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## **Information Paper**

# **Field of Children and Youth Statistics**

**Australia**

**2005**

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AUSTRALIAN BUREAU OF STATISTICS

EMBARGO: 11.30AM (CANBERRA TIME) WED 6 APR 2005

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# **1. Introduction**

## **1.1. Context**

The ABS is currently undertaking a project to improve the quality and range of information available on the populations of children and youth. The process used to achieve this is described as 'information development'. This process will identify the supply and demand for information, in order to describe the information gaps, overlaps and deficiencies that exist. Importantly, an information development plan will outline key priorities for information development and outline an agreed work plan to guide the activities of all parties to the plan.

This paper documents work undertaken as part of the process to develop information in the children and youth field. The final output of this project is the production of a Children and Youth Information Development Plan. This paper provides important background and contextual material for the Children and Youth Information Development Plan and will form part of the suite of outputs from the project.

## **1.2. Purpose**

Dependable information on children and youth is important to a wide range of groups: governments; researchers; communities; practitioners and families; for a number of reasons. Data play an important role in describing the population of children and youth and, as such, can illuminate problems that they experience and show the importance of some of the factors associated with those problems. For these reasons, data are an integral part of the policy design and evaluation process, research agenda, and decision making processes of communities and organisations, which generally aim at improving the health, development prospects and wellbeing of children and youth.

Data users require quality data in order to answer research questions and address policy issues. Quality data is underpinned by robust statistical concepts, agreed standards and classifications, and sound information frameworks. This document discusses the concepts of children and youth from a theoretical and statistical viewpoint, describing concepts, standards and frameworks currently in use, and outlines some of the standards and measurement issues facing this field of statistics (both currently and historically). As such, it provides important background for the Children and Youth Information Development Plan.

## **2. Children and youth concepts**

The way childhood has been conceptualised and what it means to be a child has varied over time, in line with changing circumstances of children and differing social contexts. The conceptualisation of childhood reflects the different societies in which children live. The concept varies between different ethnic and cultural groups. Similarly, the concept varies between countries, with some children overseas experiencing shorter childhoods than those in Australia.

The term 'child' is commonly used in two ways. Firstly, as a term that is used to denote a relationship. In this context, the term 'child' is used without reference to age or level of dependence. Secondly, the term 'child' can be used to denote a person in the early stage of their life (i.e. before adulthood). This paper is chiefly concerned with children as infants, boys and girls (i.e. those in the early part of their lives) and used in this way, unless otherwise stated (e.g. when discussing ABS family coding).

The way youth has been conceptualised has also changed and the idea of youth as a period of transition into adulthood has a long history. The modern concept of youth in Western countries is largely associated with the changed social conditions which prevailed in developed countries after the second world war.<sup>1</sup>

It is important to note that historically females have experienced very different transitions to adulthood than their male counterparts, partly due to differences in roles and responsibilities as parents and in the workplace. Similarly, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people have also experienced very different transitions to adulthood. Traditional Aboriginal cultures have very clear descriptions for the initiation process of attaining adulthood and as a result, there have been arguments as to whether the notion of youth is appropriate to characterise the social experience of young Aboriginal people growing up.<sup>1</sup>

The fluidity of these concepts over time, and between cultures, is important to bear in mind when considering collecting, analysing and comparing statistical data on children and youth. Some key dimensions are outlined below.

### **2.1. Age and development<sup>2</sup>**

Age is the most important dimension of the concept of children and youth. For children, age is used as an indicator of their developmental stage. For youth, age is used as representative of their level of independence.

Children experience a progression through various development stages. While the age at which individual children progress through these development stages can differ from child to child, all children progress through similar stages which generally occur during a broad age range. Aspects of a child's 'development' are typically considered to be either physical, cognitive or social. These types of development are all interlinked and progression in one development type will affect progression in the other types.

### *Physical development*

Physical development refers to the rate of growth and level of functioning of a child's body. The physical growth experienced during infancy is by far the most rapid growth experienced by humans. Infants generally double their birth weight in their first three months and triple it by the age of one year. Similarly, the brain grows rapidly during infancy and early childhood. A child's locomotive skills progress rapidly from being unable to hold their head up at birth, to learning to walk and run and use fine-motor skills by the age of three years. Physical development stages include those which occur during puberty.

