

Children of One Parent Families

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Social policy may be defined in a general sense as the conscious process by which members of a society, or some large sub-section of a society, collectively seek enduring solutions to the problems that affect them. Social policy refers particularly, but not only, to the actions of governments and to the activities of large organisations and institutions. It is now generally accepted that the concerns of social policy have at least to do with questions of social justice, equity and environmental protection, although there is much debate about specific application of these values or of the lower order values that might be derived from them.

An extensive literature on social policy now exists.¹ This literature deals with the principles or philosophy underlying the process of formal policy making, the development and current extent of policies in selected nations or in relation to specific population groups or social problems and also deals in a normative way with the actual activities to be undertaken in the formulation and implementation of social policies.

Family Policy in the Year of the Child

The family, which these days seems to be much harder to define even in a general sense, is still recognised as a basic institution in society. Therefore the family does have a very important part in practically any set of social policy arrangements. Recent developments in the United States of America, Canada, Europe and Australia indicate that there is renewed interest in the family, particularly in families with children. Definitions of the family differ

widely² and there is no clear consensus about what changes occur in or to the family in industrialised society or about what might be done in the best interests of the family even if these changes could be documented. However, there is no doubt that we will see increasing attention being given to the notion of family and child care policy in Australian in the coming years.

An informed discussion on family policy requires at least a working definition of the family, an explicit statement about broad general principles and some grounding in objective facts about the situation of families and the problems they face in society.

The Year of the Child is both an opportunity and challenge for all people interested in children and families to review and to discuss the place of the child in the family and in society, to re-examine our principles and philosophies and to take a close look at what is known about children and their experience in this society. Such a process may lead to clearer policies and to more decisive action on behalf of the society's children.

The National Family Survey

The Family Research Unit in the School of Social Work at the University of New South Wales has been engaged since 1973 in a study of the family in Australia. The major piece of work undertaken was the National Family Survey of 1975 which was carried out for the Unit by the Australian Bureau of Statistics. For the purpose of this survey the family was defined as consisting of child or children and the adults who are, or who act as, their parents. Special emphasis in the study was

given to the comparison between one-parent families and two-parent families.

The survey was conducted in all states and the Australian Capital Territory and covered the urban population, that is, all persons living in settlements of five hundred persons or more as determined for the 1971 Census of Population and Housing. In all the sample represented the population living in approximately eighty-six per cent of dwellings in Australia. Details of the survey design and the topics covered in the survey have already been published³ and the first report on the findings of the survey was released in January of this year⁴.

A Definition of the Family

In this article I intend to adopt the same definition of the family as used in the National Family Survey. Thus a two-parent family comprises a child and his mother or substitute mother and his father or substitute father who are married to one another or live together in a marriage like relationship. It includes all children of either parent that reside with the family. A one-parent family is a family in which the responsibility for the care of a child or children is held by one adult, either a parent or substitute parent.

The Rights of Children

The survey does provide a great deal of information about family composition, family life styles and the experiences of children and adults living in Australia in the mid nineteen seventies. It may be very difficult to achieve agreement about the long term effects, harmful or otherwise, upon children now living in various family situations particularly for those children where one parent is absent for all or most of their childhood.

However, principles of social justice, equality and environmental protection are well established in the social policy literature and receive at least lip service from most sections of the community when discussing the rights of children. Thus, using the first report of the findings of the National Family Survey I intend to examine the situation of children living in one-parent families in Australia and to compare their situation with that of children living in two-parent families. In this way we can test at least in some respects whether or not these children suffer from social injustice, inequity or from exposure to risks beyond that of other children in Australia. I do not intend to enter into a discussion here about the causes, either social or personal, which

lead to the establishment of one-parent families or to try and establish who may be at fault. Whatever may have produced the situation in relation to one-parent families is of less interest here than the implications for Australian children of living in a one-parent family.

The One-Parent Family

At least one in 11 of all families with children aged 17 or younger in Australia is a one-parent family. In one in eight of all these one-parent families the children live with their father. There is some variation between the States, with New South Wales and Tasmania having higher proportions of one-parent families than the other States. However, the pattern is similar in all States*.

