



FOR RICHER OR POORER

The typical new dwelling in NSW had 278.2 square metres of floor space last year, up 10.3 per cent on the year before, BIS Shrapnel figures revealed by AVJennings show.

One of the largest of the new batch would occupy just over 500 square metres.

A hankering for grand master bedrooms, en suite bathrooms, multi-media rooms and large informal living areas explained the increase, said Tim Redway, national marketing manager of AVJennings.

“If you think back in the 1970s, en suite bathrooms were virtually non-existent and in the 1980s they were mainly in luxury homes. Now they're a standard inclusion.”

Where once a home may have had a single living area, developers are now offering separate family rooms, games and music rooms, rumpus rooms and meal areas within the one dwelling. “What we're finding with families is there's an increasing desire of members within the family to be involved in individual activities,” Mr Redway said.

Extract from 'Down drawbridge, our guests are here', by Lisa Pryor, Property Reporter, Sydney Morning Herald, 24 May 2004

Owning the family home on the 'quarter-acre block' is often referred to as 'the Great Australian Dream'. People want to raise families in their own home – in a safe and secure environment. Parents also want to provide as many opportunities as possible for their children – everything from the best possible education and opportunities for sporting and other extra-curricular activities, to home computers, DVD players and computer games. Most parents are prepared to work hard and sacrifice a great deal to provide security for their children's future.

HOW MUCH IS ENOUGH?

Children are a precious gift in the life of families. It is natural that parents want to provide the resources and opportunities that will secure a decent future for them. It is also natural to want them to be happy.

A good education might require not only a good school but also the latest in home computers, additional subject tutoring, and participation in a range of out-of-school sporting and artistic activities.

For children, the acceptance of their peer group is an important factor in their happiness and social development. Parents know that for many kids to be accepted by their peers they have to have the right gear. Their clothes need to be fashionable and trendy. They need to be able to participate in conversations about the latest computer games, pop music and films. They need to be able to go roller-blading or skateboarding with their friends. They need to take good presents to their friends' birthday parties and they need to be able to host fun and exciting parties and sleep-overs themselves.

The pressures to provide all these opportunities and resources to our children are enormous – advertisers have learned to target children most particularly, knowing that parents find it difficult to resist the pleas of their children.

What it means for parents to feel that the family is economically secure is often determined not by their ability to provide the basic necessities of life but by how well they can provide all the 'stuff' that is advertised to children and adults alike as essential to good living.

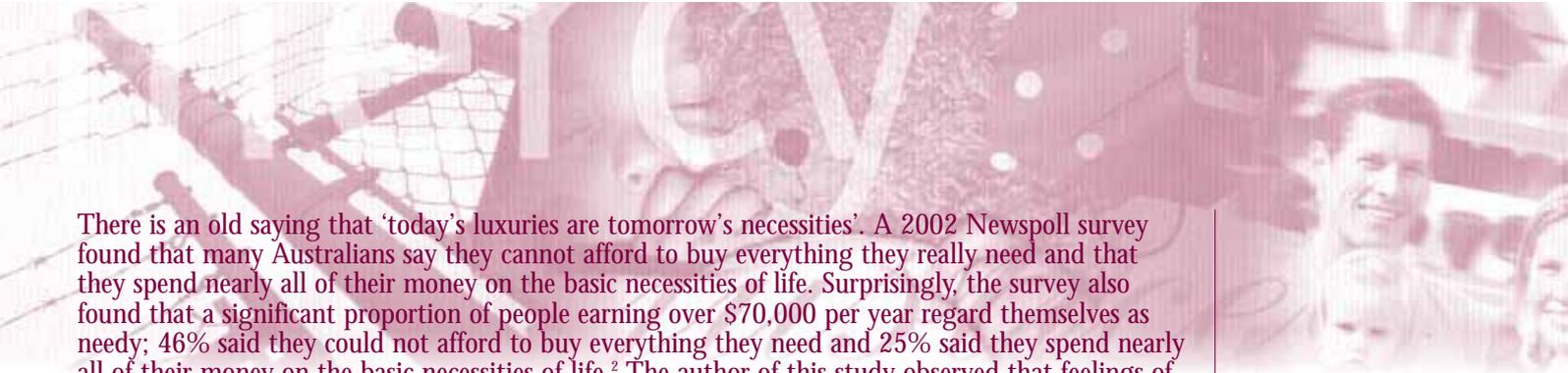
How much of what you spend in your household is for the necessities of life and how much goes towards the 'essentials' for good living?

Truth A recent national study has shown that the cost for an average couple to raise two children to the age of 20 is \$448,000, with significant components of this cost including food (\$83,300), transport (\$75,400), recreation (\$68,700), and education and child care (\$49,600).¹

How can parents balance the need to provide for their children's material well-being with the pressure to over-consume?

¹ Percival, R. & Harding, A., 2003, *The Costs of Children in Australia Today*, National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling, AMP, University of Canberra, pp.1-4.





