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*"What counts?
Defining, exploring
and measuring
family wellbeing"*

OVERVIEW, OUTCOMES
& NEXT STEPS

National Family
Wellbeing Symposium

University House,
The Australian National University
Canberra

20-21 June 2007



families
australia

National Family Wellbeing Symposium: Overview, outcomes and next steps

Summary

The National Family Wellbeing Symposium was held in Canberra on 20-21 June 2007. Four key conclusions were reached. First, developing a family wellbeing framework was worthwhile and could enhance the coherence of, and to help inform, national family research and policy. Second, work on developing such a framework should begin as soon as possible. Third, indicators of wellbeing will need to be carefully selected so that they are inclusive, and the involvement of families in the development phase is crucial. Finally, a working group representing key stakeholders should be formed to develop a first working iteration of the framework.

Introduction

The National Family Wellbeing Symposium was held in Canberra on 20-21 June 2007. It aimed to explore the meaning and relevance of 'family wellbeing', at a time when the term is being increasingly used. It also sought to explore the practicality of developing and agreeing on a coherent and readily understandable tool for monitoring and reporting on how well families and their members are faring and what more can be done to support them.

The Symposium was an initiative of Families Australia, in conjunction with the National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health at The Australian National University College of Medicine and Health Sciences. It was supported by the Australian Government Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs.

The Australian Government Minister for Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, the Hon. Mal Brough MP, opened proceedings. The Shadow Minister for Families, Community Services, Indigenous Affairs and Reconciliation, Ms Jenny Macklin MP, addressed the Symposium at the beginning of the second day.

The Symposium was attended by 130 people from a range of family, political, government, community and research backgrounds. It featured many prominent international and Australian experts, including Dr Willem Adema (OECD Directorate for Employment, Labour and Social Affairs, Paris); Mr Brian Babington (CEO, Families Australia); Ms Muriel Bamblett AM (Chair, Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care); Dr Helen Berry (National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health, ANU); Mr Paul Brown, Manager, Social Conditions Business Unit, Statistics New Zealand; Mr Richard Eckersley (Director of Australia 21); Mr Michael Fletcher (New Zealand Families Commission); Dr Matthew Gray (Deputy Director, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne); Professor Alan Hayes (Director, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne); Mr David Hazlehurst (Group Manager, Families Group, Australian Government Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs); Dr Eva Jespersen (Chief, Social and Economic Policy Analysis, UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, Florence, Italy); Ms Susan Linacre (A/g Australian Statistician, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra); Ms Laura Lippman (Senior Research Associate, Child Trends, Washington DC, USA); Ms Wendy McCarthy AO (Director, McCarthy Mentoring, and Plan International); Associate Professor Jan Nicholson (Senior Research Fellow, Murdoch Children's Research Institute, Melbourne); Dr Rajen Prasad (Chief Commissioner, New Zealand Families Commission); Dr Jan Pryor (Director, Roy McKenzie Centre for the Study of Families, Victoria University of Wellington); Dr Lyndall Strazdins (National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health, ANU); and Mr David Tune (Executive Director, The Australian Government Treasury, Canberra).

The Symposium explored latest Australian and international research and policy on family wellbeing, identified current and emerging influences on family wellbeing in Australia, critically discussed family wellbeing definitions, models and frameworks (with an emphasis on ways of measuring) and identified areas for further research or policy development. Participants were asked to explore several themes, particularly the contrast between the wellbeing of families as entities and the wellbeing of individuals as sometimes aggregated in families, as well as what family wellbeing means in terms of the trade-offs within families. Issues included the benefits and costs to individual family members in the context of enhancing overall family wellbeing. Participants were also challenged to consider the meaning of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family wellbeing.

In the lead-up to the Symposium, several focus groups with families were held in Wollongong and Canberra to gain first-hand understandings of family members' views on family wellbeing and the factors that affect it.

What did the Symposium achieve?

