

## CURRENT AND FUTURE AVAILABILITY OF FOSTER CARERS

BY MARILYN McHUGH<sup>1</sup>



In most Australian States and Territories, recent reports on foster care emphasise that the provision of

home-based care, for children at risk of harm who can no longer live with birth parents, is under considerable stress. The nature of the crisis is multi-faceted, but two crucial factors are the decreasing number of people volunteering to take on the role of providing foster care, and the difficulty of retaining experienced carers. In addition, the increase in the number of children

and young people with challenging behaviours requiring care is one of the greatest concerns in out-of-home care (OOHC).

Recruitment and retention of carers and the challenging nature of children and young people in care is not a problem specific to Australia; it is a recurring theme in the empirical literature on fostering throughout the western world. Children requiring OOHC, here and elsewhere, are presenting with increasingly complex needs due in part to greater rates of family breakdown, drug and alcohol abuse, family violence and mental health issues. There is also the perception that more children with disabilities

(physical and intellectual) are coming into care.

A study conducted by researchers at the SPRC for the NSW Department of Community Services (DoCS) aimed to develop a demographic profile of current carers in NSW and to identify the changes and forward projections of socio-demographic trends in NSW that may impact on the availability of carers. The study used several sources of information to examine current and future availability: ABS data, a survey with a representative sample of 450 carers, focus groups with carers and workers and interviews with stakeholders. In addition, research studies both national and international, were used to inform the analysis. At the time of the study, there were

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<sup>1</sup> The author acknowledges the contribution of colleagues Justin McNab, Ciara Smyth, Jenny Chalmers, Peter Siminski and Peter Saunders to the study in November 2004, *The Availability of Foster Carers*, on which this article is based.

*Continued on page 4*

### CONTENTS

Staff and Visitor Update .....	2	New Discussion Papers .....	10
From the Director .....	3	New Projects .....	11
Families First Area Review Lessons .....	6	ASPC Conference 2005 .....	14
Book Review .....	9		

**LEAD ARTICLE:**  
Marilyn McHugh discusses the profile and availability of foster carers.

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## THE SOCIAL POLICY RESEARCH CENTRE

The Social Policy Research Centre is located in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of New South Wales. Under its original name, the Social Welfare Research Centre was established in January 1980, changing its name to the Social Policy Research Centre in 1990. The SPRC conducts research and fosters discussion on all aspects of social policy in Australia, as well as supporting PhD study in these areas. The Centre's research is funded by governments at both Commonwealth and State levels, by academic grant bodies and by non-governmental agencies. Our main topics of inquiry are: economic and social inequality; poverty, social exclusion and income support; employment, unemployment and labour market policies and programs; families, children, people with disabilities and older people; community needs, problems and services; evaluation of health and community service policies and programs; and comparative social policy and welfare state studies.

*The views expressed in this Newsletter, as in any of the Centre's publications, do not represent any official position of the Centre. The SPRC Newsletter and all other SPRC publications present the views and research findings of the individual authors, with the aim of promoting the development of ideas and discussion about major concerns in social policy and social welfare.*

## STAFF AND VISITOR UPDATE

### DEPARTURES:

MARGARET MICALLEF has returned to Research Services, at the University of New South Wales.

MICHAEL BITTMAN has taken a Professorial position at the University of New England and will continue as an Honorary Research Associate of the Centre.

ROSLYN BAKER has left the Centre to pursue her interests.

JUSTIN McNAB is undertaking his PhD whilst on leave from the Centre.

MARGOT RAWSTHORNE has taken up position as a lecturer in Community Development at the School of Social Work and Social Policy at the University of Sydney.

### ARRIVALS:

CASSANDRA BOURNE and KRISTY MARTIRE are doing internships at the Centre. Both are completing Masters of Forensic Psychology at the University of New South Wales.

MICHAEL CLARK has been appointed to act in the role of Business Manager.

NATASHA CORTIS has joined the SPRC as a Research Officer and is working on the Stronger Families, Stronger Communities Evaluation. Natasha is also completing her PhD with Uniting Care Burnside, at the University of Sydney on Performance Indicators in Children and Family Services.

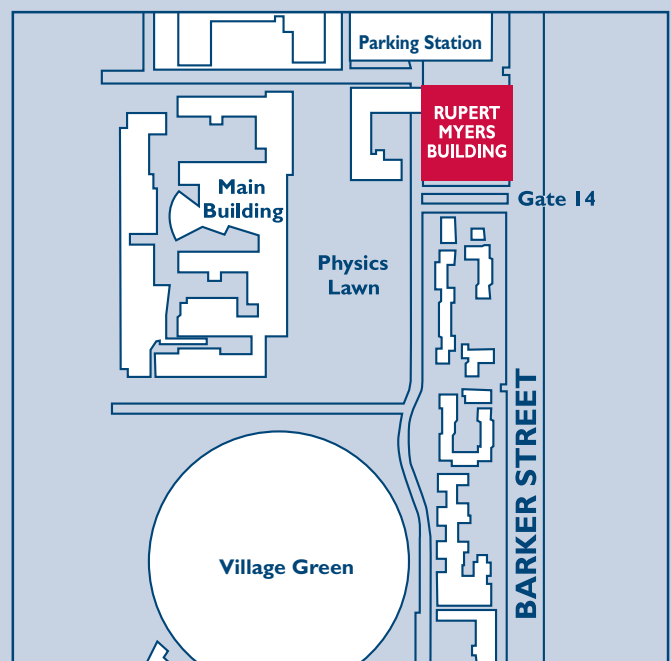
ANN DADICH has been appointed as a Research Associate to work on the Mental Health Housing and Accommodation Support Initiative Evaluation. She previously worked at Richmond Fellowship of New South Wales, based at University of Western Sydney.

ILAN KATZ has been appointed to the position of Deputy Director of the Social Policy Research Centre. Professor Katz was previously at the Policy Research Bureau, London.

KRISTY MUIR has joined the Centre as a Research Associate to work on the Mental Health Housing and Accommodation Support Initiative Evaluation. Kristy previously worked as a Senior Research Officer at The Smith Family.

### ANNOUNCEMENTS:

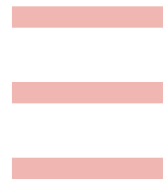
During December KATE NORRIS, CIARA SMYTH and JUDE BROWN were reclassified to Research Associates.



**The Social Policy Research Centre is located on Level 3 of the Rupert Myers Building, South Wing, Kensington Campus. Enter by Gate 14, Barker Street.**

# FROM THE DIRECTOR

BY PROFESSOR ILAN KATZ



This is my first 'from the director' and I would like to use this platform to introduce myself and also to reflect on my first few weeks working in SPRC. Rather than going through my CV (which is available on the SPRC website), I will discuss some of my key research interests and how they have developed over the years. Although I have always been interested in research, it only became part of my 'day job' quite late in life.