There is an old saying that ‘today’s luxuries are tomorrow’s necessities’. A 2002 Newspoll survey found that many Australians say they cannot afford to buy everything they really need and that they spend nearly all of their money on the basic necessities of life. Surprisingly, the survey also found that a significant proportion of people earning over \$70,000 per year regard themselves as needy; 46% said they could not afford to buy everything they need and 25% said they spend nearly all of their money on the basic necessities of life.² The author of this study observed that feelings of deprivation are often conditioned by expectations and attitudes rather than real material circumstances.

Our consumer driven culture leads people who are relatively wealthy to feel ‘poor’ or economically insecure because they don’t have the goods or services promoted by the market as essentials or in the possession of their peers. Many Australians who do have economic security still feel as though they are missing out.

The national study which highlighted the high costs of raising children also found that, when asked to focus more on the values promoted by our society, 83% of Australians see our society as too materialistic – with too much focus on money and not enough on what really matters.

For those of us who have enough to meet the basic needs of our families, then, other demands set in. We become vulnerable to the risks posed by the pressures of consumerism and the consequent drive to overwork and the ‘family’ experience begins to fall far short of the ideal. Many people are trading time with their families for more hours at work. Working hours in Australia are now much longer than the official working day. Some believe that this trend to ‘overwork’ has been driven by ambitious lifestyle goals that, in turn, are driven by consumerism. It is all too easy for the worker and the family to become trapped in a cycle of overwork, over-consumption and debt in their efforts to achieve material success. All families experience periods of difficulty, with discord, tension or conflict testing the bonds of love and loyalty. But increasingly it is because of the drive to establish and maintain the economic security of a family that the daily experience of conversation, practical care, sharing time and expressing love can be overlooked.

THE SECURITY OF LOVING CARE

Contrary to what many people might expect, the Bible is full of stories of families that would never meet the standards of what we might regard as a model for a ‘good Christian family’. God’s most faithful servants often led difficult and complex family lives, with histories of dysfunction, brokenness and violence. Think about the stories of Cain and Abel; Abraham, Sarah and Hagar; the hatred and violence perpetrated on Joseph by his eleven brothers; David and Bathsheba, and the story of David’s son Amnon who rapes Tamar, one of David’s daughters. These families, as violent and dysfunctional as they were, were however, instruments of God’s grace in the world.

In the New Testament we read of Jesus spending time with families (Mary, Martha and Lazarus in Luke 10 and John 11) and sharing the grief of parents whose children were sick and dying (the story of Jairus in Mark 5 and the Syrophenician woman’s daughter in Mark 7). But we also see some ambivalence towards families. Jesus called men and women to leave their families to follow him. He himself left his family to do God’s work in the world.

Mercy It is clear from the biblical stories that we do not need a perfect family life to be acceptable to God. We are acceptable to God just as we are.

This does not mean that family life isn’t important. In the Bible the poor and marginalised are often represented by ‘the orphan’ and ‘the widow’. Children and women without families were vulnerable to poverty and violence. Families were important not only for social order but also as a way of ensuring that the society’s wealth was available to everyone.

For most people, our family is our first experience of unconditional love and loyalty, both of which are fostered as we grow. The family has variously been described as: the first and vital cell of society; a school of deeper humanity; the foundation of social, cultural and economic life; the best welfare support system yet devised; and the domestic church. These descriptions capture something of the essence of the great value of families.



² Hamilton, C., 2002, *Overconsumption in Australia: The rise of the middle-class battler*, The Australia Institute, Canberra



If children are to grow up healthy then they need strong, healthy families. Families in Australia are very diverse. What makes them healthy or otherwise is not that they fit a certain profile, but rather the values which find expression in their lives. The Australian Institute of Family Studies advocates a 'family strengths' perspective. The qualities which they have identified in strong families are: commitment, positive communication, spiritual wellbeing, appreciation and affection, time together and ability to cope with stress and crisis.³

What would happen to the type of houses that Mr Redway sells if family members began to spend more time together instead of less? What might a house look like if it was designed to enable a mix of independence and healthy interaction?



WE CAN LIVE THE BALANCE AT HOME

The need for economic security in families is real. But so is the pressure to accumulate wealth. Jesus understood this pressure and warned people about the dangers of prioritising wealth over relationship.

¹⁹ "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; ²⁰ but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Matthew 6:19-21)

Community A recent study of the views of young people on parental work, time, guilt and consumption, found that young people would rather have more time with their parents than have more money coming in as a result of their parents' work. This was the same regardless of whether one or two parents worked in two-parent or single-parent households. The study also found that children have a healthy cynicism of materialism and over-consumption:

While they enjoy having material goods, they are sharply critical of those with 'too much' and see them as greedy, spendthrift, socially inauthentic, irresponsible and poorly equipped for later life... Most of the young people in this study are planning to have jobs and a family and many want to do it in ways that are different from their parents. In many cases, young men want an active role in parenting and to be there for their children more than their own fathers have been. Young women want to share the tasks of earning and caring with their partners.⁴

But what can we do as family members, in our Church communities and as Australians, to foster a balanced life that comes close to the high ideals that are often attributed to families? How can we work towards a society that ensures families can attain economic security without losing relational security?



