

2. Profile of Australian families

Key points

The make-up of Australian families has changed considerably over recent times...

- Between 1976 and 2006:
 - couples with dependent children fell from 48% to 37% of all families in Australia.
 - couple-only families increased from 28% to 37% of all families.
 - one-parent families increased from 7% to 11% of all families.
- Average household size is falling – from 3.6 people per household in 1954 to 2.5 people in 2006.

...yet families made up of couples and children remain common.

- A large number of Australians live with a partner – 59% of people aged 15 years and over, in 2006.
- Most children grow up in couple families – in 2006-07, 73% of young adults reported they had lived with both their birth parents until age 18.

The living arrangements of families take diverse forms.

- Indigenous households, for example, are larger and are more likely to be one-parent families with dependent children than other households (28% in 2006 compared with 9% for other one-family households).
- Overall, families with one or more members born overseas have a profile similar to other families in Australia, but within this group there is considerable diversity based on the country of origin of family members.

The type of family that people live in can change over time.

- In 2001, 29% of young adults had experienced two or more changes to their living arrangements (e.g. from living in a couple family to living in a one-parent family) until age 18.

The composition of Australian families has changed considerably over recent times. Most children still grow up in a two-parent family, and most couples stay in their first marriage. At the same time, families are getting smaller and are less likely to contain children. People are less likely to marry and more people are living alone.

With relationship breakdown more common, people are more likely to experience changes to who they live with over time.

The result of these changes is greater diversity in family composition in Australia than ever before. This diversity can pose challenges for governments and the community in supporting

the full range of Australian families. This chapter outlines some of the major changes occurring to family structures in Australia.

It also considers how families can take different forms for different people, and how they change over time in response to life events.

What is a family?

Family means different things to different people. It is difficult to talk about the 'typical Australian family', especially as society and families change. Families may span several generations, several households, and may change in response to life events such as divorce, remarriage, and children leaving the parental home. It is sometimes easier to define the family according to what it does rather than what it looks like – caring, supporting, protecting and loving are what families have in common.

This more inclusive definition is difficult to apply when providing a snapshot of Australian families. This report generally uses the definition of a family developed by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), that is, a family is 'two or more persons, one of whom is aged 15 years or over, who are related by blood, marriage (registered or de facto), adoption, step or fostering; and who are usually resident in the same household.' However, where data is available, the report also considers broader definitions of the family.

This chapter presents data on households as well as families, especially where data on families is not available. Most people living together in households are in fact families, with families making up 72% of all households in 2006. The remaining household types are made up of lone-person households (24%) and group households (4%) (ABS, 2006a).

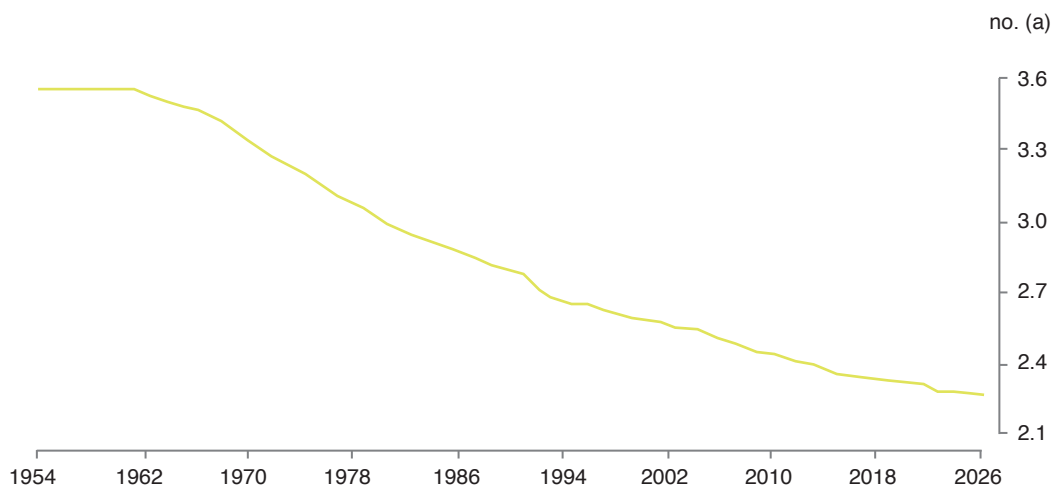
Then and now

The major changes occurring to families in Australia reflect demographic, social and economic trends, as well as changing values, attitudes and aspirations. Australia's population is ageing, for example, and fertility is lower now than in the past (see Chapter 3). Australians now undertake more education, change jobs more often, marry or form partnerships later, and have fewer children later, if at all. Separation and repartnering are more common than they were 30 years ago.