The Symposium recognised that 'family wellbeing' has become an established part of the lexicon – being used regularly by practitioners and politicians – but that its conceptual underpinnings and measurement were lagging behind. It concluded that further work on a family wellbeing framework is warranted, especially with the close involvement of families themselves. A well-constructed and broadly accepted framework could help inform national research and policy and could perhaps provide suitable information for a report on the state of family wellbeing in Australia.

The Symposium generated considerable interest and engagement from government, media, community and research sectors about the state of family wellbeing in Australia, the value and practicality of devising a family wellbeing framework and ways to enhance intergovernmental cooperation in the area of family policy and service delivery. This engagement commenced prior to the Symposium, as many participant groups undertook significant preliminary examination of the issues. The gathering also brought together a diverse range of national and international participants, which stimulated cross-sectoral networking and understanding in an intellectually lively and constructive environment.

The Symposium commenced with a detailed examination of the value and practicality of constructing a family wellbeing framework, drawing on overseas experience and Australian research.

Mr Babington, from Families Australia, stated that family wellbeing is part of broad public, media and political parlance but its meaning remains elusive. There is no widely accepted focus specifically on family which could guide research, policy, program delivery and evaluation, nor a comprehensive national picture of how families are doing overall based on an integrated set of indicators. Families Australia made several suggestions under the banner of a National Family Wellbeing Agenda, including the development of a National Family Wellbeing Framework to set high-level national targets and a 5-10 year National Family Wellbeing Action Strategy between Federal and State/Territory governments which would emphasise, among other things, additional investment in early childhood and in supporting families which face severe or multiple disadvantage, development of a coherent national approach to child protection, and intensified focus on closing the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous families and children.

Subsequent Plenary presentations indicated some initial ambivalence about whether the concept of family wellbeing was as helpful as the concept of wellbeing of individuals in terms of ease of measurement and value to policy development and delivery. Professor Hayes and Dr Gray from the Australian Institute of Family Studies outlined some of the challenges and pitfalls in attempting to define family wellbeing and posed the question: given the wide variations in family forms, would it be more appropriate to use measures of individual wellbeing and to examine how these affect, and are affected by, family, community and wider contextual factors?

Mr Fletcher, from the New Zealand Families Commission, stated that the Commission is developing a 'State of New Zealand Families' report using statistical trends supported by qualitative information. The Commission's approach to family wellbeing, which closely matches Families Australia's conceptual model, is based on four factors: positive family functioning; physical and social environments that promote family wellbeing; economic circumstances of families; and family knowledge base. New Zealand does not have a family wellbeing framework, but the Ministry of Social Development produces an annual 'Social Report' which contains nine domains with two to three indicators per domain which mostly focus on individuals.

Other speakers suggested that a focus on child wellbeing similar to the UNICEF framework discussed by Dr Jespersen might offer practical and achievable ways of viewing and influencing family wellbeing. The six dimensions of child wellbeing which UNICEF has analysed were: material wellbeing; health and safety; educational wellbeing; family and peer relationships; behaviours and risks; and subjective wellbeing. It was also suggested that different aspects of family life, for example, children, work and ageing, should be examined in a suite of linked frameworks rather than being aggregated in one overall family wellbeing framework.

Further discussions led to a broad measure of agreement that a focus only on individual wellbeing would not adequately capture many important occurrences within families. These include: the trade-offs and dynamics between family members over issues such as child care and housework; the influence that families as units have on communities, neighbourhoods, societies, economies and individuals; and the relationships connecting individuals within families.

Dr Adema from the OECD noted, for example, that in the area of work and family in countries such as Australia and Sweden, women rather than men trade off labour market participation with other household interests, which contributes to persistent gender wage gaps and reduced career profiles. Such evidence raises the question, does policy design attempt to reduce intra-family trade-offs in wellbeing? Other speakers argued that a child wellbeing framework alone would not be an adequate proxy for all aspects of the wellbeing of families.