### *Cognitive development*

Cognitive development refers to a child's ability to think, including their thought processes, construction of knowledge and handling of information. It is generally accepted that children progress through a number of stages of cognitive development.

### *Social development*

Social development refers to a child's ability to interact with others and the wider environment. Children progress through various stages of social development, from recognising their own existence at around two years of age to learning to talk in grammatical sentences and communicating with others and recognising and using other's emotions as cues. Children also learn gender roles and how to cooperate with and help others. As adolescents they explore their own identity.

## **2.2. Dependency**

These developmental stages may also indicate a level of dependency on the part of the child. Dependency refers to physical, emotional and psychological dependency, as well as financial dependency.

In a general sense, dependency means the state of being reliant on someone or something other than oneself. Dependency implies one has a need which one requires some external support in order to fulfil. When thinking of children, dependency refers to their reliance on support to allow them to live and function in society. This reliance is mainly physical, psychological and/or emotional in younger children, but may be more social, legal, sometimes economic and financial in nature, as children age.

Children are generally dependent upon a parent (or guardian) in these terms. As children approach adulthood, greater levels of social, legal and psychological independence are progressively achieved.

## **2.3. Youth and social and legal responsibility**

There are difficulties in assigning an age at which childhood ends and youth begins. Physical and mental maturity play a part, but it is the gaining of social/legal rights and acceptance of social/legal responsibilities which are most important in considering the transition from childhood to youth. Hence, age is the main means of

identifying youth for statistical output, but dependency, as discussed above, remains important, with the emphasis being on economic dependency.

Youth are often defined according to how many of various adult rights and responsibilities they have, some of which are legally defined in terms of age. These legal ages, such as the age one can be charged as an adult in criminal courts, the age of consent and the age one can hold a driver's licence, not only differ between countries but between the States and Territories of Australia.

While Commonwealth legislation applies across the entire country, State and Territory legislation can differ. Commonwealth legislation covers the legal age at which young people attain adult rights such as the right to drink, vote, marry without parental consent and acquire Australian Citizenship without parental consent, which all occur at 18 years of age. In contrast, the age at which driving licences can be obtained, the school leaving age, age of consent and age one can be charged as an adult, differs between the States and Territories, as shown in the Appendix.

The age of consent ranges from 16 years of age to 18 years of age across the States and Territories and also differs in regards to heterosexual and homosexual sex in the Northern Territory. Similarly, the provisional driving licence age differs between States and Territories, ranging from 16 years and 6 months in South Australia, to 18 years in Victoria. The school leaving age is less varied— 15 years for all states except Queensland, South Australia and Tasmania, where it is 16 years of age (see Appendix for details).

In all States and Territories, a child under the age of 10 years of age is not deemed to be responsible for their actions in legal terms, while responsibility must be proved by the prosecution for children aged 10 to 14 years. In contrast, the age one can be charged as an adult and the associated legislation differs between the States and Territories. In half the States and Territories (New South Wales, Western Australia, South Australia and the Australian Capital Territory), a person must be 18 years old before they can be charged as an adult, while in the remaining States and Territories, this age is 17 years.

### 3. Frameworks relevant to children and youth

#### 3.1. The rationale for frameworks

A framework for a particular area of statistics is a well recognised tool which supports statistical measurement and data analysis in that area. It is a broad level conceptual 'map', which identifies issues of concern and allows statistics to be organised and grouped into a logical structure and which defines the boundaries and content of these statistics. A framework can take on a number of different forms, with one arrangement not necessarily better or worse than another, provided it is logical, relatively easy to follow and comprehensive. Some framework formats are more suited to particular topics than others.