A key change for Australian families is the decline in average household size. Average household size has declined from 3.6 people per household in 1954 to 2.5 people per household in 2006; this decline is projected to continue gradually (see Figure 2.1).

The decrease in household size is in part due to lower fertility rates and because more people are now living alone.

Figure 2.1 Average household size is declining 1954 to 2026



(a) Persons per household

Source: ABS *Household and Family Projections, Australia* (3236.0); ABS data available on request Censuses of Population and Housing 1954-1981.

At the same time, family types have also changed. Couples with dependent children¹ have long been the most common family type in Australia. Recently, however, this group is beginning to be overtaken by couple-only families (see Figure 2.2). These family types each made up around 37% of all families in 2006. Couples with dependent children have gradually decreased (from 48% in 1976 to 37% in 2006), and couple-only families have

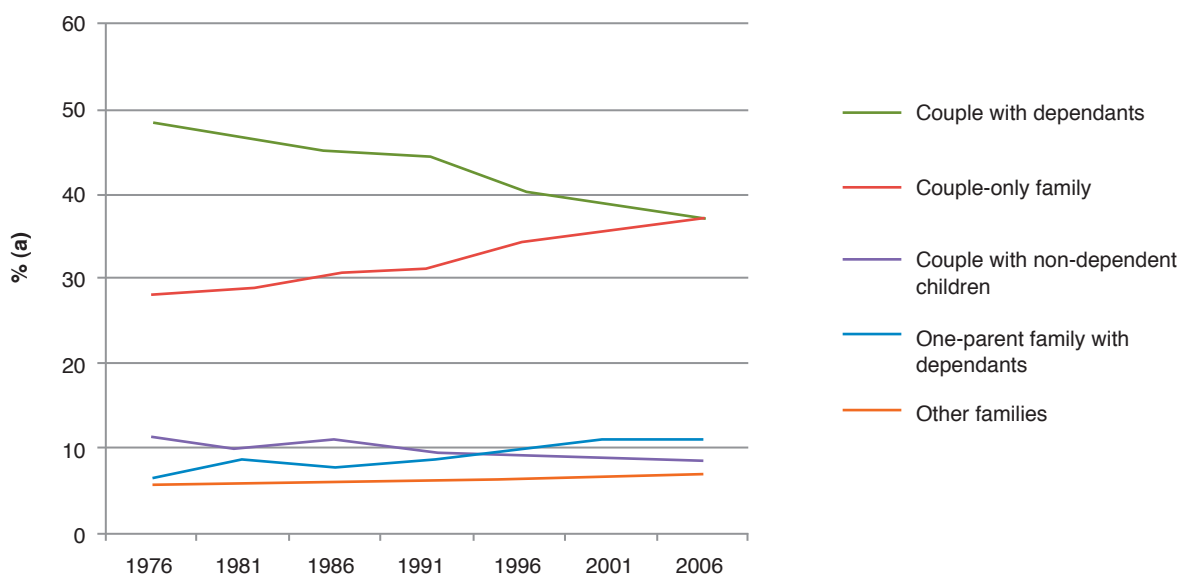
increased (from 28% in 1976 to 37% in 2006). This is partly a result of population ageing, with more 'empty nesters' (older couples whose children have grown up and left home) than in the past. Also, there are more younger couples delaying having children or not having children at all.

The third key family type, one-parent families with dependants,² has also increased but by

¹ Dependent children, as defined by the ABS, are children aged under 15 years or aged 15-24 years who are full-time students and have no partner or children of their own.

² In several places this chapter cites data for one-parent families, but from different sources. Differences in estimates for one-parent families are a result of different data sources taken at different time periods and covering slightly different populations.

Figure 2.2 Family types are changing 1976 to 2006



(a) Proportion of all families.