Ms Lippman from Child Trends USA suggested several bases on which to develop a family wellbeing framework. These were: a family strength-based approach; healthy couples; positive parent-child relationships; father involvement; child, family and community connections; and child and adolescent outcomes. A family strengths perspective posited that: families have a reality beyond individuals; family strengths vary across the life cycle and for different cultural groups; and family strengths help families and individuals deal with stress, challenges and negative events. Family processes which could be measured by this model are: connection (including cohesion, secure attachment); inclusion (e.g. who's in the family?); regulation (including how family members influence other members and create a structured environment); teaching/socialisation (including explaining, being a role model); provisioning (providing for the family); and protection (including keeping family members safe and healthy).

Mr Fletcher from the New Zealand Families Commission suggested that a family wellbeing model ought to capture the collective wellbeing of individual family members and that part of family wellbeing which is the wellbeing of the entity itself, over and above the wellbeing of individual family members. It should also enable examination of intra-family differences in, and distribution of, wellbeing matters. The framework should be capable of recognising families' collective goals and aspirations and should be able to deal with the ways that families change through time. It should be able to deal with families across households. While there was complexity in conceptualising and aggregating wellbeing across the family, he noted that practitioners (in such fields as social work, health and education) routinely considered the wellbeing of the whole family, not just the client, patient or student.

In relation to measuring the overall wellbeing of the family entity, Mr Fletcher suggested the concept of 'family capital', which introduces the notion of 'investing' in the family as a unit. It allowed for varying degrees of 'extendedness' from the parent-child or couple relationship to the wider extended family grouping and provided a role for time in terms of the individual's and family's life course. A family capital approach could also include tangible and intangible aspects of family wellbeing that have been passed down from previous generations.

A definition of family social capital suggested by Dr Pryor from Victoria University of Wellington was 'the stock of social goodwill created through shared norms and a sense of common membership, and the ability to manage and utilise resources including social goodwill, upon which individuals may draw in their efforts to achieve collective or personal goals'. Her model of family wellbeing was that family functions and practices and family strengths build family social capital (the ability to generate and utilise resources including social goodwill upon which individuals may draw for collective and social objectives), which in turn build family wellbeing, defined as 'the ability to perform functions and practices for the benefits of the group and individuals'.

Several speakers stated that there would be value in a broader family wellbeing framework, provided it is driven by understandings of what families (as well as other experts) thought and recognised that the number and nature of the main components of family wellbeing would necessarily always be a 'best approximation' and subject to change. Should a family wellbeing framework be devised, some suggested that it would need to be 'true' to what mattered most to families, including families from different cultures and of differing types. It should also be developed in an inclusive, integrative and iterative manner.

Some speakers suggested that the focus of a framework should be on what families 'do' and how they function rather than on what form they take. It should not intentionally or inadvertently prescribe a particular type of family as the best sort of family. A framework could also be helpful as a means of gaining

agreement on, and guiding priorities for, research, resource allocation, policy development and practical action. Some speakers suggested that a family wellbeing framework should be multi-dimensional, concise and comprehensive.

Mr Tune, from The Australian Government Treasury, spoke about Treasury's mission to improve the wellbeing of the Australian people and their development of a wellbeing framework to assist them in providing policy advice to Government. To date, the focus is on the individual rather than the family. The five elements are: consumption (with the aim of maximising consumption possibilities in areas such as GDP, amenity of environment, leisure and relationship growth; distribution of income – geographically, generationally and socio-economically; managing and ameliorating risk and uncertainty, through such measures as income support and health insurance; dealing with the increasing complexity of access and service delivery issues, as peoples' lives become more complex; and opportunity and freedom, focusing on identifying and maximising people's capabilities.