The first 12 years of my career were spent as a front line social worker and social work manager in various parts of London. The 1980s was a decade of ferment for social work in the UK. During the 70s there had been a huge growth in social services, and more and more social workers were being employed. Social services were largely benevolently viewed by the media, politicians and the population as a whole, and social work was seen to be a positive force in society. In the late 70s this consensus began to break down, with attacks from the left (the so called 'radical social workers' – who saw the profession as papering over the cracks of capitalism) and the right (who saw the profession as an arm of the left wing forces who were determined to extend the welfare state and drain resources from dynamic businesses). In the 1980s the profession was hit with a double whammy – again from the left and the right. On the left the liberal consensus which had underpinned the ethics of the profession were challenged by both feminists and anti-racists. They pointed out that social work, wittingly or unwittingly, perpetuated the patriarchal, white nuclear family in which (white) men had the power and women, children and people from minorities were expected to conform to norms set by those in

power. On the right the Thatcher government challenged the consensus around the value of public services and introduced the philosophy of *managerialism* which quickly took hold. Suddenly the work of the public services, which had been justified on the basis of its value to society, was required to justify itself on the basis of its cost effectiveness. Business rather than psychoanalysis became the ideal to which social services were expected to aspire. Alongside this was the attack on the social. Thatcher's most famous pronouncement '*There is no such thing as society*' resonated through the public services.

It was in this context that I began my research career. I felt that in this clash of values and ideals, research could provide a different and possibly mediating perspective on the policies and practices which were so contested. (although even then I was not naïve enough to believe that there was an objective truth which would resolve these ideological clashes – but more of that later) The topic I chose for my PhD was the development of racial identity in children of mixed (race) parentage, which was one of the key areas of debate at the time.

I have continued to maintain an interest in the topic of race, culture and families over the years, but my research interests have broadened out to encompass a wide range of social policy issues. However those formative years as a practitioner and neophyte researcher have had a lasting effect on my interests in a number of ways. Firstly it left me with a lasting interest in the influence of context on policy and practice. It is now commonplace to talk in terms of the ecological theory in child development, the importance of cultural context is acknowledged, and communities are seen (by both left and right) as valuable in their own right and as contexts for improving the lives of

children and families. However this was not the case at the time – during the 1980s both left and right viewed communities with suspicion. It has been very interesting for me to see the huge burgeoning of interest in policy, practice and research relating to the importance of context, and this has been an area which I have returned to again and again in my research career. For example in the area of child abuse there is still a debate about whether there are some acts which are abusive per se, or whether abuse is constructed differently in different social contexts. Context is important in another way. The national context in which policies and practice take place are equally significant. In relation to race, for example, the term 'black' has a different meaning in South Africa and the UK (and is different again in Australia and yet again in the US). Moreover the terms of the debate have changed over the years and these terms have changed their meanings. In the UK for example there is currently a debate about whether the whole category of 'race' is now being broken down, and religion is now the marker by which many minorities now wish to be identified by. In a series of studies on the child protection systems in different countries across the world my colleagues and I also found that although some terms are used universally (child abuse, children in care, social worker, family therapy for example), they have subtly different meanings in different countries, and the work of child protection is driven by deep seated and largely unacknowledged assumptions about the relationship between the individual, the family and the state which underpin different types of child protection systems. Inter country comparisons, which look straightforward when the comparisons are of quantitative data



Professor Ilan Katz

*Continued on page 10*

# CURRENT AND FUTURE FOSTER CARERS

CONTINUED  
FROM PAGE 1

18,800 children aged 17 years and over in OOHC, the largest proportion (8084) were in NSW (AIHW, 2003).

The provision of out-of-home care is a dynamic phenomenon. It is composed of numerous complex interactions involving a number of parties. These include the children and their birth families who enter the welfare system; the Departmental workers responsible for the care and protection of children when they are placed in care; and carer families who provide the volunteer services for children and young people. The complex interactions between all parties are governed by procedures and protocols determined by specific legislation and policy and also involve judicial decisions by the Courts in relation to custody and guardianship of children in OOHC.

A number of issues addressed in the study reflect the multi-faceted nature of fostering and highlight how critical it is that there is an adequate supply of carers, and that all carers receive ongoing training for the apparent increasingly challenging job of fostering. Equally important is the provision of an adequate number of workers to support carers in the system. The OOHC provisions in the new legislation (*Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998 NSW*) came into effect in July 2003. These provisions laid the foundations for a number of significant improvements in the care of children including a substantial increase in funding for the OOHC sector and the appointment of additional caseworkers.

A number of major projects and initiatives by DoCS in 2000-2004 gave recognition to the fact that the provision of foster care could be improved in a number of ways. These improvements should provide better support for carers and ensure their retention in the system. The responses from workers, stakeholders and carers to

many of the issues presented to them in the study appear supportive of a move to a more professional approach to fostering which involves support and ongoing training for carers and a better working relationship between carers, caseworkers and other departmental staff. As this research study demonstrates from both the ABS data and the carer survey, it is women, predominantly mothers in their own homes, who are the mainstay of the provision of OOHC services. Without their ongoing voluntary commitment to provide these services, fostering would not be viable

## CARER PROJECTIONS

The projections undertaken for this study do not suggest any major changes in the composition of foster carers either by age or labour force status. In 2013, as in 2003, ABS data indicate that about two-thirds of future foster carer families will include women aged between 35 and 54 (66 per cent in 2003, 64 per cent in 2013). There will be slight increase in older carers (women aged 55+) from 18 per cent to 21 per cent of all carer families. In addition the projections indicate there will be a slight increase in labour force participation rate of carers from 44 per cent to 47 per cent of all carer families.

## CHANGING CHARACTERISTICS OF NSW CARERS

There are some indications from a comparison of the survey conducted for this study and an earlier study conducted in 1986 (Gain, Ross and Fogg, 1987) that a number of characteristics in the NSW carer profile has changed in the period 1986 and 2003. Reflecting the rise in single female-headed families in society more generally, single female carer foster families in 2003 represent around one-quarter of all foster families compared to just 14 per cent in 1986.

Whereas in 1986, the carer age profile was women aged 25-49, in the current study, 70 per cent of all carers are aged 35-54 years. Female carers in 1986 and 2003 continue to be more likely not to be in paid employment, though the rise from 31 per cent in 1986 to 39 per cent currently is not insignificant, especially as 36 per cent of the primary carers in paid employment were working full-time in 2003.

Other data suggest that current carers are fostering more children per household than carers were two decades ago. In 1986 almost two-thirds had only one fostered child in their care; in 2003 this had dropped to below a half of all carers (48 per cent). Furthermore, 3.6 per cent of carer households in the 1986 study had four or more children in their care at the time of the study compared with 9.4 per cent of carer households in the current study. As the numbers of fostered children per carer household has increased, the proportion of carer families with no other children residing in their home has declined. In 1986, 26 per cent of carer families had no other children residing at home compared to 50 per cent in 2003.