Source: de Vaus, D. (2004) *Diversity and Change in Australian Families*, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne, p.6; ABS 2006 Census Tables (2069.0).

a smaller margin, and this growth has stabilised in recent years. In 1976, one-parent families with dependants comprised 7% of all families; by 2006 this had increased to 11%. The number of one-parent families with children under 15 headed by a woman remains higher than those headed by a man – by around seven times. Since the early-1990s, male one-parent families have increased only very slightly as a proportion of all one-parent families with children under 15 (ABS, 2007b).

These trends in family type are likely to continue into the future. By 2026, couples without children are projected by the ABS to be the most common type of family in Australia (44% of all families). One-parent families are projected to change little as a proportion of all families.

These changes to family type will have implications across a range of areas, including future community services and infrastructure.

Marriage and partnering

One key change in the profile of Australian families relates to marriage and long-term relationships. Although most people still form a long-term relationship at some stage of their lives, the nature of these relationships has changed since the 1970s. More people are living in de facto relationships than in the past, relationships are more likely to break up, and marriage bears a less direct relationship to having children. The number of children people are having is much lower than in the 1960s and 1970s (see Chapter 3).

Analysis of marriages data suggests that the likelihood of marrying has decreased in recent decades (ABS 2007b). Of all boys born in the three-year period 1985–87, 79% are expected to marry. This proportion is expected to fall to 69% for boys born in 2000–02. Similarly, 86% of girls born in 1985–87 are expected to marry, compared with 74% of girls born in 2000–02.

The age at which people marry is also increasing, partly as a result of more people living together before marriage. In 1975 men typically first married when they were around 23 years old and women when they were around 21 years old (ABS, 1993). By 2006, these ages had increased to 30 for men and 28 for women (ABS, 2006b).

Lower rates of marriage are, in part, associated with the increase in de facto relationships. The proportion of couples living in a de facto relationship has increased markedly, from 6% in 1986 to 15% in 2006, yet in many cases these couples eventually marry. In 2006,

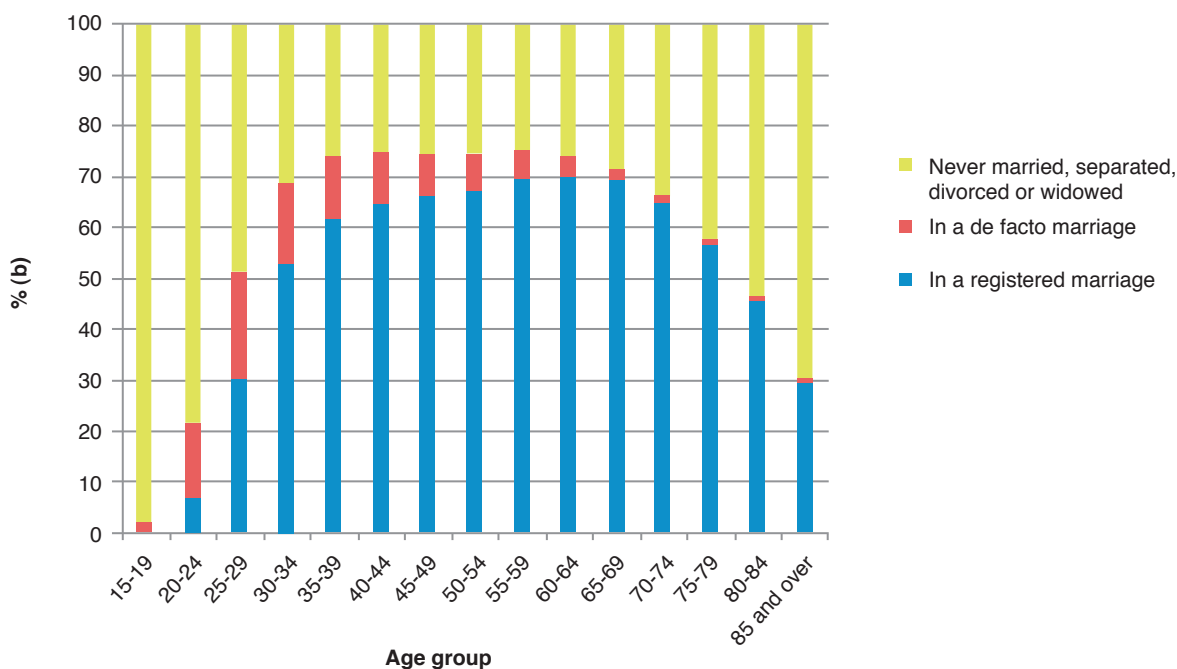
a de facto relationship was a more popular living arrangement than marriage for people in their early-20s, but for people in their late-20s onwards, marriage was more common, suggesting it is still the preferred eventual arrangement for people in long-term relationships (see Figure 2.3).

