

Census reports highlight dramatic social changes in Australia

By Dragan Stankovic
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Reports from the 2001 census of Australia give a picture of far-reaching changes in social and family life over the past three decades. Fewer people than ever are marrying, while more are divorcing; childlessness has increased; and the number of people living alone has risen.

These trends indicate that years of economic restructuring, including reduced job security and longer working hours, have had a deep social impact. They also suggest that the breakdown of the nationally-regulated economy and the increasing globalisation of all aspects of life have produced underlying social shifts. But none of the reports, or the media commentary on them, have probed these questions. Instead, the official debate has focussed on lifting the “fertility rate,” that is, on how to induce or encourage women to have more children for the sake of the national economy.

The statistics show that people are increasingly delaying formal marriage or not marrying at all. Thirty years ago, in the 1971 census, 35 percent of 20-29 year olds described themselves as never married. By 2001 that figure went up to 75 percent. Marriage rates have hit a 100-year low. In 2001, 103,000 couples married, a fall from 113,905 in 1981. Moreover, couples are marrying, on average, five years older than in 1981. Last year the median age of the bride was 27 and the groom 29. At the same time, more couples chose to live together before marrying. In 1981, 31 percent of couples cohabited before entering a registered marriage; by 2001, this proportion had reached 72 percent.

Divorces are historically high. With the exception of 1976, the year the Family Law Act was introduced to allow no-fault divorces, 2001 saw the highest number of divorces ever granted in Australia. There were 55,300, up from 41,412 in 1981. On average, these couples separated after 8.3 years of marriage and divorced about three and a half years later. Just over half of all divorcing couples had children.

Over the same 20-year period, the average Australian household shrank from 3.3 members to 2.6. In the five years between 1991 and 1996, households consisting of couples with children fell from 50 percent of total households to 47 percent. For the first time, they were outnumbered by single-parent families, childless couples and people living alone.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), the proportion of lone person households rose to 23 percent in 2001, up from 18 percent in 1971, with a substantial part of the increase occurring among young people. Single-parent families now represent 15 percent of all families, compared to 6 percent in

1971.

Among women, the proportion who have never had children and are unlikely to do so has climbed to the highest levels since the 1930s Great Depression. Estimates from birth registration data show that in 1986 some 20 percent of women in their child-bearing years were likely to remain childless. By 2000, that figure rose to 25 percent.

The commentary in official political and media circles has generally blamed “selfishness” and loose morals for the declining marriage and birth rates. The *Sydney Morning Herald* quoted Professor Pat Noller from the University of Queensland family centre, who condemned “the prevailing attitude” that “we don’t have to put up with anything” and “what we want is all that counts”. Liberal Party figure Malcolm Turnbull, a wealthy businessman, urged governments to respond to the “fertility crisis” and prevent the “terminally catastrophic phenomenon” of an ageing national population by providing high school courses on marriage and conception skills, as well as introducing marriage contracts to make divorce more difficult.

The purpose of these superficial “analyses”—which attempt to explain complex social phenomena simply on the basis of individual attitude and choice—is to avoid any examination of the impact, on the lives of ordinary people, of the profound economic changes that have taken place during the same period. In fact, there is considerable evidence that these social shifts are substantially bound up with the increasing strains produced by greater job insecurity, longer and more irregular working hours, lower wages and the need for two or more incomes to sustain a family, as well as the sharp decline in welfare, health and education services. For example, the ABS refers to surveys indicating that the cost of raising children, in terms of both money and time, has become a barrier for many people.

Certainly, young people, even couples with two incomes, are finding it harder to buy a home and raise children. Those who are married, with or without children, face enormous financial and time pressures. Since the early 1980s, the number of people working more than 45 hours has increased by 76 percent, while the proportion employed part-time, usually in low-paid, casualised or temporary jobs, nearly doubled from 15 percent in 1980 to 29 percent in 2000.

The statistics indicate a clear connection between childlessness and the growing proportion of working women. For women who are employed, the childlessness rate is higher. In 1996, 80 percent

of women between the ages of 20 and 44 who had not yet had children were working, compared with 55 percent of women who had children.