In relation to the children fostered, there appear to be fewer older teens (16 to 18 years) in foster families now (less than five per cent) compared to 11 per cent in 1986. In part this could be a reflection of the difficulty OOHC providers experience in attracting carer families for teenagers noted in the report, or young people's suitability for a foster family placement. Of equal concern is the increase in the proportion (33 per cent) of pre-school aged children (0-4 year olds) in OOHC in 2003 compared to 25 per cent in 1986.

## DEMAND FOR CARERS

According to interviewed stakeholders and Departmental workers there is an urgent need for carers in all areas of fostering: crisis,

“ responses from workers, stakeholders and carers to many of the issues presented to them in the study appear supportive of a move to a more professional approach to fostering”

respite, short-, medium- and long-term, and culturally specific carers. As mentioned above, finding carers for young people is becoming increasingly difficult. Paradoxically, it is also the group where matching the young person with a carer with the capacity to meet their needs becomes more critical. Workers in three areas included in the study discussed how their local office implemented recruitment strategies and while their approaches provide useful information, no general conclusions can be drawn about appropriate recruitment strategies to address the problem of the availability of carers.

## RECRUITING CARERS

Most carers surveyed in 2003 had always planned to foster. Overall media advertising or promotional material (approximately 60 per cent) is the most influential recruiting method, followed by recruitment by another carer (30 per cent). Most carers' motivations to continue fostering are child-focused. They include being able to achieve positive outcomes for children; an awareness of children needing families; and making a difference in the lives of abused children.

## WHY CARERS CEASE TO FOSTER

The findings from the study indicate that carers cease to foster mainly due to 'burn out', lack of support, effects of fostering on carer families and children being too difficult to care for. In addition, changes in personal circumstances (e.g. poor health, old age, a new baby or changing work commitments) are also seen as important reasons to cease fostering. Workers perceive the ageing of the carer population as a major problem as many of the current older more experienced carers are leaving fostering.

## SUPPORT AND TRAINING FOR CARERS

Stakeholders perceive support for carers as being crucial for placement stability and retention of

carers in the system. They want caseworkers to work with carers and to build up ongoing relationships with children to bring about the best outcomes. Research indicates that a lack of regular casework and regular visits to carers is strongly associated with placement breakdown. High caseworker turnover and inexperienced caseworkers are also seen as detrimental to the development of worker/child and carer/worker relationships.

The majority of surveyed carers report having a caseworker for the child and less than a fifth do not. Over one half of the carers have regular contact with a caseworker and two-thirds rate the relationship with their caseworker as good. Over half of the carers regard the overall level of support they receive from their caseworker as good. However, over a fifth describe it as poor. Carers' assessment of their relationship with the Department is similar, with half describing it as good and a fifth describing it as poor. Other supports such as a mentor or buddy for new carers and belonging to a carer support group are seen as good options for carers. Stakeholders agree that unless there are changes in the attitudes of caseworkers and local office managers, especially in relation to information sharing and working as partners with carers, it will be difficult for fostering to survive as a feasible option.

Around 20 per cent of current carers surveyed have not received any initial training. Reflecting the recent emphasis on carer training as a critical element in fostering, almost all carers who had completed ongoing training did so in 2000 or later. Of some concern is that over half of all carer surveyed either have not or do not plan to undertake any ongoing training.

## POSITIVE AND NEGATIVES ASPECTS OF FOSTERING

For careers the most positive aspects of fostering centred around three themes:

- development or improvement in a child;

- enhancement of family life for foster carer families; and
- personal fulfilment for a carer.

The majority of carers would recommend caring to others.

However, many emphasise the importance of being honest with potential carers about the realities of fostering.

For carers who provided responses about the worst aspects of fostering, the dominant response is a lack of support from the Department. The main difficulties of working with the Department are: unanswered phone calls and queries; not being given honest information about the child; and a lack of respect from Departmental officers. Most carers are fearful of an allegation of abuse being made against them at some stage of their fostering career and other negative aspects of fostering are contact with birth parents; stress and workload; and the challenging behaviours of fostered children.

## SUPPLY AND DEMAND FACTORS

Identifying future demand for OOH services was also an objective of the project. Due to a lack of longitudinal data on the characteristics of children in OOH and no annual data on the numbers of carers recruited and retained in the system such analysis could not be carried out. In addition, without annualised data on the number of carers recruited, retained and leaving the system and the level of carer skills and experience, it is not possible to target recruitment in identifiable areas with specific communities to enable appropriate matching of a carer to a specific child or young person.

Two recent tools implemented by DoCS, the Key Information and Directory System (KiDS) and the Carer Development Plan provide an avenue for maintaining systematic information on all Departmental carers. In addition to basic demographic data on all carers, information recorded could include all training undertaken, level of training skills, type of children cared

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*Continued on page 16*

# FAMILIES FIRST AREA REVIEW LESSONS

BY KAREN FISHER, CATHY THOMSON AND KYLIE VALENTINE



Karen Fisher



Cathy Thomson

## INTRODUCTION

Families First is a NSW State Government strategy introduced progressively across the state from 1998. It aims to increase the effectiveness of early intervention services to support families and communities to care for their children. The implementation of Families First is the responsibility of a number of agencies including the Departments of Community Services (DoCS), Ageing, Disability and Home Care (DADHC), Education and Training (DET), Housing and NSW Health through Area Health Services, and non-government agencies funded by Government to support families.

The broad objective of Families First is to develop a coordinated network of services focusing on prevention and early intervention. It aims to reform government services to better support families through an early intervention and prevention approach by identifying children and families who require further assistance and linking them to appropriate support early, before problems become entrenched. The strategy combines universal service elements and screening to targeted services, with operational emphases on: service integration and networking; community outreach, especially via services such as home visiting by early childhood nurses and volunteers; and community development (TCO, 2002). Families First policy framework is based on research evidence highlighting the importance of the early years in a child development, the benefits associated with a prevention and early intervention approach and service integration and networking. The Statewide policy framework of Families First focuses on four fields of activity (FOA) including: FOA 1: Supporting parents who are expecting or caring for a new baby; FOA 2: Supporting families who are caring for infants or small children; FOA 3: Supporting

families who need extra support; and FOA 4: Strengthening the connection between families and communities (TCO, 2002).

The strategy aims to achieve the objectives of Families First through the development of service networks that adopt a coordinated, interagency approach to service planning and delivery. The purpose of the networks is to develop linkages to collaboratively support families at different stages as outlined above in the fields of activities.

The University of New South Wales (UNSW) Evaluation Consortium was commissioned by The Cabinet Office in NSW to conduct the Area Reviews of Families First. The Consortium consists of academics and representatives of a number of research centres and universities. The Social Policy Research Centre, UNSW managed the Consortium.