Overall, the proportion of people living with a partner (either formally married or de facto) has declined slightly since the mid-1980s. However, the number of people aged 15 and over living with a partner was still high, at 59% (ABS, 2006a). This is associated with population ageing (more people in older age groups who have outlived their partner), a greater rate of separation and divorce, and fewer people forming long-term relationships in the first place.

Relationship breakdown

Another substantial change for Australian families is the increase in the breakdown of marriages. This can be partly attributed to the substantially simplified divorce procedures which followed the introduction of the *Family Law Act 1975* (Cwlth). Before 1976, the crude divorce rate (the number of divorces per 1,000 people) was below one per 1,000 people. Following implementation of the law, there was a large increase in the divorce rate in 1976 (4.5 divorces per 1,000 people) as the backlog of divorce applications was cleared. Since then the crude divorce rate has hovered between about 2.5 and 3 divorces per 1,000 people, growing slightly in the late-1980s and early-1990s, but since 2000 has started falling and in 2007 was 2.3 divorces per 1,000 people (ABS 2007c).

Figure 2.3 People’s marital status (a)
2006



(a) By age group
(b) Proportion of age group population

Source: ABS 2006 Census Tables (2068.0).

The rate of relationship breakdown is higher for de facto relationships than marriages. De facto couples are three times as likely to end their relationship within a five year period as those who are married (Qu and Weston, 2008). It should be recognised, however, that there is significant variation in the nature of de facto relationships, ranging from couples testing their commitment prior to making a decision about marriage to couples intending to have a long-term commitment.

Diversity in the family

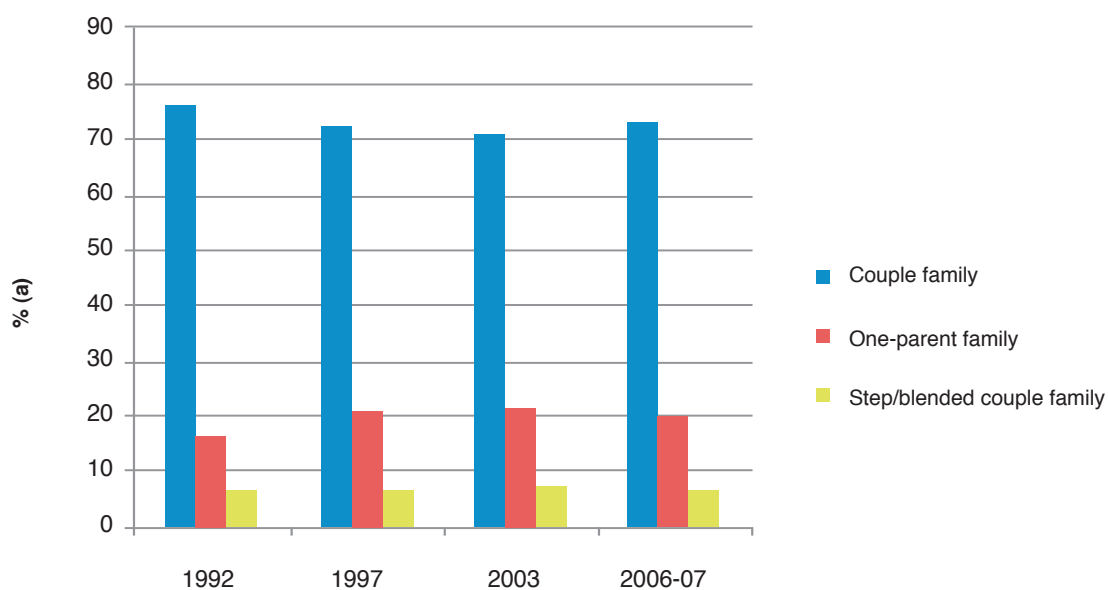
Diversity and change in families is apparent not only in changing numbers of couples and one-parent families, but in changing trends in marriage and long-term relationships. Within each of the different family types there can be a wide variety in the actual relationships between family members. For example, a couple who have dependent children may not both be the children’s biological parents – one may be a

step-parent, or both may be guardians of the children (for example, grandparents who have primary care of grandchildren).

