

## Research Operations Unit

**The primary tasks of the Research Operations Unit are to: develop and manage the Institute's new panel survey, known as the *Australian Family Panel Survey*; provide advice on research methods to the Institute's three Program areas; and undertake research including the monitoring of family trends and family-related values and attitudes based on data from the panel survey and other sources.**

### Panel survey

A manager of the Research Operations Unit was appointed in September 1999. The main focus of the Research Operations Unit has been development of the Australian Family Panel Survey. This has involved three areas of work: development of the design of the survey; planning of database management, and development of the questionnaires.

In October 1999, Dr Heather Laurie (manager of the British Household Panel Survey, the BHPS) visited the Institute for two weeks to provide advice on survey design and database management. This was followed by three roundtable discussions with experts in running Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) surveys, managing longitudinal studies, and measuring family strengths. Participants included the Assistant Director of the Family Action Centre at the University of Newcastle and the Professor of Family Science at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, as well as other experts drawn from various states in Australia.

The survey is designed to: build a master sample from which sub-samples can be taken when required; monitor personal and family wellbeing and family-related attitudes and values in the light of policy initiatives such as the Federal Government's *Stronger Families and Communities Strategy*; address core questions for projects in the Institute's three research programs; and provide data for swift analysis to inform policy relevant issues as they emerge.

Issues relevant to the research program areas that can be examined by the panel survey include:

- What parenting behaviours, attitudes and values best promote child wellbeing?
- What types of child care arrangements are most likely to promote child wellbeing and positive family functioning?
- How do parenting and child wellbeing vary in different family types?
- What circumstances and experiences minimise adverse consequences for children's wellbeing during the divorce transition and thereafter?
- What factors are most likely to promote positive and stable family unions that persist though time?
- Why is it that some relationships are more able than others to withstand stressful events (for example, unemployment, birth of first child)?
- How do changing family circumstances affect patterns of participation in the wider society (including participation in employment and voluntary engagement in community activities)?
- What factors are influencing the declining rate of fertility?
- How are changes in work life impacting on family wellbeing?
- Is a 'culture of welfare dependency' being transmitted across the generations in some Australian families?

Interviews are planned for every two years. A tracking exercise will be undertaken 12 months after each wave to maintain contact and update information about those in the sample. It is envisaged that each wave of the survey will result in a published report on the state of family life in Australia.

The pilot study is about to go into the field. The feasibility of continuing with the study will depend on response rates. This will be monitored closely, as will the reliability and validity of the questions asked.

Where possible, the panel survey will complement other relevant Australian studies, including the forthcoming Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey, planned by the Commonwealth Department of Family

and Community Services, and the Negotiating the Life Course Survey, run by the Australian National University. Over the last 12 months, various papers have been published outlining details about the planning of the survey, plans have been discussed in conference and seminar presentations, and close liaison has been maintained with those planning the HILDA panel survey to ensure complementarity between the two data sets.