## AREA REVIEWS

This article describes the key lessons from the Area Reviews, one component of the statewide evaluation of Families First. The other components of the evaluation are the State Level Review, the Outcomes Framework and local program evaluations. The findings of these evaluation activities are described elsewhere (see SPRC Report 7/02; SPRC Report 2/03; reports are available at [www.sprc.unsw.edu.au](http://www.sprc.unsw.edu.au)). Each Area chosen for review (hereafter Area) represents different geographical locations, metropolitan, remote and regional, at different stages of implementation. Families First was established in 1998, 2000 and 2002 in South West Sydney, Orana Far West and Illawarra respectively. Within each Area, two fieldwork sites were selected representing different demographic characteristics. Each Area Review was conducted over a period of around four months, from June 2002 to November 2003.

The Area Reviews were a type of formative or process evaluation, monitoring the extent to which services are delivered in the form envisaged by the agencies responsible for policy development. The Area Reviews were not designed to evaluate individual services but to gain generalisable lessons for future implementation and service development. Recommendations from the Area Reviews have been applied to the implementation processes of newer regions.

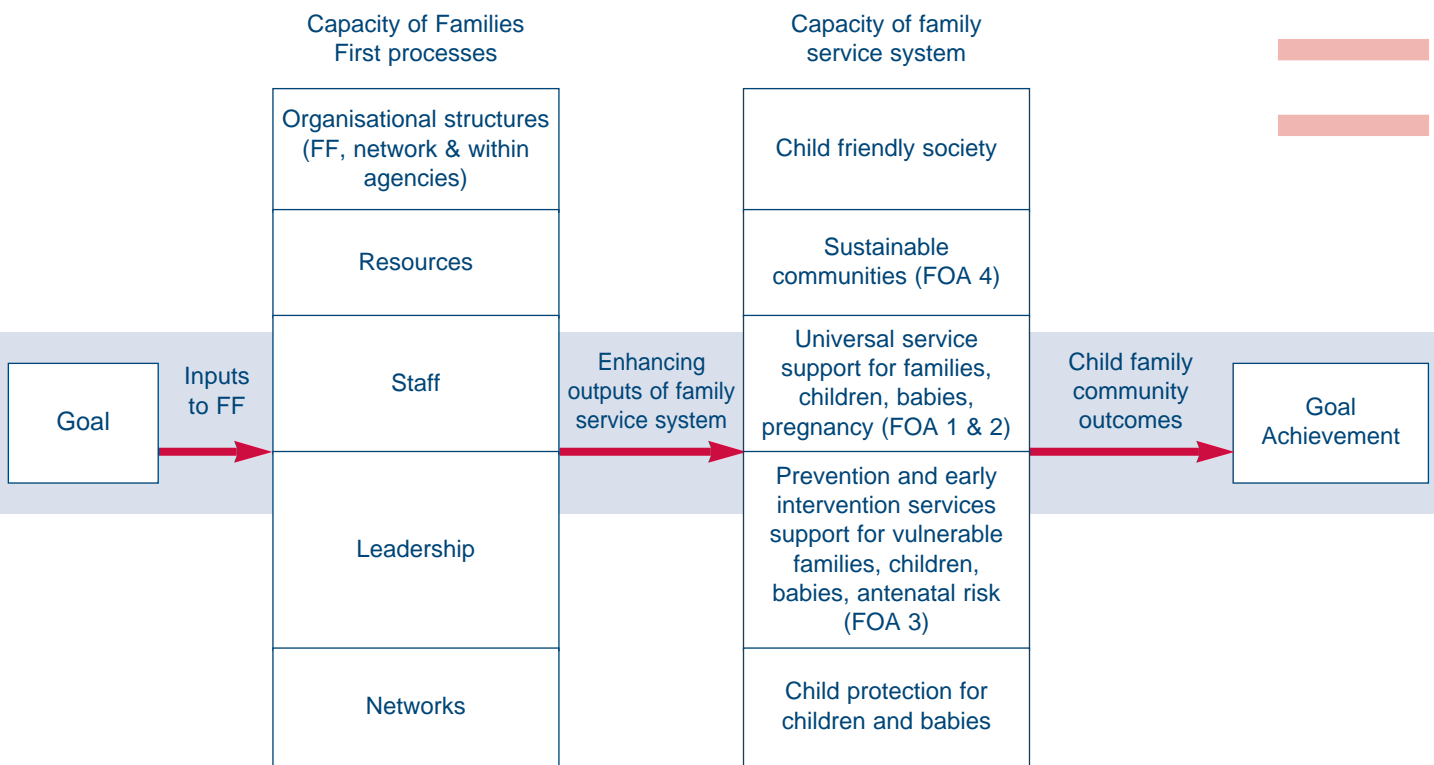
A triangulated methodology was employed to explore the process of development and implementation and the experience of key people in Families First including families, service providers from a wide range of government and non-government organisations and management representatives. The methodology included document reviews, surveys, interviews and focus groups.

Overall the Families First areas involved in the Review made significant progress towards developing structures and implementing strategies to expand the service network system to better support for families and children through an early intervention and prevention approach. For example some service providers are working collaboratively in service planning and provision. One worker commented:

*There is more collaboration between services because we are working together. For example [an NGO] has the young mums program so we can work together. Before we would've had difficulty getting them into things. Now we're invoking services a lot more at an earlier stage so families don't require further support.*

Service providers reported greater knowledge and awareness of other agencies and what they provide, greater communication and links between agencies and more appropriate referrals and networking since the introduction of Families First. Also the majority

**Figure 1: Conceptual Approach to the Analysis – Goal-Outcomes Model**



Source: Harris, NSW Health 2001.

- Notes: FOA 1: Supporting parents who are expecting or caring for a new baby  
 FOA 2: Supporting families who are caring for infants or small child  
 FOA 3: Supporting families who need extra support  
 FOA 4: Strengthening the connection between families and communities

of service providers thought there had been an increase in the prevention and early intervention focus of the network. A child protection worker stated:

.... early childhood nurses ... [have] been a huge asset to the Department...often tapping families into required services and not necessarily involving the Department...Certainly with their home visiting program... if we're [both] involved with the family, they look at what sort of supports they can provide to prevent these kids from coming into care or assisting the parents to look after the kids.

As well as fostering relationships between agencies, a number of service providers also commented that links within their agencies had been strengthened. For example, referral pathways within some hospitals were developed to streamline antenatal referrals to the social work department and to the early childhood nurses so that problems could be identified early and supports put in place before the baby was born.

The Area Review also found that some areas had developed structures and processes to actively

support participation in service network planning and service provision from a broad range of stakeholders. In one Area, Families First and the local network groups, in particular, were nominated by participants as bringing about stronger links between Aboriginal and non Aboriginal-specific services. A participant from an Aboriginal service reported that:

*It's black and white all, it's sort of broken down a lot of barriers too. I find that Families First, we didn't know lots of people in Department of Housing, but now we do. It has broken down barriers for us, and there's faces to names now. (Middle Manager)*

### KEY LESSONS FROM THE AREA REVIEWS

The main lessons emerging from the findings of the Area Reviews are organised according to the goal-outcome model (Figure 1). The model allows us to conceptualise Families First in the broader context of the family service system, which aims to improve child, family and community outcomes. The model examines whether the capacity of each part of the Families First process enhances

the capacity of the family service system to improve child, family and community outcomes. The Area Reviews examined one element of the model, the Families First implementation processes and structures. These provide input into the broader family service system. The main lessons emerging from the implementation structures and processes developed in each Area involved the Review are outlined in turn in terms of the five elements of the model. Discussion of other challenges in the service system identified follow.