This section describes various frameworks which set out the important matters of social concern relating to children and youth. It includes frameworks developed by statistical and non-statistical agencies, but only those frameworks which relate directly to statistical measurement are included. Children and youth are covered by several (ABS and other) frameworks which apply to the general population, but there are also a number of frameworks which relate specifically to the children and youth populations. In some cases these frameworks cover both groups. There is no existing national over-arching framework for children and youth. However, a framework of this nature is being explored as part of the collaborative *A Picture of Australia's Children* project.<sup>3</sup> In addition, at the State and Territory level, a number of State governments have been involved in considering frameworks— for example, as part of the Western Australian Government's *Children First Strategy*,<sup>4</sup> the Office of Children and Youth is currently developing an indicator set for reporting on the wellbeing of the State's children and youth.

Existing frameworks relating to children and youth are useful to consider for several reasons. Frameworks can assist the information development process by highlighting the nature of information supply and demand in the children and youth field. By mapping the entire field they can highlight areas where information deficiencies and gaps exist. They can also aid the information development process by promoting standards, consistency and comparability across new and existing information sources. They help to show children and youth in relation to the key organisations associated with them and identify important factors such as resources, risk and protective factors, factors impinging on development and maturation, and broader environmental factors affecting children and youth. Others provide clarity to facilitate discussion and debate.

Importantly, frameworks can be used to show the relationships between children and their families, their broader social networks and communities and with various government and non-government organisations with whom they may have important connections. They may indicate the flows between these groups and the impacts they have on each other including any negative ones that may impede children's development.



## 3.2. Current frameworks

### 3.2.1. The ABS frameworks

Social statistics are about people. They tell us about the number and characteristics of our people, their origins, their living arrangements, their social and economic activities and many aspects of their wellbeing. They inform of the prevalence and location of social problems such as ill-health and disability, unemployment, poverty and crime. They help to show relationships between aspects of wellbeing (income, health, wealth) and the extent to which various social and community services (e.g. schools, hospitals, subsidised housing and income support) are used to support people's lives. Together with economic statistics they provide views of living standards in Australia and how they are changing over time.

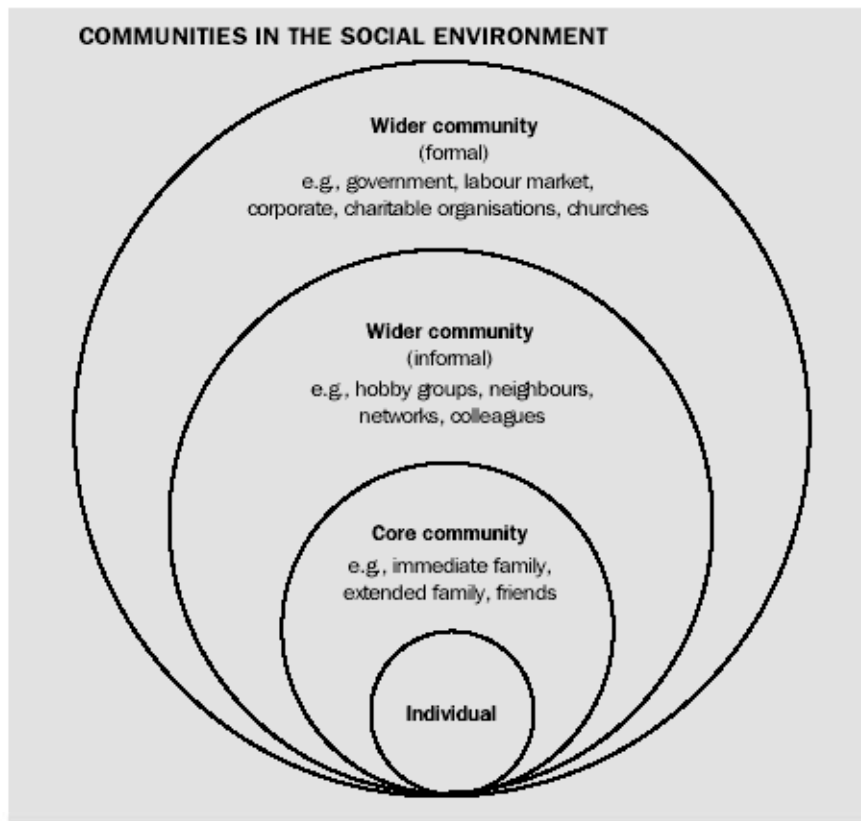
Social statistics collected by the ABS are used to describe the wellbeing of the population as well as its size, structure and geographic distribution. Underlying the notion of wellbeing is a range of fundamental human needs and aspirations, each of which can be linked to an area of social concern. Governments also implicitly identify with this range of needs and aspirations and they are the focus of social policy and service delivery. They are reflected through the structures of government, for example in portfolios such as health, housing, education, transport, crime and justice and so forth. Frameworks for social statistics are described in *Measuring Wellbeing: Frameworks for Australian Social Statistics*.<sup>5</sup>