Couple families (where the children are the natural or adopted children of both parents), though, are still the most common type of family with children under 18 years. In 2006-07 they made up 73% of all families with children under 18 (see Figure 2.4).

One-parent families made up 20% of families with children under 18. Step and blended families (where the children are a mixture of natural/adopted children and step children) made up about 7% of all families with children under 18. Since 1992 there has been a slight decrease in couple families and a slight increase in one-parent families, and almost no change in the proportion of step and blended families (ABS, 2008c).

Figure 2.4 One-in-five families with children have only one parent present 1992 to 2006-07



(a) Proportion of all families with children under 18 years.

Source: ABS *Family Characteristics, Australia, 2006-07* (4442.0), p.15.

Other family types make up only a very small proportion of all families, there are a number of distinctive characteristics:

- The 2006 Census suggests there are around 26,000 same-sex couples, making up less than 1% of all couple families. Around 11% of these families (or 2,900 families) had one or more children of any age living with them (ABS, 2006a). This is likely to be an underestimate of the number of same-sex couples as some couples may not choose to identify as 'same-sex' in the Census.
- It is estimated that in 2006-07 there were around 14,000 grandparent-headed families with children under 18 years (less than 1% of all families with children) (ABS, 2008c).
- In 2006 a small proportion of households (1.3% or 93,200) were comprised of more than one family living together. Most of these (80%) consisted of three generations of parents, children and grandchildren living together (ABS, 2006a).
- In 2006-07 there were 7,000 families containing one or more foster children (ABS, 2008c).
- The number of families with adopted children is not known. However, only a small number of children are adopted in Australia each year (568 in 2006-07). Adoptions have decreased considerably since the 1970s and are now largely made up of adoptions of children from overseas (71% of adoptions in 2006-07) (AIHW, 2008).

Although small in total, these family types may have needs that are very different to those of other families, which should be recognised in the design of programs and services.

Changing living arrangements

Family diversity is also the result of changes across the lifespan. Snapshots of family types can hide the fact that people's living arrangements are not fixed in time. Most people pass through certain stages in their lives such as living with parents, living alone, living with a partner, living with a partner and children, and so on. Other life circumstances, such as a relationship breakdown, death

of a family member, and repartnering, can also alter living arrangements. Families may require support across these stages, and particularly at times of change.

One example of this is how children's living arrangements change when their parents' relationship changes. The Household Income and Labour Dynamics Australia (HILDA) Survey

indicates that most children live with both their birth parents for all of their childhood (de Vaus and Gray, 2003). For people born between 1976 and 1983, almost three quarters (71%) lived with both their birth parents until age 18.

A substantial minority, however, experienced some change in living circumstances. Around 16% experienced two different living arrangements in their childhood, and 13% experienced three or more. Most commonly, when parents separate, children spend some time in a mother only family, and some later go on to live in a step or blended family with one of their parents.

Some studies have highlighted concern about the effect family disruption has on children. On the whole, children who have experienced such transitions have poorer social and emotional outcomes in childhood and later life, compared with children who have not experienced such transitions, although the differences are not large. While for many families, parental separation and remarriage may benefit both parents and children in the long term, programs and services which help to minimise disruptions at transition points are important.

Around half of older Australians (65 years and over) live with their partner, a further quarter live alone and the remainder live in other arrangements (de Vaus, 2004). Residential aged care is an option for some aged Australians, however, this is much more likely in later life, that is, for those aged 85 years and over (31%) than for those aged 65-74 years (1%) (AIHW, 2007).