### ORGANISATIONAL CAPACITY

- Ongoing communication strategies are necessary to ensure the dissemination of information about Families First. These strategies must explain how Families First is distinct from, and complementary to, both existing strategies and practices and new strategies being introduced. Providing information and feedback about the implementation processes and achievements in Families First Areas is an effective way of increasing the

“Overall Families First has made significant gains in developing structures and processes towards a coordinated service network system “

understanding and commitment of agencies to the strategy. However, the historical strengths on which the achievements have developed and the contribution of other strategies should be acknowledged.

- Early intervention and prevention principles and service coordination must become incorporated into the core business and management practices of agencies at all levels if Families First is to be sustained.

- Management structures should include regional and local structures; and ensure participation of all agencies providing support to families and children, including NGOs. Management processes should allow time for the development of relationships and build on the particularities of existing networks and services.

- A simultaneous ecological approach to implementation across the four Fields of Activity should be employed, in order to secure the engagement at all levels of all relevant agencies.

## RESOURCE CAPACITY

- Families First funds are essential to develop and manage service change and to instigate innovative service delivery models to fill service and information gaps. These resources increase the total capacity of the service network, which is fundamental to meeting the support needs of families earlier.

- Dedicated resources for the implementation process of Families First, such as project leaders and other key personnel, facilitates the planning and implementation processes.

- Families First infrastructure should support the identification of gaps in services in the core human service agencies and transport.

- Network development and enhancement requires dedicated resources and management to facilitate the active involvement of all relevant agencies, in acknowledgement of their differences in organisational size, power and unequal capacity to consistently participate in planning, implementation and tendering processes.

## STAFF CAPACITY

- Incorporating and sustaining Families First into the core business practices of agencies requires time and ongoing training and resources, for staff at all levels to understand the significance of Families First principles, including early intervention and prevention, service integration and a strengths-based approach to service delivery, in their practice.

- The professional skills base of an Area, and skills development opportunities, should be considered in the development of future Area Plans.

## LEADERSHIP CAPACITY

- Leaders at regional, local and network levels need to be identified and supported. The strong commitment of champions for Families First and its principles, involved at all levels of the implementation, will help sustain the momentum needed for change.

- Central agency management has the capacity to facilitate the implementation of Families First due to its planning neutrality and freedom from the responsibility for program delivery.

## NETWORK CAPACITY

- Structural, historical and political differences of interest, power and opinion between and within agencies represent a complex challenge in bringing about change. Engaging with and strengthening pre-existing service networks at the levels of practice and planning is a vital component of a successful implementation strategy. This will ensure that management and planning of Families First funded services is based on local knowledge and will complement existing services.

- Clearly defining the role of and processes by which network groups and other interagency groups link into the planning and implementation of Families First will broaden the range of agencies engaged.

- A shared definition and understanding of the degree to

which agencies should be networking around central budgeting and planning of agency core programs is required.

## ENGAGING ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES

An important finding of the Area Reviews, which cuts across all of the components listed above, is the importance of effective strategies to engage Aboriginal communities in the Families First implementation process. In one Area in particular the Families First management processes demonstrated a commitment to recognising Aboriginal communities' knowledge of their service needs and how to meet them. The key lessons are:

- The investment of time, energy and resources are required to build and maintain relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities and organisations. Different approaches than are normally employed in planning and consultation processes may be necessary to engage Aboriginal communities in Families First.

- Aboriginal elders' and other community representatives' knowledge of the needs of their communities and the ways to meet these needs should be respected and acted on.

- Aboriginal communities are not homogeneous. Differences of opinion and views occur between individuals and communities, and the implementation of any new strategy must negotiate and work through these differences. It is important that all views are taken into account when working with Aboriginal people and their communities.

## CONCLUSION

Overall Families First has made significant gains in developing structures and processes towards a coordinated service network system focused on prevention and early intervention support for families and children.

*Continued on page 16*

# BOOK REVIEW

## POVERTY

BY RUTH LISTER,  
POLITY PRESS, CAMBRIDGE (XI + 238PP)  
REVIEWED BY PETER SAUNDERS

Having spent years in the wilderness under successive Conservative Governments, poverty research in Britain is now at the forefront of New Labour's policy agenda, actively supported by Prime Minister Tony Blair and Chancellor Gordon Brown. The contrast with Australia is stark, and depressing. It is illustrated by the fact that Ruth Lister's book on poverty was the subject of a breakfast seminar at 11 Downing Street following its release last October. British poverty researchers have a unique opportunity to influence policy by generating new ways of thinking about poverty and developing new methods for documenting its extent, causes and effects. In this context, Ruth Lister's excellent book takes a fresh look at some old issues, identifies a number of weaknesses in current conceptual thinking about poverty and those it affects, and suggests new ways of overcoming long-standing obstacles to the design and implementation of anti-poverty policies.

The author's experience as an academic and practitioner (she has a long involvement with the Child Poverty Action Group and served on the recent Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power) suggests that the book will not dwell unnecessarily on academic debates but engage with poverty as

it affects people's lives. These expectations are fulfilled as the author takes the reader on an exhilarating ride that deals not only with poverty, but also its relation to social exclusion, inequality, social divisions, human rights, agency and politics. Australian researchers who find our seemingly endless disputes over the poverty line and the *minutiae* of measurement disheartening, will take heart from the opening three chapters that shed light on issues that have for far too long been shrouded in darkness and confusion. Lister makes the important distinction between the *concept* of poverty (which provides the basic framework but also influences the language and images of poverty), its *definition* (what we mean by poverty) and its *measurement* (how this meaning is made operational in ways that identify whether or not people are poor, how many there are, and the depth of their poverty). While poverty research (dominated by economists, though the author is too polite to mention it!) has focused on definitional and measurement issues, Lister's main task is to revitalise our conceptual understandings in ways that can inject renewed understanding into these sterile debates.

The approach utilises the metaphor of a wheel that has at its hub the material core of unacceptable

hardship that constitutes poverty, narrowly defined. But there are also important relational and symbolic aspects of poverty (represented by the circumference of the wheel) that reflect aspects of how poverty is experienced in terms of disrespect, stigma, shame, denial of human rights, lack of voice and powerlessness. In order to incorporate these effects, Lister argues that we must overcome the 'Othering' that is a core feature of social relations between the non-poor and those living in poverty, and this involves listening to what those in poverty have to say about their experiences and involving them in the research process.

