

1. Overview

Families are a major part of the social fabric of Australia. This first *Families in Australia* report provides a snapshot of the diversity of experience of Australian families, and describes some of the major changes that have occurred over the last 30 or more years.

The report highlights the ongoing importance of the family to individuals and to society more broadly. Against a backdrop of major demographic, social and economic changes, as well as changing attitudes and aspirations, some aspects of family life remain much the same as they have always been, while other aspects have changed considerably over time.

The very definition of family is one that is open to a variety of interpretations and understandings. It is difficult to talk about the 'typical Australian family' given the extent to which families adapt and change in response to life's events. The term family is best understood inclusively, covering people who care for, support and protect each other. A more detailed discussion of what is meant by the term family, and how it is used in this report, is in Chapter 2.

In examining Australian families, this report does not attempt to provide an exhaustive analysis of the broad range of issues facing families today. Rather, it examines a selection of key topics, including fertility, caring responsibilities, economic wellbeing, relationships and work and family. Future reports will look at a range of other current and emerging issues facing families.

Families in Australia: 2008 paints a generally positive picture of Australian families. Most families experience strong and healthy relationships and are faring well financially. Families contribute significantly to Australian

society, including through care for children and care for aged relatives and relatives with disability. An expansion in child care and measures to assist workers with family responsibilities is helping more families to effectively balance work and family.

Of course, all families face a range of everyday pressures associated with such things as maintaining good family relationships, balancing the family budget, and dealing with work pressures. They must also deal with life-cycle related events, such as births, deaths and illness.

Some families are more vulnerable than others and are more likely to face more fundamental and ongoing difficulties. These include jobless families, families with caring responsibilities, low-income families, one-parent families, older Australians and Indigenous families.

While most Australian families are doing well, *Families in Australia: 2008* identifies some areas which could benefit from greater attention. The most significant issues identified in the report are:

- *Recognising and supporting the diverse range of Australian families.*
- *Supporting families who wish to have children.*
- *Supporting Australia's carers now and into the future*
- *Supporting strong families, especially in times of greatest need.*

- *Enhancing the economic wellbeing of vulnerable Australian families.*
- *Helping Australians to balance their work with family and caring responsibilities.*

Recognising and supporting the diverse range of families

Families in Australia shows that Australian families are very diverse and have changed considerably over the last 30 years. On the one hand, most children still grow up in a two-parent family, most people still get married and have children, and most people stay in their first marriage. At the same time, families have become smaller, there are more families without children, and there are more people living alone. Families are going through more transitions over time, for example, some marriages break up and parents re-partner, and there are more one-parent and step/blended families.

Culture plays an important part in defining family. Families from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds may have different concepts of family.

Different family types are likely to have different requirements which need to be recognised in the design of government programs and services. For example, programs and services that provide support where families' living arrangements change due to relationship breakdown, the death of a family member or re-partnering, can help to minimise disruptions, particularly for children. Similarly, targeted services will be more effective if they recognise the distinctive features of families from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds or the more

inclusive concept of family for many Indigenous people.

In providing support for Australian families a key focus needs to be on assisting more vulnerable families to reach their potential. The report shows that one-parent families, especially those that are jobless, and Indigenous families are particularly vulnerable in a number of ways. Some older couples and singles also face particular pressures. Providing support to and implementing programs that target these groups could help to achieve sustained improvements on a number of fronts (see Chapter 2).

Supporting families who wish to have children

A key change for Australian families has been in fertility. As is the case in much of the developed world, Australia has lower fertility now than in the past. Couples are choosing to have fewer children and to have children later in their partnership, with many couples delaying having children until they are in their 30s.

After falling since the 1960s, Australian fertility rates have increased in recent times. Nevertheless, small family sizes and an ageing population are likely to place some pressure on government services and on families balancing caring responsibilities with other commitments.

The report presents evidence that suggests some families may feel constrained from having the number of children they would ideally like to. This could reflect a range of factors including concerns about economic security or how they can combine work with family. Supporting families and reducing barriers

to having children is an important part of an overall response to changes in the age profile of the population. Governments, employers and the broader community can all play a role in ensuring families are supported and feel able to combine having children with other responsibilities (see Chapter 3).

Supporting Australia's carers now and into the future

Caring continues to be a core activity and defining feature of families. Most Australians are likely to undertake caring responsibilities at some time during their lives, with women significantly more likely to be primary carers than men, particularly those aged 45 to 55 years.

Providing effective support to carers of the aged and people with disability is important in recognising the valuable contribution that carers make to their families and to the Australian community, in both social and economic terms. It is also important in helping to minimise some of the adverse financial, emotional and physical impacts that many carers report.