Beyond household boundaries

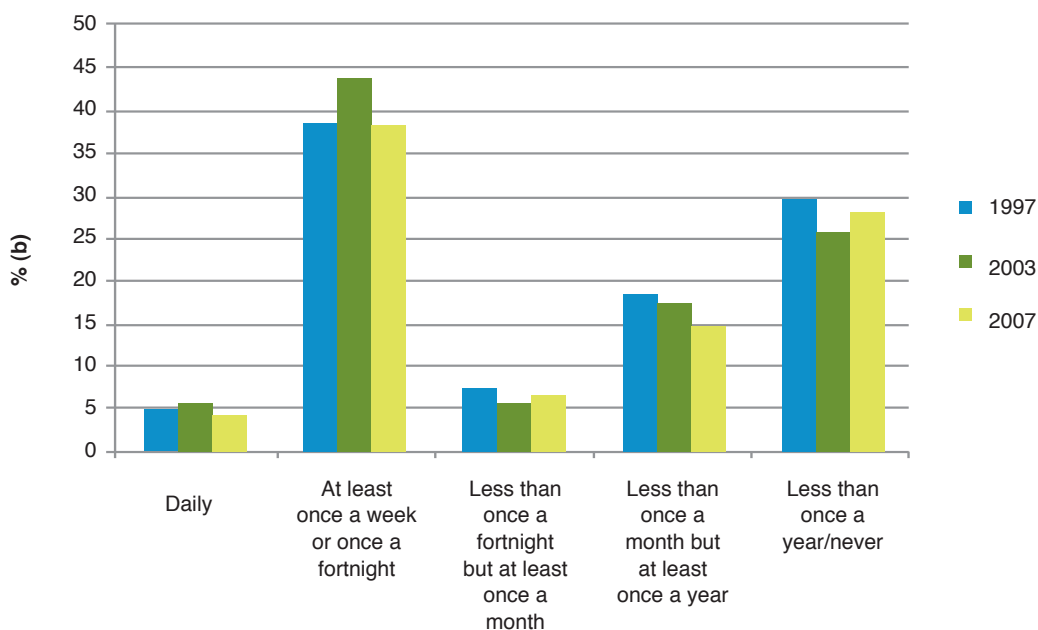
Most of the data presented so far refers to families who live together. A key aspect of family diversity is the relationships that extend beyond the household which play an important role in family life.

One important example of this is the relationship between immediate family who do not live together full time, such as between children and parents, and between brothers and sisters, in cases where the parents' relationship has broken down and family members live apart. Contact arrangements after separation that allow for meaningful, supportive relationships to continue are important for the wellbeing of both children and parents.

In 2006-07 there were just over a million children aged under 18 years (22% of all children under 18 years) who had a parent living at a different location. For a substantial minority of these children, contact with their non-resident parent is very limited. Around 4% saw their non-resident parent daily, while 39% saw their non-resident parent at least once a fortnight or once a week (see Figure 2.5). However, 28% saw their non-resident parent less than once a year or never.

Indigenous families

Another aspect of diversity that needs to be recognised in providing support to families is the way families vary according to social and cultural background. Indigenous families, in particular tend to have some distinctive characteristics compared with non-Indigenous Australian families.

Figure 2.5 How often do children see their non-resident parent? (a)

(a) Frequency of 'face-to-face' contact with non-resident parent by children aged less than 18 years with a parent living elsewhere.
 (b) Proportion of all contact (including no contact).

Source: ABS *Family Characteristics and Transitions, Australia, 2006-07* (4442.0), p.27.

The ways families are described, especially in statistical collections, often do not capture Indigenous families very well. Indigenous families tend to be based on more inclusive definitions of family than other Australian families, and tend to be organised around different cultural norms (such as relationships across generations, rather than around nuclear families, and notions of kinship within language groups). Indigenous families often have a greater involvement of grandparents in supporting the household socially and economically, and particularly in looking after children.

There also tends to be more interdependent relationships across households for Indigenous compared with non-Indigenous people (including sharing of resources across households), and greater movement of individuals between these linked households, especially children.