She argues that this is most likely to occur within a human rights framework built around notions of citizenship, but along the way provides a fascinating account of the four main aspects of the agency of people in poverty: 'getting by'; 'getting back at'; 'getting out of poverty'; and 'getting organised'. She concludes by emphasising (p. 188) that 'the struggle for social justice has to involve both redistribution and recognition and respect' – measures designed to address the material and relational/symbolic aspects, respectively. There are signs that Britain is moving slowly in this direction, but we are light-years away in Australia and seem condemned to wait patiently for Ruth Lister's poverty wheel to turn!



Peter Saunders

THE TITLE REVIEWED ARE AVAILABLE DIRECT FROM THE PUBLISHERS.  
THE SOCIAL POLICY RESEARCH CENTRE DOES NOT SELL PUBLICATIONS.

## NEW REPORT

The Final Reports from the Department of Community Services, NSW project the Availability of Foster Carers are now available. <http://www.sprc.unsw.edu.au/reports/FosterCarersReport.pdf>

# NEW DISCUSSION PAPERS

## HOW DO THEY DO IT? A TIME-DIARY ANALYSIS OF HOW WORKING MOTHERS FIND TIME FOR THE KIDS

Lyn Craig

SPRC Discussion Paper No. 136  
January 2005

Working parents are obliged to use non-parental child care. However, parents who make use of non-parental child care do not reduce their parental childcare time on an hour for hour basis. Since there are only 24 hours in the day, how do parents continue to be engaged in direct care of their own children while also committing significant time to the labour market activities? Using data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics Time Use Survey 1997 (over 4000 randomly selected households), to compare the time allocation of

employed fathers, employed mothers and mothers who are not in the labour force, this paper shows how parents maintain their time commitments to both work and child care. The strategies available are 1 reducing the time devoted to other activities (principally sleep, leisure, bathing, dressing, grooming, eating), 2 rescheduling activities (from weekends to weekday or changing the time of day at which particular activities are undertaken).

## CROSS-NATIONAL COMPARISON OF THE IMPACT OF CHILDREN ON ADULT TIME

Lyn Craig

SPRC Discussion Paper No. 137  
February 2005

This paper uses a framework of welfare state typology pioneered by Gosta Esping-Andersen and developed by Walter Korpi, and

data from the Multinational Time Use World 5 Series, to compare the impact of children on adult time-use in four countries (Australia, Italy, Norway and Germany) with different approaches to economic, social and family organisation. It quantifies three measures of the time effects of parenthood. These are 1) the gap between couple parents and non-parents in total paid and unpaid work undertaken (the workload penalty of parenthood), 2) the relative time allocation to paid and unpaid work by couple parents and by non-parents (work-family balance), and 3) the relative contribution to unpaid work by couple parents and by non-parents (gender equity in domestic labour). Of the sample, 'familialistic' Italy has the most inequitable division of labour for childless men and women, and it is 'liberal' Australia in which the changes in time commitment that come with parenthood are most pronounced and most inequitable by sex.

## FROM THE DIRECTOR

CONTINUED  
FROM PAGE 3

become very 'slippery' and problematic when the research attempts to uncover the actual practices and meanings which lie beneath the bland statistics.

Another ongoing area of interest which arose from these early years of research is the relationship between policy, practice and research. This is another area where some text books portray these relationships as rather straightforward. According to the text book, policy makers consider the evidence and then decide on the best way to tackle the latest policy issue. They then implement their policy and commission an independent evaluation. The evaluator then reports on the

successes and failures of the policy, which is then amended in the light of the evaluation and a better, more effective policy is developed and implemented. This is known as the 'virtuous circle' of design, implementation, evaluation and design. But real life is so different from this. Policies are sometimes designed on the back of an envelope, programmes are terminated or expanded long before the evaluation reports start flowing in, 'political' issues can intervene and the research ignored or suppressed. Is the answer to redouble our efforts to ensure that policy becomes more evidence based, or is it better to acknowledge and deal with the

messy realities of policy as it develops and evolves? How do we deal with these issues on a theoretical basis rather than blaming these or those civil servants, politicians or academics when tensions emerge? How do researchers engage with this process without losing their academic credibility?

These are some of the issues I have been struggling with for many years, and I am looking forward to continuing addressing these challenges here in Australia. I think working in the SPRC will provide a unique and privileged insight into these (and other) issues for me.

# NEW PROJECTS

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## **INCOME DISTRIBUTION AND POVERTY TRENDS IN AUSTRALIA**

Bruce Bradbury

UNSW Faculty of Arts Research Grant Program

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The main source of income distribution data in Australia is from the Income Distribution and Household Expenditure Surveys conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics. However different versions of these data lead to widely differing conclusions about trends in income inequality and poverty, particularly with respect to the bottom half of the income distribution. This project will investigate the reasons for this and provide recommendations for the best data selections and modifications to use in order to estimate trends in income distribution and poverty.

## **STRONGER FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES STRATEGY EVALUATION**

Ilan Katz, Karen Fisher, kylie valentine, Cathy Thomson, Natasha Cortis with Alison Morehead (AIFS) and advisers.

Department of Family and Community Services

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The Australian Government Department of Family and Community Services contracted the UNSW Consortium, managed by the SPRC, to design the evaluation of the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy (2004-2008) (SFCS) (Stage One). The SFCS aims to: help families and communities build better futures for children; build family and community capacity; support relationships between families and the communities they live in; and improve communities' ability to help themselves. The evaluation

will be undertaken in two stages, consisting of Stage One, the design of an evaluation plan; and Stage Two, the implementation of the evaluation plan and data analysis and reporting. The evaluation design will be based on a program theory approach. Data collection will use mixed methods, including individual and group interviews, site observation, stakeholder meetings, quantitative data (primary data about process, longitudinal outcomes and costs and secondary geo-coded outcomes data) and document review. Data will be analysed using meta-analysis, local context, process, outcome and cost effectiveness evaluation techniques.

## **IMPACT OF PARENTS' EMPLOYMENT ON CHILDREN'S WELL-BEING**

Michael Bittman, Jan Nicholson, Lyndall Strazdins, Ann Sanson  
Australian Research Council Linkage Project With Queensland Commission for Children and Young, Queensland Government Office for Women, Commission for Children and Young People, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission

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Most Australian children now grow-up in families where both their mother and their father are employed. Using a new national dataset, this research examines how parents' working conditions are related to children's well-being. It is proposed that parents' availability, resources, and family functioning mediate between parental employment and child outcomes. The Growing-Up in Australia study (available in 2005) surveys 10,000 children, combining measures of child well-being, existing validated measures of work conditions and family functioning, with a new child-focused diary that measures time and activities

undertaken with children. New knowledge generated will inform future policy development.

