

## **Defining families: family types and characteristics**

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### **What is a 'family'?**

Family means different things to different people – 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 a family not by what it looks like but by what it does – caring, supporting, protecting and loving are what families have in common.

- *This information sheet is intended to supplement the Family Impact Statement (FIS) Guidelines. You can use this information sheet to help identify the types of families which may be affected by your policy or program and the ways in which they may be affected. Links to more information about Australian families can be found on the FIS page of the PM&C website.*

### **Points to consider:**

- Marriage and children are not prerequisites for family formation.
- In recent years there has been a trend to smaller families and an increase in the number of couple-only and lone-person households. It is important to remember however, that extended families may span several households, and that people living alone are not necessarily without family.
- More people are forming several families across their lives, as a result of greater rates of separation and re-partnering.
- Certain types of families, and families at different points in the life cycle, may have different strengths, needs and vulnerabilities. These include jobless families, one-parent families, Indigenous families, families with caring responsibilities, families from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and families in rural and remote communities.

## Overview – family types and living arrangements

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS), and the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) provide detailed summaries of data relating to family structures and family relationships. The following statistics use the ABS definition of a family as two or more persons, one of whom is aged 15 years and over, who are related by blood, marriage (registered or de facto), adoption, step or fostering; and who are usually resident in the same household.

- In 2006, there were 5,219,165 families in Australia.
- In 2006-07, there were 2.6 million families with at least one co-resident child aged between 0 and 17 years old. Of these families, 73% were intact families; 7% were step or blended families; 17% were lone mother families and 3% were lone father families.

## Vulnerable families

### Jobless families

Families where no adult is employed are more vulnerable to some forms of disadvantage. Jobless families are more likely to be economically disadvantaged than families with employment; tend to experience poorer health outcomes; and may find it difficult to get support in times of crisis. Importantly, children growing up in jobless families are more likely to grow up jobless themselves.

- In 2007, 14% of all families with children under 15 years were jobless. In the same year, 45% of all one-parent families with children under 15 years were jobless.
- Over half of jobless family households with children under 15 years reported they could not raise \$2000 in a week for something important.
- In 2006, around half of people in jobless households reported their health as good or better, compared with over two thirds living in other households with children under 15 years.

### One-parent families

One-parent families refer to families where a child or children are raised in a household with only one parent present. Parents may raise children on their own for a number of reasons, such as the death of a partner; divorce or separation from a partner; or having no established relationship with the other parent of the child.

- Since the late 1960s, there has been an increase in the number of one-parent families with dependent children in Australia.
- In 2006-07, there were just over a million children under 18 years of age (22% of all children under 18 years) who had a parent living at a different location. Of these, around 4% saw their non-resident parent daily and 39% saw their non-resident parent at least once a fortnight or once a week. At the opposite end of the spectrum, 28% saw their non-resident parent less than once a year.
- Of one-parent families with children under 15, the majority are headed by women.
- Lone parents (both male and female) are less likely to be employed than couple parents, although lone father rates of employment are higher than lone mother rates.
- One-parent families with dependent children often struggle financially. Although they have similar expenses to couple parent families with dependent children, they are

disadvantaged by factors such as having no income earner or no second income earner, and/or having to rely on government benefits.

### **Indigenous families**

The profile of Indigenous families is different to other Australian families. Primarily, Indigenous people tend to have children at younger ages and reside in larger households than non-Indigenous people. Indigenous children are more likely to grow up in one-parent families, although there are often other adults present.

The lower health and socio-economic status of many Indigenous people is apparent in their higher infant mortality, lower life expectancy, educational attainment and income, and their greater contact with the criminal justice system. These have wide implications for family formation, functioning and wellbeing.

- As of June 2006, the estimated Indigenous population of Australia was 2.3% of the total Australian population.
- Around one-third of Indigenous Australians (32%) were living in major cities, 43% in regional areas, and 26% in remote or very remote areas (compared to less than 2% of the non-Indigenous population).
- Around two-thirds (67%) of Indigenous one-family households were families with dependent children, compared with 47% on non-Indigenous one-family households.
- Of Indigenous one-family households, the proportion of one-parent families with dependent children is quite high (30%, compared to 10% for non-Indigenous one-family households).
- Just over half (57%) of Indigenous people aged 15-64 years were either in work or looking for work, compared with 76% of non-Indigenous people in the same age bracket. Indigenous people were also about three times as likely as non-Indigenous people to be unemployed.
- In 2006, almost half of all Indigenous households were in the lowest income distribution group (lowest 20%). The median weekly individual income of Indigenous Australians (aged 15 years and over) was \$278, compared to \$473 for non-Indigenous Australians.
- Fourteen percent of Indigenous households were experiencing over-crowding; with the numbers higher in remote and very remote areas.

### **Families with caring responsibilities**

Most families have caring responsibilities at some point in the life-cycle. In addition to caring for babies and young children (discussed in Information Sheet 2), families may also provide care for a member with a chronic illness or disability, or a frail aged relative. Care may be provided in the form of assistance with daily living activities; ad-hoc assistance or assistance with specific tasks; and financial assistance.

- One in five Australians had a reported disability in 2003. In the same year, just over one half of the population aged 60 and over had a reported disability, while around 40% reported needing assistance because of disability or age to cope with health issues and everyday living.
- In 2003 there were around 2.6 million carers who provided assistance to those who needed help because of disability or old age. About one fifth of these were primary carers; of primary carers, most provided care for a person living in the same household.
- Research suggests that the most intense caring responsibilities occur for people aged between 35 and 44 years.

Caring can have a significant effect on the financial, emotional and physical wellbeing of carers and their families. Caring for someone may restrict employment opportunities and income, resulting in lower living standards and a greater likelihood of financial hardship. At the same time, carers and their families may also experience higher rates of mental health problems than the general public.