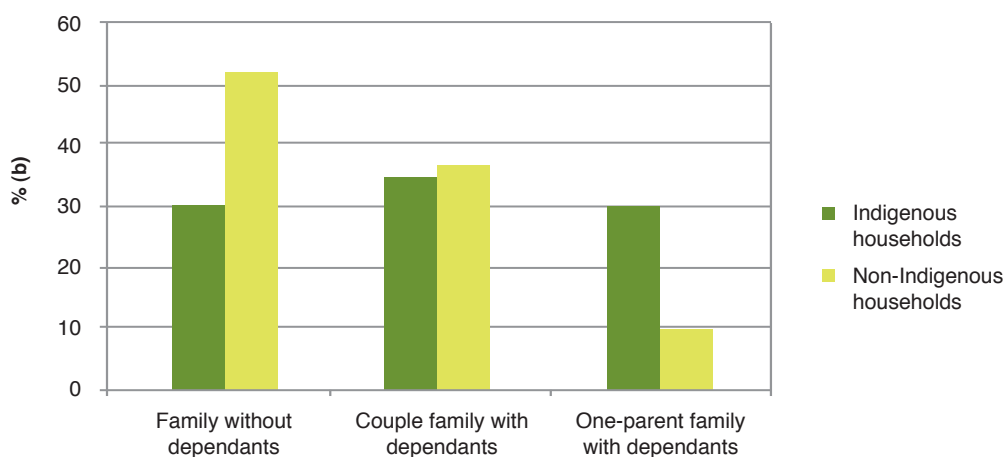
Despite limitations in statistical collections, data that is available shows there are substantial differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous families and households.

Households tend to be larger for Indigenous people than non-Indigenous people. In 2006, on average, Indigenous households³ contained 3.3 people per household, while non-Indigenous households contained 2.5 people. Multi-family households, while still relatively uncommon, were also much more common for Indigenous than non-Indigenous households (5% compared with 1%).

One of the biggest differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous families is in the proportion of families with dependent

children. In 2006, 67% of Indigenous one-family households were families with dependent children, compared with 47% of non-Indigenous one-family households. This reflects differences in age structure and fertility. Indigenous people are generally younger than non-Indigenous people and have a higher fertility rate (see Chapter 3). The proportion of one-parent families with dependent children for Indigenous one-family households is particularly high — 30% compared with 10% for non-Indigenous one-family households (see Figure 2.6).

Figure 2.6 Indigenous and non-Indigenous households (a) 2006



(a) One-family household, by family types.

(b) Proportion of all Indigenous one-family households; all non-Indigenous one-family households.

Source: ABS *Population Characteristics, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, 2006* (4713.0).

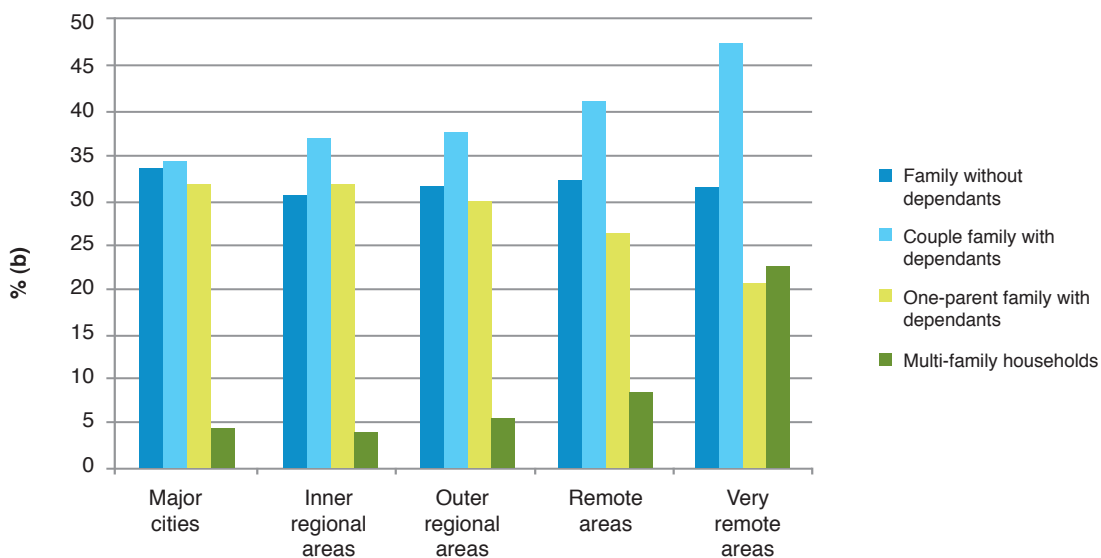
³ The ABS defines an Indigenous household as any household that had at least one person of any age as a resident at the time of the Census who identified as having Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander origins.