## **OVERWEIGHT/OBESITY, ACTIVITY PATTERNS, AND HEALTH IN 4-YEAR-OLDS: THE LONGITUDINAL STUDY OF AUSTRALIAN CHILDREN**

Melissa Wake, Michael Bittman, Michael Sawyer, John Carlin  
National Health and Medical Research Council

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The primary aim of this proposal is to investigate the relationship between activity patterns and overweight/obesity in 4-year-old children. A better understanding of this relationship is important because of the strong probability that reduced levels of physical activity play a major role in the current epidemic of child overweight and obesity. Currently we know little about the nature of the relationship between activity patterns and overweight/obesity in young children, at an age when lasting patterns of sedentary behaviour are becoming established. We also know little about the behavioural mediators by which a familial predisposition to gain weight, as evidenced by having an overweight/obese parent, is translated into excessive weight gain during early childhood. The present study will utilise data collected as part of the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC). In March 2004, LSAC will enrol a nationally-representative cohort of 10 000 Australian children (5000 4-year-olds and 5000 0-year-olds) for comprehensive longitudinal study. The initial assessment of these children will take place between

# NEW PROJECTS CONTINUED

March and September 2004, with the first wave of data available for analysis in April 2005. A unique feature of LSAC is direct measurement of children's weight and height coupled with detailed data about their use of time. For 4-year-old children, health-related quality of life (HRQoL) will also be assessed. The availability of these data will enable us for the first time to study the relationship between childhood overweight/obesity, detailed activity patterns of young children, parental overweight/obesity and the relationship between these variables and children's health-related quality of life.

## **NEGOTIATING CARING AND EMPLOYMENT - THE IMPACT ON CARERS' WELLBEING**

Michael Bittman and Cathy Thomson

Australian Research Council Linkage Project NSW Department for Women Department of Ageing, Disability and Home Care, NSW Health, Office of Industrial Relations, Office of Employment Equity and Diversity, Carers NSW

Work and caring compete for carers' time. Little is known about the difficulties of combining work with the care of adults or children with disabilities. Between 40 and 60 percent of Australian carers combine employment with caring responsibilities. The project proposes to adopt a life-course perspective to study the effect of caring on income security, social participation and the health of employed carers. It makes innovative use of existing data sources, including new longitudinal survey data, supported by a specially designed program of

qualitative research to study key transitions, possible workplace solutions and the effective provision of human services.

## **AUSTRALIAN SOCIAL SCIENCE DATA ARCHIVE: FACILITY ENHANCEMENT & NETWORK DEVELOPMENT**

DA Mitchell, PG Saunders, MS Humphreys, MC Western, I McAllister, TS Breusch, RK Gibson, BW Bradbury, MJ Bell, RM Colomb, C Gallois, AE Smith, PR Boreham, PF McDonald, HL Kendig, JH Baxter

Australian Research Council Linkage Infrastructure, Equipment and Facilities Grant, The Australian National University, The University of Queensland, The University of New South Wales Australian Consortium for Social and Political Research Incorporated

This project will enhance Australia's social science research infrastructure by creating a distributed data archive with world class cataloguing, online access and analysis capabilities. It will also pilot a complementary qualitative data archive. The facility will provide improved archiving, access and online analysis to the Australian research community, and enable researchers on eight Australian and international projects to construct consolidated purpose-built datasets for their research and dissemination to Australian researchers. The qualitative archive will develop and pilot new technology for archiving, disseminating and analysing non-numeric social data as proof of concept for the development of a national qualitative archive.

## **JOB QUALITY AND THE MENTAL HEALTH OF WORKING PARENTS AND THEIR CHILDREN**

Lyndall Strazdins, Jan Nicholson, Bryan Rodgers, Michael Bittman, Michael Sawyer

Australian Rotary Health Research Fund, Research Project Grant – Mental Illness

Supporting the mental health of parents and young children is a national research and policy priority, as is the need to promote a better work and family balance for working parents. The project examines two ways the quality of parent work is related to mental health and well-being. The first is the extent insecure employment, poor control at work, inflexible work hours and work at unsociable times (weekends, evenings or nights) are related to parent's mental health or substance use. The second is to examine how such mental health problems affect parent's behaviour with their children, in turn, influencing the social and emotional well-being of the children themselves. The research uses nationally representative data from the 2004 Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (Growing Up in Australia), a unique study of Australian families with young children, which gathers information about the quality of parents' work, parent behaviours, and the mental health and emotional well-being of parents and their children. The project addresses key components of Australia's Second National Mental Health Plan, supplying evidence for the development of family, employment and social policy that promotes and protects the mental health of Australian families.

## LEFT OUT AND MISSING OUT: TOWARDS NEW INDICATORS OF SOCIAL EXCLUSION AND MATERIAL DEPRIVATION

Peter Saunders, Peter Davidson, Janet Taylor

Australian Research Council Linkage Project, Australian Council of Social Service, Brotherhood of St Laurence, Mission Australia, Anglicare, Diocese of Sydney

This ground-breaking project will utilise academic knowledge and practical agency experience built up over decades to produce a new framework for identifying and measuring exclusion and deprivation in contemporary

Australian society. It will generate new findings on public attitudes to the 'necessary requirements' needed to participate at all levels in society and the economy. It will examine the population profile of the individuals and groups who are denied these opportunities, using both quantitative (survey) and qualitative (focus group) data, and its findings will complement existing data collections.

## INDIGENOUS WOMEN'S MENTORING

Karen Fisher, Trish Hill and kylie valentine  
UNSW Equity Initiatives Grant

This grant under the UNSW Equity Initiative is to commence an Indigenous Women Researcher

Mentor Program, aimed at the needs of Indigenous women who are or wish to become academics. The Mentor Program provides an opportunity for Indigenous women to further develop first, their research skills in social policy and related areas; or second, academic and social policy research careers. Additionally, the Mentor Program enables SPRC, a key contributor to social policy research in Australia, to develop our Indigenous research capacity. The Mentor Program seeks to address not only the issues identified by the UNSW Equity Plan but also wider concern about the lack of research training and opportunities for Indigenous women researchers.

## FAREWELL TO MICHAEL BITTMAN



Michael Bittman

England. Michael joined SPRC in 1995 to work on the budget standards project, where he played a major role in an extremely important piece of research that is still generating interest among community groups and policy-makers. Since completing that work in 1998, he has been instrumental in raising the profile of SPRC in research on time use (where he has

an international reputation) and on work and family issues more generally. He has undertaken a number of important projects in these fields, receiving funding from a range of bodies, including the Australian Research Council, the Office for the Status of Women, the OECD and the Department of Family and Community Services. This body of research includes major contributions to the sociology of the family, to the measurement of needs and living standards, to the domestic division of labour and to the impact of a diverse range of social programs. However, Michael's contribution extends far beyond his scholarly output, distinguished as that is. He has been an excellent colleague and a dedicated mentor of early career researchers and postgraduate

students and his many endearing personal qualities have made him enormously popular. His office – a small (but growing!) chaotic mountain of paper surrounding his computer – was near the exit and many people stopped in for a chat on the way out (or in). Yet despite his many work pressures, he was always incredibly generous with his own time, never failing to help out when asked and always willing to comment on the work of others and provide advice on anything from the intricacies of the latest ABS Time Use Survey data to how to negotiate the complexities of the ARC's GAMS system. He has made a marvelous contribution to SPRC and we wish him well in his new position. He will continue to have an association with SPRC as an Honorary Research Fellow.

