

Uniting Families Report 2024 in summary

Insights into the diversity of families raising children and young people



The Uniting Families Report 2024 is the first in a 10-year series of annual reports that seeks to explore the realities of family life in Australia, especially the families in which children and young people are being raised.

In this first year we have analysed Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) and Census data to provide insights into the diversity of families in Australia and how their experiences differ according to their family type.

The implication of seeing these families and how they live their lives in our community is clear. Where policymakers and practitioners fail to design systems, laws and services without the full range of family experiences in mind, some individuals won't get the support they need to thrive.

The key findings show that those people not in couple parent families are more likely to experience cost of living pressures, greater caring responsibilities, ill health, disability, more unstable housing and hardship. This indicates that there is work to do to ensure that conditions and opportunities are equal for all families.

It is our ambition that the Uniting Families Report will form the basis for 10 years of research and insights into family life that can help bridge that gap.

“As one of Australia’s largest community service providers, Uniting has more than 100 years of firsthand experience with the diversity and complexities of caregiving and kinship. We celebrate the richness and love within each of the families we support.”

Tracey Burton
Chief Executive Officer
Uniting NSW.ACT

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Australian families are diverse

Australian families come in many different forms.

- 69% of children live in couple parent families
- 11% live in sole parent families
- 12% live in step and/or blended families
- 6% live in multigenerational families
- 1% live in foster families or families made up of other kin.

This diversity doesn't fit neatly into categories. Almost 1 in 5 couple parent families are also step and/or blended families, multigenerational families or foster and other kin families.

Most laws and practices are based on the assumption that families are couple parent families. Other family types are treated as anomalies, when they are recognised at all. In fact, one in every three Australian children lives in a family which does not conform to this assumption.



We need to better understand First Nations families and kinship relationships

One third of First Nations families are couple parent families. First Nations families are more likely to be multigenerational, step and/or blended, sole parents, or foster and other kin families than non-First Nations families.

This confirms what First Nations communities and organisations have been saying for years, and could assist in the development of support programs and services for First Nations families. It also highlights the necessity of self-determination for First Nations peoples in the development of programs and services because of their deep knowledge of their own ways of 'doing family'.



Multigenerational families use the most informal care for young children

Multigenerational families have the highest use of informal care (74%) for children before they start school. Step and/or blended families (35%) have the lowest.

This finding highlights the strength of multigenerational families in supporting adults juggling work and care costs. Programs like supported playgroups are crucial in providing developmental support, school readiness, and social interaction, forming a vital part of early learning opportunities tailored to all families' needs.



Young adults are not all in work or school

- Young people who don't live in couple parent families are less likely to be participating in work or study.
- The rate of non-participation in work or study for young people is almost twice as high in sole parent and step and/or blended families, and three times higher for those in foster and other kin families, than in couple parent families.

Most young people (aged 18 to 24) are either working, studying or a combination of both. Fewer than 10% of young people in couple parent families are in neither work nor study. In sole parent and step and/or blended families the rate is closer to 20%, and more than 30% of young people in foster and other kin families are not working or studying.



Family type affects wealth and ability to manage economic pressures

- The average total net wealth of couple parent families is around 1.3 times higher than for any other family type.
- One in five sole parent families have needed to ask friends and family for financial assistance.
- Approximately 10% of couple parent families say they couldn't raise \$4,000 in an emergency. In all other families, this number is greater than 20%.

The cost of living crisis in Australia is impacting families unequally. The financial buffer required to survive financial ups and downs is not available to many families, making them vulnerable to things like rising prices and economic downturns.



Some families are more likely to rent and face housing insecurity

- Sole parent families and step and/or blended parent families are more likely to rent and face housing insecurity.
- Three times the proportion of sole parent families rent compared with couple parent families.
- Twice the proportion of step and/or blended parent families and foster or other kin families rent their homes compared with couple parent families.

Too often, the evidence we collect about families to use in policy and service development also focuses on one or two types of family. We know that families in Australia are much more diverse than is considered in public debate and public policy. This report is a first step towards challenging the notion that all family experiences are the same.



Ill-health and disability are not evenly distributed across families

- Around one in 10 people over 15 years in couple parent families live with ill-health and disability. The rate is much higher for other family types: approximately one in five in step and/or blended families, sole parent families and multigenerational families, and one in four in foster and other kin families.
- Although close to 15% of families include someone with a long-term health condition, impairment or disability, there is substantial variation across family type.



Women are still doing more parenting and child-rearing than men.

- Two thirds of women say they do more than their fair share of parenting and child rearing while a similar percentage of men report that they do their fair share.
- Women in sole parent families are the least satisfied with how child rearing tasks are shared.
- A gendered pattern of care work amongst men and women is consistent across all family types except sole parents.

These findings compel us to continue our advocacy for services and policies that recognise and address the multifaceted needs of families. By fostering dialogue and catalysing action, our commitment to disrupting entrenched disadvantage is unwavering.

Future editions of the Uniting Families Report will take wide inspiration and focus on the challenges and issues of the day. Each year a spotlight topic will be explored through a range of research methods to bring insights on an area of need and opportunity.

Alongside the UNSW Social Policy Research Centre, Uniting looks forward to bringing you on this 10-year journey of exploring and understanding families with us.



Meet one of our families:

“Family is very important to all of us. We have grown as a family learning to build relationships with the different versions of each other and we appreciate each other as we grow together.”

Photography by Fancy Boy Photography

Visit uniting.org/families-report to read the Uniting Families Report in full.