TABLE 1. One-parent and two-parent families in each state

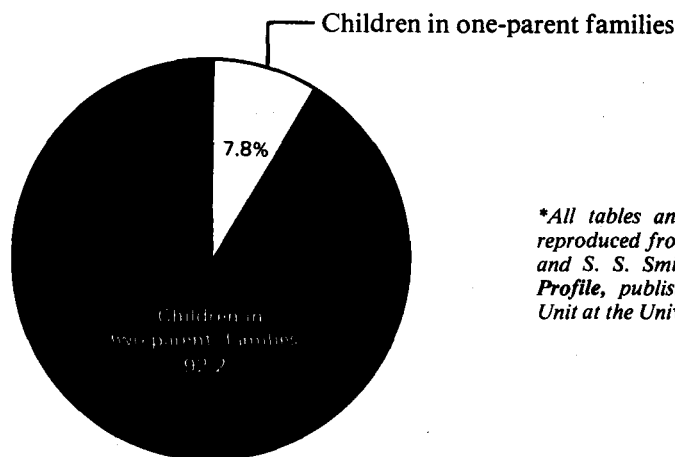
STATE	ONE-PARENT FAMILIES		TWO-PARENT FAMILIES		ALL FAMILIES	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
New South Wales ¹	66,000	9.6	623,000	90.4	689,100	100.0
Victoria	43,700	8.4	475,200	91.6	518,800	100.0
Queensland	22,300	8.9	227,700	91.1	250,000	100.0
South Australia	14,800	8.7	154,600	91.2	169,500	100.0
Western Australia	12,700	8.6	136,200	91.5	148,900	100.0
Tasmania	5,300	10.8	43,600	89.2	48,800	100.0
TOTAL²	164,800	9.0	1,660,300	91.0	1,825,100	100.0

1. New South Wales figures include the Australian Capital Territory which was not sampled separately.
2. The estimates cover the population living in approximately 86% of dwellings in Australia. Figures exclude rural areas and the Northern Territory.

Looked at from another prospective nearly 320,000 children — that is just under eight percent of all children —

now live in one-parent families. This percentage is smaller than the percentage of one-parent families because the average

number of children in these families is smaller than the average number of children in two-parent families.



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FIGURE 1 Proportion of children in one-parent and two-parent families

Thus the children of lone-parents already constitute a very significant proportion of the population. However, these figures are based upon a survey at one point in time. With the increased number of dissolutions of marriage and the tendency of many divorced and widowed parents to remarry it is apparent that many more than eight percent of children do experience some period in a one-parent family between their birth and the end of their school years. For the United States of America where nearly 16 percent of children now live with only one parent it has been estimated that 40 percent of children born in the 1970's will live in a one-

parent family for some period prior to reaching age 16⁵. No estimate of this kind has been published for Australia, but we can reasonably assume that many more than eight percent of children now being born will live for some significant part of their childhood in a one-parent family. In addition to any notion of justice or equity the sheer numbers of children involved point to the necessity for some positive action to ensure that such a large proportion of the society's children do not suffer unnecessarily as a result of the type of family in which they live.

Income and What it Buys

It is difficult to construct one

comprehensive indicator of life style, but in an industrial society such as Australia income has a very important influence upon the quality of life and the type of experiences any parents can provide for their children. The National Family Survey collected information about income received from a number of sources. Figure 2 shows the current gross incomes (in weekly equivalents) for lone parents and for husbands in two-parent families at the time of the survey. Data were also collected about the income of wives in two-parent families but this information has not been published as yet.