Peter Saunders

# AUSTRALIAN SOCIAL POLICY

20-22 JULY

## LOOKING BACK, LOOKING FORWARD: A QUARTER-CENTURY OF SOCIAL CHANGE

The Social Policy Research Centre invites offers of papers for presentation at the next Australian Social Policy Conference to be held at the University of New South Wales, Sydney, from 20-22 July 2005.

This year sees the 25th anniversary of the Social Policy Research Centre. To mark this event, the overarching theme for the 2005 conference will be *Looking Back, Looking Forward*. The end of the long economic boom in the mid 1970s led to the realisation that new social policies were needed to cope with the changing economic and social environment. The

establishment of the SPRC in 1980 (initially known as the Social Welfare Research Centre) was one response to this. Twenty-five years later, economic growth has returned, but inequality continues to grow and social change continues to be rapid. Like the Red Queen, social policy-makers must keep running to keep up with new circumstances and needs.

For the 2005 Australian Social Policy Conference, presenters are being encouraged to examine social and policy changes past, present and future.

### PLENARY SPEAKERS



*Our children, ourselves: rethinking the economics of family policy*

**Nancy Folbre,**  
Department of  
Economics,  
University of  
Massachusetts



*Can child poverty be abolished? Promises and policies in the UK*

**Holly Sutherland,**  
Institute for Social and  
Economic Research,  
University of Essex



*Researching social policy: trends, tragedies and triumphs*

**Peter Saunders,**  
Social Policy Research  
Centre, UNSW



*Reconciliation - the journey. Is there a destination and can we get there?*

**Linda Burney,**  
Member of the  
Legislative Assembly  
and Member for  
Canterbury, NSW

### CALL FOR PAPERS

The success of the Australian Social Policy Conference is based on the presentation of high quality, original papers across the range of social policy fields. We are now inviting offers of papers from researchers, teachers, students and practitioners of social policy. Papers can present the results of research, discuss conceptual approaches to contemporary social policy research, describe work in progress or raise issues for social policy debate.

As in previous conferences, discussion will be organised around thematic strands. The topic areas from within which the final strands will be selected, and for which we are currently seeking offers of papers, include the following.

- Employment, Unemployment and Welfare Reform
- Income Distribution and Social Inequalities
- The Work/Family Balance
- Retirement and Ageing
- Childhood and Child Well-being
- Indigenous Australians
- Disability
- Spatial Dimensions of Social Policy
- Social Policy and Environmental Sustainability
- Organisation and Delivery of Community Services
- An Open strand will also exist for papers on other subjects of interest and importance outside the main themes.

# CONFERENCE 2005

## SELECTION OF PAPERS

Acceptance of papers for presentation at the conference is necessarily competitive. Selection will be the responsibility of the SPRC, in collaboration with some external session organisers, and will be based on the abstracts submitted. Criteria for selection will include academic quality, originality, accessibility and relevance to current debates in social policy.

We welcome papers presenting all points of view.

If you wish to offer a paper, please send the title and an abstract of no more than 200 words. Please specify the thematic area (or areas) into which you feel your paper falls. We reserve the right to place it elsewhere, where appropriate, to maintain program balance.

The closing date for the receipt of abstracts is 18 April 2005. Please send your abstract (preferably as a Microsoft Word attachment to an email) to: [ASPC2005@unsw.edu.au](mailto:ASPC2005@unsw.edu.au)

Or by post to: Australian Social Policy Conference 2005  
Social Policy Research Centre  
University of New South Wales, Sydney NSW 2052

Or by fax to: (02) 9385 7838

Telephone enquiries about papers or the conference in general should be directed to (02) 9385 7802.

Registration details will be made available shortly.

The conference website is now online at [www.sprc.unsw.edu.au/ASPC2005/](http://www.sprc.unsw.edu.au/ASPC2005/). Information on the papers presented at the previous (2003) conference can be found at [www.sprc.unsw.edu.au/ASPC2003/](http://www.sprc.unsw.edu.au/ASPC2003/).

## PUBLICATIONS AND MAILING LIST

### SPRC DISCUSSION PAPERS (FREE)

The Discussion Paper below has been posted to the SPRC Website:

Lyn Craig, *How Do They Do It? A time-diary analysis of how working mothers find time for the kids*,  
SPRC Discussion Paper Paper No. 136, January 2005, <http://www.sprc.unsw.edu.au/dp/DPI136.pdf>

Lyn Craig, *Cross-national comparison of the impact of children on adult time*,  
SPRC Discussion Paper Paper No. 137, February 2005, <http://www.sprc.unsw.edu.au/dp/DPI137.pdf>

### MAILING LISTS (FREE)

- SPRC Email Notices *You will receive email updates about events at SPRC*
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- SPRC Annual Report Mailing List *You will receive Annual Reports*

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## CURRENT AND FUTURE FOSTER CARERS

CONTINUED  
FROM PAGE 5

for, type of care provided, when fostering ceases and why. The systematic collection of data would allow an audit of carers to be conducted at any point in time by the Department. This could enable a central database of current carers in the system to be established and assist with recruiting new carers according to current and expected demand.

### CONCLUSIONS

Foster carers participating in the project indicated their strong commitment to the children and young people in their care. Reasons that motivated them to continue fostering were child focussed. They were aware of children needing families and they wanted to achieve positive outcomes for children. It was also clear that fostering is not

always easy; it can be physically and emotionally demanding work. Fostering is not for everyone but for those who do it well the rewards are obvious: 'being able to make a difference in a child's life' and a sense of personal fulfilment.

It is important to emphasise that a strong collaborative relationship between carers and Departmental workers in the recruitment, assessment and training of carers was seen as essential to ensure the viability of the system. It fits with the move to a more inclusive form of working together as a team in providing care for children and young people. In addition a carer's capacity to provide quality care is highly reliant on a positive ongoing supportive relationship with an individual Departmental caseworker and with the Department more generally.

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## FAMILIES FIRST AREA REVIEW LESSONS

CONTINUED  
FROM PAGE 8

The findings of the Area Reviews identified a number of challenges that extend beyond the capacity of Families First processes into the broader context of the family services system continuum. At one end of the system, where support is targeted to families with higher needs, including crisis intervention, it is difficult for practitioners to determine where the boundaries between prevention, early intervention and crisis support begin and end. This becomes a problem when these parts of the system have high, unmet demand.

At the other end of the family services system are efforts to develop child friendly societies and sustainable communities, including universal service support for all families with young children.

Limited understanding of a systems approach to coordinated planning and delivery of support to all children and families is present here. Some people and organisations still understand Families First as only being another funding program for particular services.

The challenge for Families First is to be recognised as a set of process principles that underpin effective system planning and delivery of support and intervention with all families. When all participants in the family services system understand and apply the principles of prevention, early intervention and service coordination to their practice in this way, we can expect improvements in outcomes for children and families.

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