Ms Linacre from the Australian Bureau of Statistics described the family statistics framework currently being developed by the ABS. The ABS family statistics framework is being prepared to inform future national data development and analysis activities. It takes as its starting point the widely-recognised wellbeing framework described in the ABS publication 'Measuring Wellbeing: Frameworks for Australian Social Statistics'. This framework identifies key areas of concern (such as work, education, economic resources, health, etc) as well as key population groups that may be at risk of disadvantage. Given the focus on families and family wellbeing, the ABS family statistics framework also identifies key dimensions of specific relevance to families. These include: family structures, family transitions and family functioning along with family connections with the wider community which takes into account all manner of family support services. The dynamic way in which families muster and use resources will also be covered by the framework, whether these involve the personal resources which individuals bring to the family, or the more widely available resources captured by the notions of natural, produced economic, human and social capital. Ms Linacre explained that the main elements of the framework have been strongly supported by the ABS Family Statistics Advisory Group and the ABS plans to consult more widely to ensure all interests are recognised.

Several speakers noted that family wellbeing is multi-dimensional and that the various dimensions of family wellbeing would need to be carefully selected. Dr Jespersen explained that the choice of dimensions and indicators in the UNICEF child wellbeing framework for OECD countries had been guided by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and commonality in the academic literature on the subject, but were ultimately reflecting the availability of relevant data. Different readers might attach different weights to the individual dimensions, and underlying indicators – and dimensions and indicators could be added (or ignored); no strong international literature could guide an unambiguous weighting. This is why her organisation decided to present the dimensions along side each other and as an initial effort to encourage further development.

Ms Lippman suggested that indicators be selected with the end use in mind. It is important, for example, to determine whether the purpose of family wellbeing indicators is to describe trends, to monitor, to set goals or to evaluate programs and policies. She suggested that indicators be selected on the basis of two questions: what five things do we want to tell Australians about wellbeing in each indicator domain; and what will we care about in ten years? She suggested that particular care would be needed in setting targets. If targets are set too high, they could cause discouragement. Finally, strength-based or positive trend monitoring is important in changing perceptions rather than taking problem focused approaches.

Several themes emerged from the first round of small group discussions on Day 1, which focused on defining and measuring family wellbeing. A large number of participants agreed that an attempt should be made to measure family wellbeing to help improve policy analysis and decision-making and in allocating resources. Many stated that a family wellbeing framework requires clarity of purpose and common understandings of what is to be measured, including a workable definition of family itself. The definition of family should be inclusive of the wide range of family forms that exist and must not lead to judgements about an ideal family type. Others suggested that the framework should measure both the strengths of, and challenges faced by, families and should contain quantitative and qualitative measures.

Some participants suggested that a family wellbeing framework should be grounded in the social and economic context in which families operate. Some argued that child wellbeing is not a complete proxy for family wellbeing, though it might be one of many indicators of the latter. Others identified the major

challenge as seeing beyond the complexity of measuring wellbeing and to decide on common-sense indicators.

A Panel discussion highlighted many issues relating to the commonalities, strengths and limitations of family wellbeing frameworks, including from an Indigenous perspective.

- Ms Bamblett, Chair of the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC), spoke about the need for investment that would strengthen Indigenous culture and therefore Indigenous family and community wellbeing, using the analogy of providing a well for a village. As the well is the source of life, so culture is the source from which Indigenous people draw strength. All interventions to tackle the serious problems some Indigenous families face must be built on respect for culture.
- Dr Berry, of the ANU's National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health, pointed out that families are a product of their society. She noted that the current tendency to focus on individual responsibility, leading to the notion of the substandard mother, ignores the power relationships in society. Power flows down, not up, and family wellbeing is a national construct. Those in power have a responsibility to create the appropriate contexts and determinants to support families and enhance wellbeing. In particular, families will succeed best if they are embedded within functional and family-oriented communities.
- Mr Brown, of Statistics New Zealand, emphasised that information frameworks must be robust and useful, inclusive and culture strong. Researchers and policy makers will have different expectations of a framework. The context and potential application need to be known and understood in order for the most useful questions to be devised.
- Mr Hazlehurst, of the Australian Government Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, indicated that a framework would need to be actionable, to guide the thinking of policy makers. It should be simple, but not simplistic, distilling what is most important and telling the story in a way that is easy to understand. It should focus on families, especially what families do to create family social capital.
- Ms McCarthy, of McCarthy Mentoring and Plan International, focussed on leadership within families and noted that it is usually provided by women. Women are having to make difficult choices, weighing up career progression against the best time to start a family. She spoke of the importance of educating women in order to improve family wellbeing, noting the evidence that having educated women improves family wellbeing. She also noted that grandparents are providing increasing levels of family support and need more assistance.