At the time of the survey the

INCOME

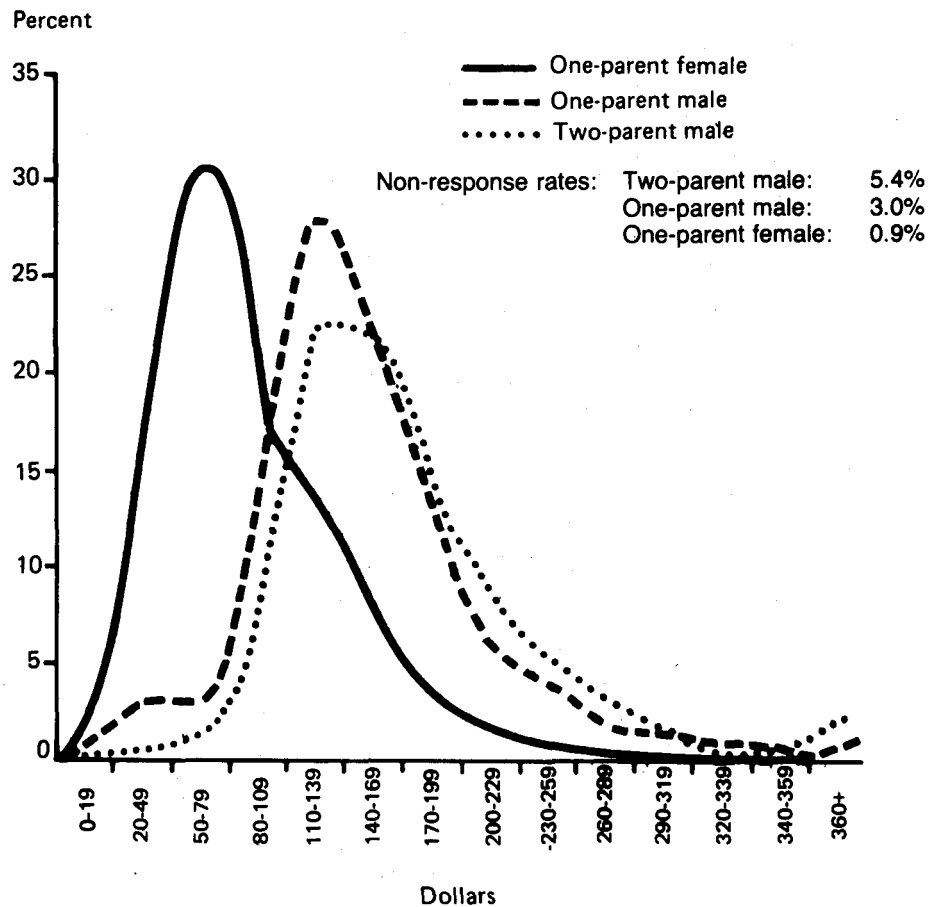


FIGURE 2 Gross income¹ of parents in one-parent families and husbands in two-parent families

1. Current gross income (weekly equivalent) from any of the following sources: wages and salaries, government pensions, benefits or allowances, superannuation, workers' compensation, alimony and rent. Figure excludes persons who do not work for wages and salary and who derive income from other sources such as business, shares, interest or dividends.

median income for lone-fathers was \$141 per week compared with \$160 for husbands in two-parent families. Lone-mothers had a median income of only \$47 per week. The major source of income for all males in the survey was from wages and salaries, whilst over 65 per cent of lone mothers depended upon govern-

ment pensions and benefits. The decision since the survey to make Commonwealth Benefits available to male lone-parents is unlikely to induce many lone-fathers to leave the work force and accept such a marked drop in income. In most dimensions measured in the survey the situation of female one-parent

families particularly was shown to be one of relative deprivation. For example 72 percent of two-parent families and 54 percent of lone fathers own or are buying their own homes, whilst only 34 percent of lone mothers are in this category. Sixteen percent of lone mothers and their children live in public housing,

compared to eight percent of male one-parent families and 5 percent of two-parent families. One in five female one-parent families lives in a flat or unit compared with one in eight male one-parent families and one in 16 two-parent families.

Working on the assumption that a minimum standard for adequate housing in Australia is a separate bedroom for a parent or married couple an index of crowding was constructed by taking the total number of rooms in the dwelling used as bedrooms, subtracting one for the parent(s) and calculating the average number of other persons for each remaining bedroom. Three out of every five female one-parent families have an average of more than one person sleeping in each bedroom and in one case in every five there is an average of more than two people for each bedroom. Crowding is marginally lower in male one-parent families. On the other hand over half of all two-parent families have a bedroom for the parents and a separate bedroom for each other member of the family. Only one in 12 two-parent families has an average of more than two persons sleeping in every bedroom.

Only 51 percent of female one-parent families have the use of a motor vehicle compared with 84 percent of other families. One-parent families are also less likely to have a telephone or to have access to a wide range of home appliances. The survey did not seek information about the full range of physical and material circumstances of children living in Australian families. But the restrictions imposed by low incomes on the ability of lone parents, particularly of lone mothers to provide a similar level of accommodation, access to household items, and control over the family's transport and communication as that achieved by the parents in two-parent families is likely to extend to such other activities as providing for books and educational toys in the home,

private tuition in music, dance etc. and to educational coaching and visits and excursions whether educational or recreational. In all of these respects the children of lone parents are very likely to be at a disadvantage compared with children living with two parents. For many children living in one-parent families the type and location of their accommodation associated with the absence of either telephone or motor vehicle may expose them to risks or exclude them from help in times of emergency.

