

**THE FAMILY IN SOCIAL POLICY: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE
FAMILIES COMMISSION SPECIAL ISSUE**

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“Other things many change us, but we start and end with family.” Anthony Brandt

This special issue of Social Policy Journal has as its focus issues that face whanau and families in New Zealand and, by implication, the relationships between those issues and social policy.

“Family Social Policy” is not a clearly demarcated discipline in New Zealand nor, indeed, in other parts of the world. It is hard, however, to find many policies that do *not* have an impact on families either directly or indirectly. And although we may and often do interrogate policies for their impact on the economy or the environment, it is far less likely that a “family lens” will be applied to policy making.

**WHY SHOULD WE BE CONCERNED WITH THE IMPACT OF POLICIES ON
FAMILIES?**

First, intimate relationships are important for the wellbeing of all individuals, and policies have the potential to enhance or to impede the formation and sustenance of positive family relationships.

Second, well-functioning families foster the development of socially engaged and successful young people who contribute to the wellbeing of wider society. This implies a *responsibility* for families toward society, since dysfunctional families impose costs on societies in the form of supporting distressed children, paying for mental health services, and providing benefit support.

Third, well functioning families are inextricably linked with economic productivity and flourishing workplaces. When intimate relationships are healthy, when parent–child relationships are fostered, then adults in the work force contribute measurably more to their workplace than those whose family relationships are stressed.

In sum, the oft quoted sentiment that families are good for society remains true. In the words of Urie Bronfenbrenner:

The family is the most powerful, the most humane, and by far the most economical system known for building competence and character. (Bronfenbrenner 1986)

**SHOULD GOVERNMENT SEE FAMILIES AS LEGITIMATE OBJECTS OF POLICY
ATTENTION?**

Families in the western world are changing dramatically in both shape and engagement (see *The Kiwi Nest* (Families Commission 2008)). It is a daunting challenge to reach and support families of all shapes and forms, but one which must be faced if we are not to limit ourselves to support for a decreasingly predominant “nuclear” family form.

At the same time, there has been a significant change in most western societies toward focusing on individuals rather than family groupings. It is argued that individuals are increasingly focused on themselves and their own wellbeing to the detriment of the wellbeing of the family as a whole. This emphasis on individualism is widely blamed for the fragility of families today. External factors, however, also take an individualistic focus particularly in economic domains such as wages and taxes. The health system, too, can be seen in many instances to be interested primarily in the individual, ignoring the fact that a person is embedded in a family grouping that is affected by, and affects, the health of the family member. There is an important role for government policy makers, then, to move relevant policies toward a group focus rather than the individual, if families are to be properly supported.

There is a strong and enduring argument, though, that families are essentially private, and that the state should not interfere in their affairs. It is increasingly recognised, however, that families are not able to perform all the functions they did in the past; education, health care, and other functions are now outside the arena of the immediate family and are shared with external institutions. Many commentators today would suggest that the role of government is to support and enable families, rather than to control and dictate. In practice this is a fine balance to maintain.

Karen Bogenschneider, Director of the Policy Institute for Family Impact Seminars in Wisconsin, suggests that any analysis of policy in relation to its impact on family wellbeing, should examine:

- The ways in which families contribute to problems;
- How families are affected by problems; and
- Whether families need to be involved in solutions.

She also suggests that policies, if they are to foster family wellbeing, should:

- provide support so that family members can fulfill their responsibilities
- encourage parental and marital commitments and stability
- recognise the strength and persistence of family ties
- assure family empowerment and partnerships
- respect family diversity
- include vulnerable families.

A paper prepared recently for the UK government entitled “Families in Britain: an evidence paper” suggests that Government policy should:

- empower families to achieve their potential
- be proportionate (this includes working in partnership with families to ensure that they both have their privacy respected, and fulfil their responsibilities to society)
- support families regardless of form or structure
- be socially equitable – this includes managing a judicious mix of universal and targeted support.

In order to inform policy making in New Zealand and elsewhere, a body of evidence is needed that is based on sound research and on the identified issues and needs of families. The Families Commission has as its mandate the tasks of listening to families, of developing a sound knowledge base, and of advocating for families. In this issue of Social Policy Quarterly, some of our work is described. The changes in family structures and forms over

the last 60 years is described by Jo Cribb and provides a much needed basis for considering the shape and needs of families today. Four papers address issues of work, families, and income: “Making it Work” (Lindy Fursman and Nita Zodgekar), “Parents’ Long Work Hours and the Impact on Family Life” (Lindy Fursman), “Beyond Reasonable Debt” by Jaimie Legge and Anne Heynes; and “Juggling Acts” by Janine Moss. These chapters address current issues of work/life balance, and of dealing with low income and debt, and provide evidence about how families both experience and cope with these issues.

Three papers focus on Pacifica families, about whom we have a dearth of information. One (Camille Nakhid) looks at young people involved in gangs and their perceptions of family and home; another (Gina Pene and colleagues) examines the experiences of Tokelauan young people in purpose-built housing for extended families. The third uses census data to track changes in wellbeing for four Pacific groups – Niuean, Tongan, Cook Island and Samoan households.

Three other issues identified by families as of concern are addressed: Elder abuse (Kathryn Peri and colleagues), parental separation (Jeremy Robertson and colleagues), and support for couple relationships (Carla Guy). Finally, two papers address methodological issues for the Commission in examining migrant and refugee families (Sara Kindon) and Family Centred Communities (Francis Luketina).

The publication of this special issue provides an opportunity for readers to review some of the work done by the Commission. Work is underway to ensure that the policy and advocacy implications of the evidence we are gathering are fully utilized in informing and supporting government, NGOs, other organizations working with and for families, and of course families themselves.

REFERENCES

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