In this publication, each of these areas of social concern has its own more detailed framework: population, family and community, education and training, income, health, housing, work, culture and leisure, and crime and justice. There is also a second dimension which focuses on population groups, including children and youth and family and communities. Information on children and youth is often therefore collected and provided according to these areas of social concern.

Another aspect of frameworks for social statistics is the transactions, or social exchanges, which take place. For example, parents feed their babies when they cry to be fed, nurture their children and teach them social values, and schools provide an education and social interaction. A model of transactions is useful within a system of social statistics, as it maps and acknowledges the interrelatedness of society.

The transaction model identifies the social environments in which an individual can become involved in transactions, and describes these in terms of communities, as shown in the figure below. An individual's core community (most often their family) is the setting for a person's primary and most intimate transactions. The informal wider community provides a social and communication network that joins the individual to others with similar interests and values, while the formal wider community provides employment and a source of income to satisfy an individual's consumption needs. Transactions can take place between any of these identified communities, such as between an individual and their core community (e.g. a child being cared for by their parent), or between the core community and the wider

community (e.g. a parent enrolling their child in a sporting group). The transaction model identifies the active parties in the transaction as either providers or receivers.



Source: Measuring Wellbeing—Frameworks for Australian Social Statistics (ABS cat. no. 4160.0)

### 3.2.2. Child-specific frameworks

The following frameworks cover those with a focus on children and in some cases their families. Frameworks which cover children, but also encompass youth are described in section 4.2.4. Some of the frameworks are based on an ecological approach which originates from Bronfenbrenner's theory.<sup>6</sup> The ecological approach essentially sees the child as developing by interacting with its environment reciprocally. The child affects its environment and is in turn affected by its environment. The main components of the child's environment which are considered in these frameworks are usually the family and the community.