Dr Strazdins, of the ANU's National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health, presented a paper on major drivers of family wellbeing which focused attention on linkages between wellbeing, poverty and disadvantage. She also suggested that the work and family debate should be refocused by adding the dimension of wellbeing, by identifying jobs that optimise parents' and their children's mental health and by re-defining family-friendliness conditions that support wellbeing, such as security and job quality as well as time-related issues. She highlighted new research which showed a correlation between child wellbeing and parental job quality and working hours. She also noted that many Australian families will face new pressures, including the effects of climate change and prolonged drying on their health and economic circumstances.

A second round of small groups examined the major drivers of family wellbeing, including work and family, social drivers (including how families use their time, climate change), discrimination (including racism and sexuality), gender factors and other major drivers not already identified. Groups were asked to focus on what is already known about these areas and what further work is required. Arising from group discussions, further research and action was suggested in areas such as childlessness, paid maternity leave, children's use of time, exploring how restorative justice could be applied, family resilience and a longitudinal study of relationships.

In a third round of small group discussions, under the heading of family diversity, complexity and wellbeing, participants were invited to examine what special considerations would need to be taken into account in measuring family wellbeing for Indigenous families, single parent families, kinship and other out-of-home care, families and mental illness, families and disability, families and ageing parents, families affected by divorce, families from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, families in rural and remote areas, families headed by grandparents, homeless families, blended families after separation, families with uninvolved fathers, families with same-sex parents and families with multiple barriers.

Using a few topic areas as examples, the following issues were just some of the many issues highlighted.

- In relation to Indigenous families, important considerations include: recognition of the strengths of Aboriginal culture by Aboriginal people; recognition of the fact that Aboriginal people do not belong to one homogenous group; recognition that not all Aboriginal families and communities are abusive or dysfunctional; the importance of not measuring programs directed at Indigenous people using a deficit only approach but also employing strengths-based measures; and that Aboriginal families are less easy to identify and assist in some urban settings.
- In relation to families with ageing parents, key considerations include: adequate access to support services; recognition of caring responsibilities in workplaces; neighbourhood-based support networks; and access to stable government rules in support for the elderly.
- For families and disability, key issues include: assisting children who care for parents with disability; and imprecise definitions of disability and mental illness.
- Grandparent-headed families face issues such as community stigma; lack of social support; financial stress; and difficulty in understanding how to access government payments.
- For single parent families, key issues include: adequate housing; finding support networks; accessing quality legal advice; and obtaining child care as a form of respite.
- For same-sex families, issues include: ensuring that decision-makers work from a definition that families encompass and respect a wide range of types; making more visible the needs of same-sex families; and adequate access to services such as in maternal and child health.
- For families in rural and remote locations, key issues include: parenting from a distance when children leave home to access secondary and tertiary education; problems of getting transport to and distance from support services; and isolation.
- Families from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds face issues such as reconciling intergenerational issues within families where values differ between those of the country of origin and those in Australia; cultural stereotyping; misinterpretation of cultural practices; and social isolation.

Next steps

The Symposium agreed that a working group, with representation from across key stakeholder groups, should develop a first working iteration of a family wellbeing framework which will be piloted, reviewed and amended in light of feedback. The Symposium organisers also intend to publish a comprehensive report of the Symposium proceedings.

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20 August 2007