A particular issue for many carers is the difficulty they have in participating in the labour force. As the Australian population ages, and the demand for caring, both informal and formal, increases, carers are likely to face increased pressure as they manage their caring, work and other family commitments. There is likely to be a growing need for access to family-friendly work arrangements and leave provisions for those who care for older people or people with disability, as well as those who care for children.

At the same time, there is likely to be increased demand by carers for support services, both in terms of respite care and services targeting their own physical and emotional wellbeing. How the community responds to these challenges will have a significant impact on the wellbeing of carers and how effectively they can perform their roles (see Chapter 4).

Supporting strong families, especially in times of greatest need

Strong and effective family relationships are important on a number of levels. Good relationships, both within and beyond the traditional family unit, are important not only to individuals, but also to society. Healthy relationships help people to achieve and contribute to society. Relationships that help people feel supported can contribute to their happiness and wellbeing, and help families cope with hardship and adapt to change.

Families in Australia shows that Australian families are generally marked by strong and healthy family relationships. Relationship satisfaction between couples and between parents and their children is generally high. However, some groups are relatively less satisfied. These include single people, step-parents and non-resident parents. Unfortunately, there are also families in Australia that are experiencing extreme dysfunction, including violence and child abuse and neglect.

Happy and healthy relationships tend to lead to less need for government intervention and support services. Families can benefit from supports that focus on the development of more

effective parenting and relationship skills, as well as on early intervention and prevention for at risk families. Such support can help people better manage or avoid relationship breakdown and, in the more extreme cases, prevent relationships deteriorating in a more dysfunctional way (see Chapter 6).

Enhancing the economic wellbeing of vulnerable Australian families

Also central to family wellbeing is having sufficient economic resources. Families need to be able to meet the basic costs of living, to work towards a satisfying lifestyle for all family members, and to provide for long-term family security. In general, Australian families today are faring well financially, compared with those in the past and in other countries.

Families do face some economic challenges. Food, transportation and housing costs have risen faster than cost increases of goods and services more generally as measured by the All Groups Consumer Price Index (CPI), making them less affordable. Other costs, such as child care and health care, can also be substantial sources of financial stress for families at particular stages of the life cycle. Many families are also facing increasing debt levels.

While families across all income groups have, on average, experienced increases in incomes after allowing for overall price increases, some families face greater hardships. These include jobless families, one-parent families, some older single and couple families, Indigenous families and families at certain 'pressure points' of the life-cycle (such as those with very young children or other caring responsibilities). How best

to support these families to take action to improve their economic circumstances should be a major focus of community and government effort.

To some degree, the disadvantage experienced by these families can be addressed by reducing barriers to work, supporting families through transitions such as relationship breakdown, and encouraging participation in education and work among those who are socially excluded. That said, the adequacy and targeting of government assistance remains an important means of reducing disadvantage (see Chapter 5).

Helping Australians balance work with family and caring responsibilities

Employment contributes to family wellbeing in a number of ways. It increases the economic resources available within families and protects against social exclusion and inter-generational disadvantage.

The report highlights the remarkable changes that have occurred in relation to the working lives of Australian families – with an increasing proportion of women working and people working in a more diverse range of employment types and patterns. The changes have led to greater importance being placed on mechanisms which help employees to balance their work and family responsibilities, including access to family-friendly leave, flexible working arrangements, and child care.

There has been a substantial expansion in child care, and measures to assist workers with family responsibilities have become more common. The spread of these provisions,

though, is uneven. For example, just over half of Australia's working women have access to paid maternity leave. To maximise labour force participation and, thereby, contribute to broader productivity goals it will be important to explore further avenues to help people balance work and family commitments and maintain their attachment to the labour force, where this suits their family circumstances (see Chapter 7).

Conclusion

A strong focus on all of these important issues will be crucial to improving the wellbeing of Australian families. The *Families in Australia* report will continue to track Australia's progress in these areas. In addition, by drawing on new data as it becomes available, future editions of the report will be able to identify emerging issues and challenges for Australian families, and ensure that progress in addressing these issues is a priority.

The role of governments is generally to provide a supportive environment in which families themselves can take responsibility for ensuring the wellbeing of family members. There is also a role for governments in providing more direct support for vulnerable families by helping them to build on their strengths and develop their capacity to participate fully in the broader society. Governments also have a role in protecting the wellbeing of children in a range of situations in Australian families. Addressing the challenges identified in this first *Families in Australia* report is a task for all of the Australian community; governments, employers, the non-government sector, community groups and families themselves.

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