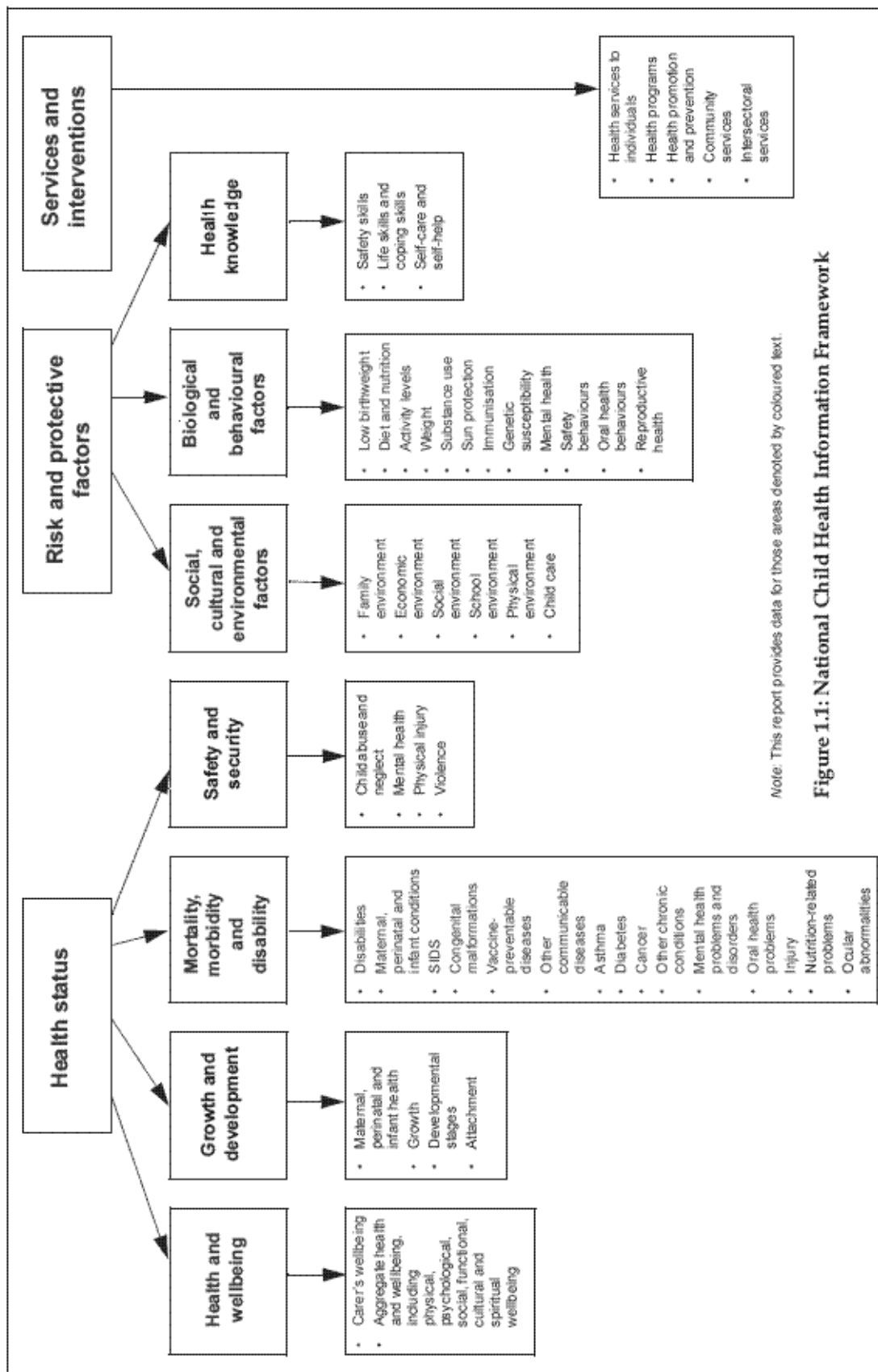
#### *3.2.2.1. Australian child-specific frameworks*

- National Child Health Information Framework<sup>7</sup>

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) has developed an information framework to monitor the health of young Australians and produces biennial reports on the health of children and young people. The national Child Health Information Framework (NCHIF) is a conceptual framework used for organising national child health information. It was developed at a workshop

convened by the AIHW in 1998. It covers the main issues relevant to the 0–14 year age group, and forms the basis for the monitoring and future reporting of child health information.

The NCHIF identifies three broad groups of indicators of child health. These include Health status, Risk and protective factors, and Delivery of health services and interventions. Each of these broad groups has a number of sub-group which further define the breadth of the framework, in terms of the impacts on, and elements that relate to, child health. A diagram of this framework is presented below.



**Figure 1.1: National Child Health Information Framework**

Source: Australia's Children— their health and wellbeing, 2002 (AIHW cat. no. PHE 36)

- Families First framework (NSW government)<sup>8</sup>

The Families First framework focuses on families with children up to eight years of age. The framework is an outcomes model, in that it attempts to measure the outcomes of a network of services and strategies that have demonstrated significant positive impacts on children and parents. The model was developed in 2002.

The framework used by the Families First project is a human ecological hierarchy based on Bronfenbrenner's theory.<sup>9</sup> In this theory the child is the centre with family, community, other resources and macro climate surrounding and influencing all other "layers". Hence the framework has four domains: child outcomes; family outcomes; community outcomes and supplementary community outcomes. The indicators used by families first support this approach by being child centric, which allows a picture to be created at the family, household and community levels.