Child Care and Education

Amongst the wide range of topics covered in the National Family Survey was a detailed examination of the use of childcare facilities by all families and a series of questions about education of children, including the aspirations that parents have for their sons and daughters. In both these areas there are manifest differences between the experiences of children in one-parent and two-parent families.

Forty-seven percent of two-parent families and 28 percent of one-parent families have children who are not yet attending school. These parents were asked a series of questions about their use of formal and informal child care facilities and where applicable their reasons for not using a formal service. Twenty-six percent of one-parent families and 31 percent of two-parent families with preschool children use formal child care services on a regular basis. Of these families who use formal child care services 56 percent of one-parent families and 44 percent of the two-parent families have some additional informal child care arrangements on a regular basis.

In families with preschool children who do not use any formal child care arrangements there is still a high incidence of regular informal child care. This occurs in 68 percent of one-parent families and 47 percent of two-parent families.

One parent families rely more on informal arrangements and are more likely than two-parent families to use child care or child minding services, whilst two-parent families are more likely to use play group or preschool kindergarten services. One-parent families are almost three times as likely to cite expense as a reason for not using formal services and almost twice as likely as two-parent families to report that they cannot find a place for their child.

Again the survey results suggest that the child of a lone parent is, compared with the child of a two-parent family, at a disadvantage when it comes to getting access to child care services or access to preschool education.

A number of questions in the survey dealt with aspects of education. Initial results suggest that the children of one-parent families are less likely than other children to continue at school or to enter into post school education or training courses. These data will be dealt with in greater detail in the major report of the National Family Survey to be published later this year. However, the first report does include descriptive data on the aspirations that parents have for the education and eventual occupation of their children. As was anticipated prior to the survey parents in both family types have higher aspirations for their sons than for their daughters. For example in two-parent families 47 percent of respondents want their sons to have a tertiary education, whilst only 35 percent want this for their daughters. In addition to this anticipated finding it was also found that lone-parents, particularly lone mothers have lower aspirations for their children than do parents in two-parent families. Details are included in the first report of the survey.

Whilst it might be argued that the aspirations of parents in all groups are unrealistically high, given the

limited number of places in tertiary institutions and possibilities for subsequent professional employment lone parents do expect less for their children. This reduced level of aspiration may reflect a sense of pessimism about the ability of the one-parent family to support a child through full secondary and tertiary education or may be a part of the one-parent family's image of itself as second best.

Implications for Family Policy and Services

Children in Australia most often live in a two-parent family household where the father is employed full time and the mother may be employed at least part-time. Most children are likely to have either one or two siblings. Throughout their childhood they come into contact with childcare, health, education, the media, welfare services, transport and commercial and industrial enterprises, either directly or indirectly through the involvement of their parents in these institutions and activities. The effects of these institutions and services on children is one of the major concerns in the developing field of family policy. The critical question in formulating family policies and in establishing services for families is that of specifying those functions which can best be left to the family, those best performed by other institutions and the appropriate balance to be achieved in those cases, the majority, in which functions are best shared. The greatest mistake that we can make in seeking answers to this question is to assume that the family itself is a static institution immune to development or social change. We now have clear evidence that a significant proportion of children will, for a variety of reasons, spend part or all of their childhood in a one-parent family, with no or only one sibling, be dependent upon government support and to be at a major disadvantage in dealings with the wide range of institutions and services in

society. This disadvantage, for example in the area of education, may have lasting effects upon the ability of the children to succeed as adults in this society.

Those who are responsible for administering existing services and those charged with formulating policy or designing new services that will impinge upon children and their families must take into account the serious disadvantages already suffered by the majority of children living in one-parent families. We must then take steps to ensure that opportunities for these children are brought into line with those of children in two-parent families.

Emotional and psychological disadvantage due to the absence of a parent may not be amenable to the provision or extension of broadly based family services. However, the results of the National Family Survey show, amongst other things, that the children of one-parent families are disadvantaged even further because they are not given

equal access to the services already provided by this society for children.

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