The more traditional Indigenous family structures are more common in remote areas than in urban areas of Australia. In 2006, among Indigenous households, multi-family households were most common in very remote areas, where 23% were multi-family. This compares with only 4% of Indigenous families in major cities (see Figure 2.7).

In contrast, one-parent Indigenous families with dependants become less common with increasing geographical remoteness (see Figure 2.7). In 2006 they comprised 21% of Indigenous one-family households in very remote areas and 32% in major cities.

These differences highlight the need to consider the differing needs of Indigenous families in urban, rural and remote areas when planning Indigenous support services.

Figure 2.7 Where are Indigenous families located? (a) 2006



(a) Indigenous one-family households, by family type.
 (b) Proportion of all Indigenous families.

Source: ABS Population Characteristics, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, 2006 (4713.0).

Families with one or more members born overseas

In 2006, 26% of people born in Australia had at least one overseas-born parent and of these 44% had both parents born overseas. Families with at least one parent born overseas had a fairly similar profile to other Australian families, although they include a slightly lower proportion of one-parent families with dependent children compared with other families (7% compared with 11%) (ABS, 2008a).

Despite the overall similar profile, there is considerable diversity among families with one or more members born overseas depending on the country of origin. Families where the reference person was born in North Africa, the Middle East, South East Asia or Southern and Central Asia, for example, had the highest proportions of couple families with dependent children. In contrast, families where the reference person was born in Europe had the highest proportions of couple families without children. This reflects the age structures of different migrant populations. People born in Europe are more likely to have come to Australia in the 1950s and 1960s and be now aged in their 50s, or older. Migrants from Asia, Africa and the Middle East, in contrast, are more likely to have come to Australia in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s, and are more likely to be younger and have young children.

Families where the reference person was born in South East Asia or North East Asia were more likely to live in multi-family households than other families (5% of each of these groups, compared with 3% of all Australian families). Families with a reference person born in Asia, Africa or the Middle East were all more likely to have other related

individuals living with them, particularly siblings or parents of the reference person (4% to 7% of each of these groups, compared with around 2% of all Australian families).

Differences in the profile of families with parents born overseas may partly reflect cultural traditions and values, but they may also reflect some of the preferences and needs of people living away from the support they may have had in the countries they left. For example, the higher rate of multi-family households may reflect the social and financial benefits of living with others from the same country while trying to become established in a new society.

These differences point to the need for programs and services to recognise the differing family profiles of different cultural groups. Services also need to recognise the diverse range of needs within this group, for example isolation issues experienced by refugee families or the aged care needs of families with a member from a previous wave of migration with low English language skills.

Conclusion

Many characteristics of Australian families have stayed the same over time. Most Australians still marry, and growing up with two biological parents remains the norm for children in Australia. However, there have been some substantial changes, most notably due to relationship breakdown and remarriage, people having fewer children or none at all, and the ageing of the population. These changes have meant more people experiencing transitions in their living arrangements, smaller household size, and more people living alone.

There is also significant diversity in the experience of family for different groups, most notably for Indigenous Australians, but also for other groups such as older Australians and families where a member was born overseas. Diversity is likely to continue to be a key feature of families into the future.

Although most children experience a stable family environment, it is important to recognise that some may experience more complicated living arrangements than others. These include the breakdown of their parents' marriage, a lack of contact with a non-resident parent, adjusting to a new family if parents remarry, and spending time in a one-parent family. For some children, these events pose few problems. Other families may require additional support from government and other services to help them adjust to new living arrangements.

Changing family structures have important implications. Smaller families may mean that people are less likely or less able to rely on their families to provide care if they are ill or have a disability. They may also have implications for the planning of housing and community infrastructure. As families continue to diversify and their living arrangements become more complex, government service delivery systems may need to change to meet the needs of all family types.

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