We can begin by looking at our priorities and consider the place of economic issues in our lives. Is this priority supporting family life or dominating or undermining it? We can also listen to each other – what is it that the members of your family want? The words of a family member can challenge our priorities in life. The voice of a child longing for mum or dad who is working back late; husbands and wives trying to make time for each other outside the demands of work and home; or the wisdom of a grandparent reflecting on the family's history – these can often be a reminder of what really matters. It is the family's experiences of love and life that count each day and ultimately. Economic security and the material acquisition it entails is an important means of fostering family life but it is not an end in itself.

Families with economic security can choose to keep economic concerns in their place. An increasing number of Australian are now reassessing their commitment to work and their material needs. Over the last ten years, almost one quarter of Australians in the prime of their working lives have willingly chosen lifestyle changes resulting in them earning less money. Many have reduced their working hours. Others have taken lower paying jobs or changed careers. The main reasons behind these choices have been to spend more time with the family and to achieve a healthier lifestyle.⁵

Justice While some families are in the position of being able to make changes for themselves, the majority are constrained by the structures and systems in our society and its institutions.

³ 'Strong Families', John DeFrain, *Family Matters*, No. 53, Winter 1999, Australian Institute of Family Studies available at <http://www.aifs.gov.au/institute/pubs/fm/fm53jdf.pdf>

⁴ 'Can't Buy Me Love', Barbara Pocock & Jane Clarke, February 2004, The Australia Institute, Discussion Paper number 61, summary available at <http://www.tai.org.au/> (click on publications)

⁵ Mail, E. & Hamilton, C., 2003, *Downshifting in Australia: A sea-change in the pursuit of happiness*, The Australia Institute, Canberra.

Local communities and churches have an important role in voicing the concerns of families – by informing our country's leaders, making submissions to government inquiries, lobbying local members and getting the message into public debate about the pressures experienced by families, and by lobbying private corporations and small and large businesses to change their expectations and foster more flexible workplaces.



FINDING OUT MORE

- Read *Growth Fetish* by Clive Hamilton, Crows Nest: Allen and Unwin, 2003
- Read *Good News for Families* by Ann Wansbrough, Melbourne: Joint Board of Christian Education, 1997, available from UnitingCare NSW.ACT phone (02) 8267 4372
- Read *State of the Family 2004* by Mark Jeffrey, Victoria: Anglicare Australia, 2004
- Find out more about Australian families by visiting the website of the Australian Bureau of Statistics at <http://www.abs.gov.au> and click on 'Themes' to find relevant resources

FAMILIES IN CRISIS

After a decade of outstanding economic performance, well over two million Australians, including over 700,000 children, are living in poverty. Many of these children are living in households where no adult is in paid work.⁶

But neither is paid employment any guarantee of securing a life free from poverty. Changes to the labour market over recent decades have seen the proliferation of low paid, casual and insecure jobs. The shift from permanent full-time jobs to part-time and casual work has seen around 90% of jobs created over the past decade paying less than \$500 per week – and 50% of these paying less than \$300⁷. Over one million people are in poverty despite living in households where one or more adult is in paid work.

The greatest drawback of the growth in casual work has been the inadequacy of wages. The rate of pay offered by these jobs is only part of the minimum wage which is inadequate for the needs of families. Another problem faced by families relying on casual work has been the workers' loss of time control – often with irregular and family-unfriendly hours – as well as the loss of access to leave entitlements that would help bring some balance in favour of family time.

Not all families are in the position to make career or lifestyle choices to improve the quality of their family life. Most families without work and many who are in low-paid work face a daily grind of poverty that sees them preoccupied with achieving a very basic level of economic security.

The churches have a great concern for the life of families and the wellbeing of the poor. This concern is the basis for demanding that all levels of government ensure economic security for all families. Fundamental tasks in respecting and fostering the family include ensuring couples have the means to form and maintain a family.

Last year, Christian, Jewish and Islamic leaders called on Australian politicians to commit to a national strategy for the reduction of poverty and the eradication of child poverty. This call was echoed in the report of a recent Senate Inquiry into Poverty and Financial Hardship. We can support the leaders of our churches in their advocacy for a basic level of economic security for our most vulnerable families by keeping alive the call of our religious leaders for a national strategy against poverty.

For those of us who have plenty, we are challenged to recognise that we have more capacity than many to reconsider and change the priorities of our lives. In what ways can we act to improve the quality of life in our own families and for those families who have little choice and opportunity for true economic security? The will of the community and of politicians to address poverty, reduce inequality and find a balance in our nation's economic life will be maintained only if we remain focussed on the human face of poverty.

⁶ Senate Community Affairs References Committee, 2004, *A hand up not a hand out: Renewing the fight against poverty*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra.

⁷ LHMU, 2003, *Fair Wages, Decent Work*, LHMU Low-paid Work Agenda, Sydney