Another ABS report, *Australian Social Trends - Family Formation: Trends In Childlessness*, demonstrates an historical correlation between economic hardship and childlessness. The lifetime childlessness rate was highest during the 1930s—31 percent—and lowest—9 percent—during the post-war boom from the 1950s to the 1970s, when people had a certain confidence in the future. From the 1970s, the rate of childlessness began to rise again, climbing sharply in the 1980s and 1990s, the decades dominated by the restructuring and deregulation implemented by the Hawke, Keating and Howard governments.

The birth rate was also relatively low during the 1930s, falling to 2.1 babies per woman in 1934. In 1961, at the height of the “baby boom”, it peaked at 3.5 babies per woman. Since then, fertility has declined, falling sharply during the early 1960s and again during the 1970s and 1990s. At 1.7 babies per woman, the fertility rate recorded for 2000 was the lowest on record.

Other ABS statistics point to the difficult conditions facing young people. Unable to find decent jobs, young workers are increasingly being pushed into low-paid, insecure, part-time work. Between 1985 and 1995, full-time employment among 15-19 year olds dropped from 32 to 17 percent, while part-time employment increased from 14 to 26 percent. During the same period, among 20-24 year olds, full-time employment dropped from 60 to 53 percent.

In real terms, average weekly earnings for young people declined sharply over the same 10 years. For 15-19 year olds, the figure fell from \$252 to \$174 and for 20-24 year olds, it dropped from \$485 to \$423. According to the ABS, the decline is partly due to the growth of unemployment.

Further education has been promoted as a means to secure employment and improved career opportunities. But a combination of cuts to student allowances, imposition of higher tuition fees via the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) and poor employment prospects in numerous fields have impoverished many students. Most students are forced to work, often full-time, in order to live, severely compromising their studies. Of all students studying full-time, 28 percent relied on wages or salaries as their main source of income, while 39 percent had no income, which means they were likely to be dependent on their parents or other family members.

By the time they graduate, students have HECS debts of tens of thousands of dollars, often making it impossible to leave their parents’ home or start a family. Because of low wages, young workers also find it more difficult to live independently. With children remaining at home well into their twenties, increased financial and family tensions are inevitable.

Statistics released by the Australian Taxation Office last month confirm that working people suffer declining incomes and are falling further behind the wealthy. Over recent months, the Howard government and right-wing think tanks have sought to deny that social inequality is worsening in Australia. But the income tax data show the opposite.

In 22 “super rich” postcode areas, where at least 20 people

declared a taxable income of \$1 million or more, incomes soared in 2000-2001, but in the poorest areas incomes actually fell, while in the working class suburbs incomes rose, but by barely enough to match inflation.

Taxpayers in Sydney’s wealthy eastern suburbs reported an average rise of 16.5 percent to \$109,000, whereas those in the South Australian countryside Mallee districts saw their incomes fall by 2.5 percent to \$19,907. In Seven Hills, in Sydney’s western suburbs, incomes increased by an average of 3.1 percent to \$36,169—about one-third the level of the eastern suburbs. These figures are likely to underestimate the disparity, given the opportunities that the wealthy have to disguise income in order to evade tax requirements.

Other figures point to severe social polarisation, with great hardship among the poorest sections of the working class. Almost 455,000 men and 116,000 women nationally earned more than \$1,500 a week. At the other end of the scale, 688,000 men and 1.1 million women received \$200-\$299 per week.

These statistics demonstrate the degree of financial stress being experienced by ordinary working people, especially the young. At the same time, there are also other factors influencing the shifts underway. The wider availability of contraception and abortion since the 1970s has, theoretically, given women greater freedom in choosing whether and when to have children. This seems to be the case, however, mainly for women with higher educational qualifications. According to the previous 1996 census, the level of childlessness was highest among women with a university degree—20 percent—and lowest among those with no post-school qualification—9 percent.

The far higher proportion of couples living together before marriage also suggests shifting attitudes toward formal marriage. Moreover, there was a significant turn away from religious weddings to marriages performed by civil celebrants. In 1981, civil celebrants conducted 38 percent of marriages; in 2001 they performed 53 percent.

But what the census reports reveal, above all, is that the lives of the vast majority of ordinary working people—and the choices they can or cannot make—are increasingly dominated by growing economic hardship, insecurity and the lack of freely available social facilities.

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