohabitations are less stable than heterosexual cohabitations or marriage (see Andersson, Noack, Seierstad, & Weedon-Fekjaer, 2006; Lau, 2012).

5 Previously, property disputes were handled by the state courts, so cohabiting parents needed to go to the federal family courts for settling disputes over children, and state-based courts for handling property matters.

6 The ABS, of course, recognises the fact that families cross household boundaries, and points out that: (a) extending the concept of “family” to those living outside a household would lead to “double counting” of some individuals, and (b) some of the ABS surveys (e.g., the General Social Survey and Family Characteristics Survey) take account of exchanges of support between relatives who do not reside within the same household.

7 The ABS does not include one-parent families with non-dependent children in the “other families” category. The inclusion in this article of one-parent families with non-dependent children in the “other families” category has been made for the sake of simplicity, given that almost all families are of neither type.

8 Despite the fact that some children spend a considerable number of nights with each parent after parental separation, most children spend most or all nights with their mother. Mothers are also less likely than fathers to re-partner, at least within the first few years of separation (see Qu & Weston, 2010). In addition, a UK study suggests that the older women are when they become single mothers (which in most cases happens after relationship breakdown), the less likely they are to re-partner (Skew, 2009).

9 The 2011 Census dictionary defines the family or household reference person as “the household member used in Census coding as the starting point for identifying the relationships between usual residents of a household. Familial relationships are defined in terms of the relationship between the family reference person and all other family members” (ABS, 2011a).

10 Grandparent couple families form part of the couple families with children classification, while lone grandparents with grandchildren (and no parents in the household) are treated as one-parent families.

11 Although the definition of grandparent families differs between the Census 2011 and ABS surveys, it is noteworthy that the Census 2011 suggests that there were around 21,760 couple- and single-grandparent families with grandchildren under 15 years old.

12 The 10,000 parents in the LSSF had been separated for an average of 15 months when first interviewed (in late 2008). The second survey, based on 70% of the original sample, was conducted in late 2009. Data were weighted to account for known sample biases, including that associated with loss of sample members by Wave 2. The sample was drawn from the Child Support Agency (now the Department of Human Services Child Support Program) database. The study was commissioned by the Attorney-General’s Department (AGD) and the then Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (now the Department of Social Services) and formed part of the family law reform evaluation conducted by AIFS (see Kaspiew et al., 2009). Unlike the ABS surveys, which focused on all children born of the separated parents, the LSSF focused on only one child in each family.

13 The different care-time arrangements ranged from the child never seeing the father to the child never seeing the mother, and included categories in which the father or mother had daytime-only care.

References


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