### **Families from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds**

Families from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds may encounter a range of challenges that are unique to their situation, such as language barriers in the community or workplace; a lack of information provided in culturally and linguistically appropriate forms; poor knowledge or understanding of Australian social practices; racist attitudes; and bullying at school or in the workplace. Depending on the reason for migration to Australia, there may also be a number of factors impinging on their health and wellbeing, such as depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, anger, stress, alienation, poverty or economic hardship, and loneliness.

As of 2006:

- 22.2% of the Australian population were born overseas, and over half this group came from a country that does not speak English as the main language.
- 15.8% of the Australian population speak a language other than English at home.
- 2.8% of the Australian population speak English poorly or not at all.
- In 2005-6, there were around 17,000 people who moved to Australia permanently under the Humanitarian Program, of which 5200 were refugees.

### **Rural and remote families**

Living in a rural or remote area may have an impact on families in a number of ways. For example, it may increase the amount of time families have to travel to access education, health, and community services; or to attend work or pursue leisure activities. The range of services available may be less than that available in the city; and telecommunications and transport may be more important and less available than in urban communities.

- As a percentage of state/territory population, the NT has the highest proportion of people living in remote and very remote areas (21.7% and 23.5% respectively); and WA the second highest (4.5% and 2.3% respectively).
- The population in inland rural Australia, and in remote and very remote areas around the country, has declined in recent years. This decline has been particularly evident in areas affected by drought.

### **Other vulnerable families**

There are a number of other family types that may experience additional pressures or forms of disadvantage. In 2006-07 there were:

- 94,000 step-families with co-resident children aged 0 to 17 years;
- 80,000 blended families with co-resident children aged 0 to 17 years;
- 14,000 grandparent-headed families with co-resident children aged 0 to 17 years;
- 7,000 foster families in which there was one or more co-resident foster child, and
- nearly two million people living alone.

## **Family characteristics and the family life-cycle**

Generally, living arrangements change over time and in response to life-cycle stages, and factors such as patterns of education, workforce participation, housing, fertility, separation, divorce and age.

### ***Couples and marriage***

Although marriage rates have decreased in Australia over recent decades, the proportion of people living with a partner is still high.

- In 2006, 59% of Australians aged 15 years and over lived with a partner.
- In 2001, 55% of Australians aged 15 years and over were married.
- Data from the 2006 Census indicates that there were 1.2 million Australians aged 15 years and over living in de facto relationships (including same sex relationships).
- The proportion of the Australian population who never married (aged 15 years and over) was 32% in 2001.

### ***Parenting and having children***

There are a number of factors that influence the decision for Australians to have children, including working arrangements, income and economic stability, the cost of living, the age of the parents, job security, job pressures, other commitments, and the quality of family relationships and perceptions of parenting skills.

- Overall, couples are choosing to have fewer children, at a later point in their relationships than in the past. Some couples are not having children at all.
- Of all families with children, 78% had dependent children – that is, children under 15 years of age, or a full-time dependent student aged 15 to 24 years.
- Of all families with children, 22% had non-dependent children only.
- The median age for mothers 2007 was 30.7 years; for fathers it was 33.1 years.

### ***Family responsibilities***

Although women's workforce participation has increased, women still undertake a greater proportion of household tasks and child care tasks than men.

- In 2006, women undertook more than two and a half times as long caring for children as men. Of time spent caring for children, fathers spent a greater proportion of their time on play activities, while mothers spent more of their time on physical and emotional care activities.
- The most common working arrangements for couples with dependent children is a 'one and a half earners' arrangement, comprising a father working full time and a mother working part time. Around a third of all couples with dependent children fall into this category.

### ***Young adults***

Young adults can experience a number of life transitions, in areas such as relationships (moving in with a partner, getting married, or having children), completing study (secondary or tertiary), employment and income (moving into full-time work), and living arrangements (moving out of the family home or purchasing a property).

- Over the last few decades there has been an increase in the number of young adults living with their parents (31% in 2006).

- Many young people are staying at school and in further study longer than has been customary in the past. For some people, this means staying in the family home, or returning to the family home throughout their 20s, for financial or emotional support. As many young people are also combining study and work, the transition to the labour force is also less distinct than it has been in the past.

### ***Separation and divorce***

The number of divorces granted in Australia has been decreasing each year since reaching a peak in 2001.

- Divorce rates currently sit at around 2.3 divorces per 1,000 people.
- De facto couples are three times more likely to end their relationship within a five year period than those who are married.
- In 2007, the proportion of divorces involving children under the age of 18 was 49.3%.

### ***Death of family members***

In addition to the immediate emotional trauma that the loss of a family member will entail, the effect of the death of a family member will have other implications, depending on factors such as the role of the person within the family (for example, the loss of a parent may result in reduced income, moving home, changes to child care arrangements; the loss of a grandparent may result in receipt of inheritance by younger generations or changes to child care arrangements; the loss of a child may result in changes to future fertility decisions).

### ***Caring for family members***

In addition to caring for children, families may need to provide care *to* a family member living with a mental or physical disability; short or long term illness, or the frail aged.

- In 2006, there were around 2.6 million carers in Australia, around one fifth of whom were primary carers.
- Most care occurs within families – 42% of primary carers were caring for their partner, 26% for a child with a disability or illness, 23% for their parents, and 9% for other people.
- People aged 35-39 years experience some of the most intense caring responsibilities as they care for children as well as for other people who are frail aged or are living with disability.
- Primary carers are less likely to be working (or if they are, only part time), have lower incomes and higher expenses due to the nature of the caring role, and are more likely to suffer depression.
- Caring is often a long-term commitment – over a quarter of carers have provided care for a person with disability or frail aged for between 10 and 24 years.