#### Summary of the Outcomes Framework<sup>9</sup>

| <b>Domain Indicator</b>                       |
|---|
| <i>Child outcomes</i>                         |
| 1. Child physical development                 |
| 2. Child social and emotional development     |
| 3. Child educational development              |
|   |
| <i>Family outcomes</i>                        |
| 4. Maternal health and wellbeing              |
| 5. Family relations                           |
| 6. Family participation outside the household |
| 7. Risk of harm                               |
|   |
| <i>Community outcomes</i>                     |
| 8. Community networks and programs            |
| 9. Criminal activity                          |
|   |
| <i>Supplementary community outcomes</i>       |
| 10. Transport                                 |
| 11. Housing                                   |

- Best Start (Victorian government)<sup>12</sup>

The Victorian Government's Department of Human Services Best Start Indicators Project<sup>13</sup> is aimed at improving the health, development, learning and wellbeing of children from the ante-natal stages to eight years old. Best Start is based on the principles of reducing the impact of disadvantage (from any cause) and enhancing the life chances of all children by strengthening preventative measures and making them more robust and effective. Active local community involvement in the design, use and evaluation of services underpins the project.

Best Start is a set of statistical indicators covering child health, development and wellbeing. It focusses on the early years of life as a predictor of later development and on the need to address issues arising in these years. Best Start makes strong use of the ecological approach with respect to the sectors that influence a child's development.

The domains are:

1. Health (including parental and child, nutrition, antenatal, play)
  2. Child welfare/maltreatment (including child re-notification)
  3. Education and Learning (including parental employment)
  4. Child friendly environment (including domestic violence, air quality, housing, social connections)
  5. Service delivery (including immunisation, hospitalisation)
- Our Kids Strategic Policy Framework (Tasmanian government)<sup>14</sup>

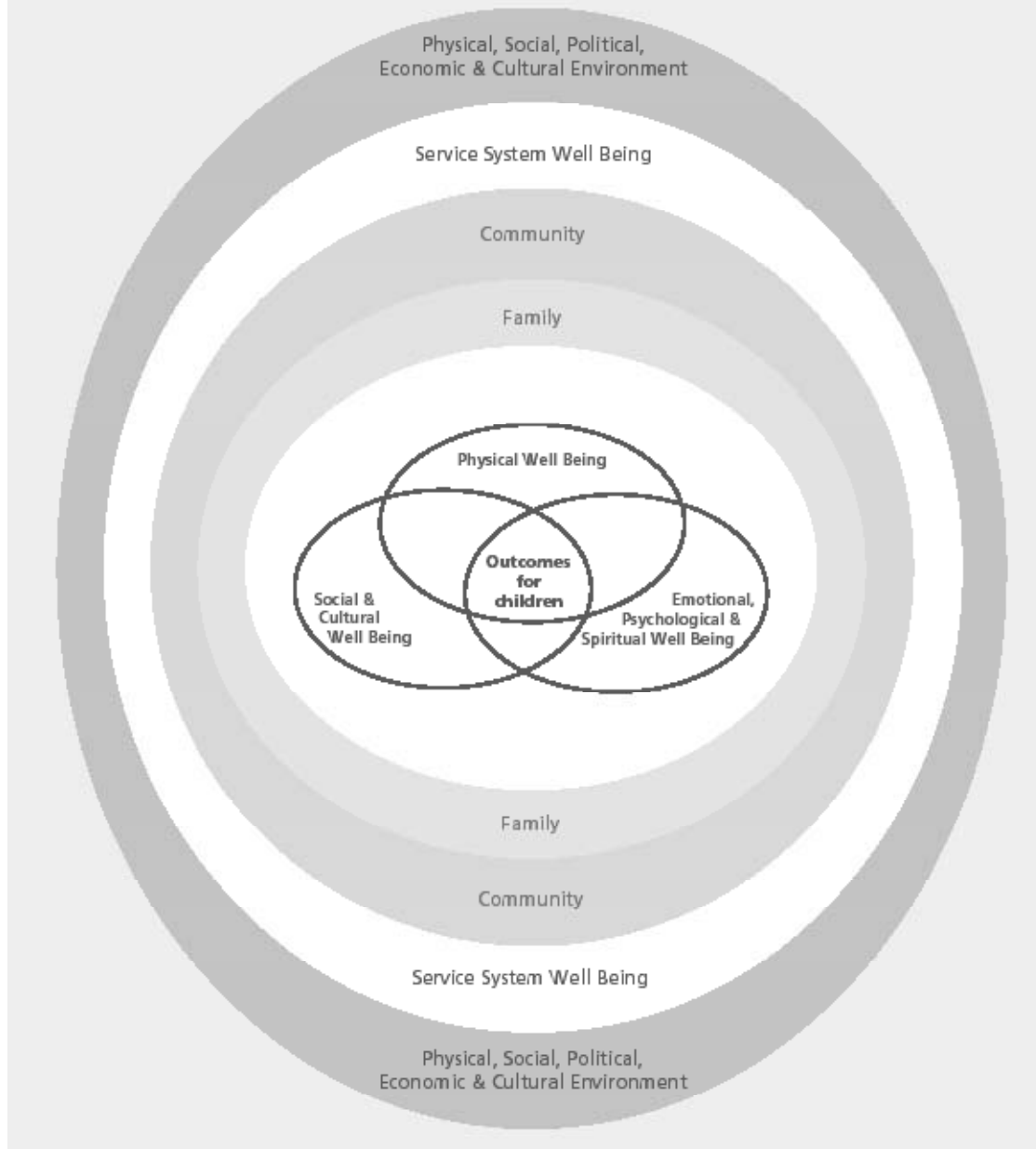
The Our Kids Strategic Policy Framework provides direction for the planning, monitoring, management, evaluation and enhancement of services and interventions. In considering children's wellbeing, it defines four policy domains:

- o physical;
- o emotional, psychological and spiritual;
- o social and cultural; and
- o service system wellbeing.

The framework is based once again on an ecological model which is a common thread among other framework and indicator sets relating to children and youth. The Our Kids Strategic Policy Framework is diagrammatically represented below.

## Vision of Our Kids

All Tasmanian children have the capacity and opportunity to reach their true potential



Source: Our Kids Action Plan 2004-2007, Department of Health and Human Services, Tasmania.

### 3.2.2.2. *International child-specific frameworks*

- The Early Childhood Development Agreement (Canadian government framework)<sup>10</sup>

In 2000, Canada's governments reached an agreement to improve and expand services and programs provided for children aged 0 to 5 years and their families. The Canadian government developed a framework which identifies five domains of interest:

- Physical Health and Motor Development;
  - Emotional Health;
  - Social Knowledge and Competence;
  - Cognitive Learning and Language; and
  - Communication
- Child Health Indicators of Life and Development (CHILD) Project, 2002<sup>11</sup>

The CHILD project is a European project which forms part of the European Union Community Health Monitoring Program. It is a tool for assessing the health of children aged 0 to 17 years across all European (member) countries. Similar to the ecological approach used in other frameworks, CHILD uses a concept of child health determinants. All elements (physiological, familial, domestic, social and physical) can have positive or negative influences on child's health. While health is the primary concern for CHILD, it also covers the interplay between health and other aspects of wellbeing.

Rather than specify domains, CHILD identified 14 principal topics:

- Demography;
- Socio-economic status and inequity;
- Social cohesion/capital;
- Migrants;
- Marginalised children;
- Family Cohesion;
- Mental Health; Quality of Life;
- Well-being;
- Lifestyles;
- Health Promotion Policies;
- Nutrition and Physical Growth;
- Development (intellectual and social);
- Mortality, morbidity, injuries;
- Environment; and Access and utilisation of services.



### 3.2.3. Youth specific frameworks

- National Youth Health Information Framework<sup>15</sup>

In 2002, AIHW in consultation with the National Child and Youth Health Advisory Group, reviewed the previous National Youth Health Information Framework and amended it to link to the National Health Performance framework. This latest version of the National Youth Health Information Framework consists of three broad groups of indicators of youth health (12 to 24 year olds):

1. Health status and outcomes;
2. Risk and protective factors; and
3. Services and interventions.

Collectively, these broad groups represent a wide range of issues, including: life expectancy; wellbeing; mortality; morbidity; disability; risk and protective factors relating to the environmental, socio-economics, community capacity, health behaviours, and person-related factors; health programs; health promotion and intervention; health services to individuals; inter-sectoral services; community services; and youth services.

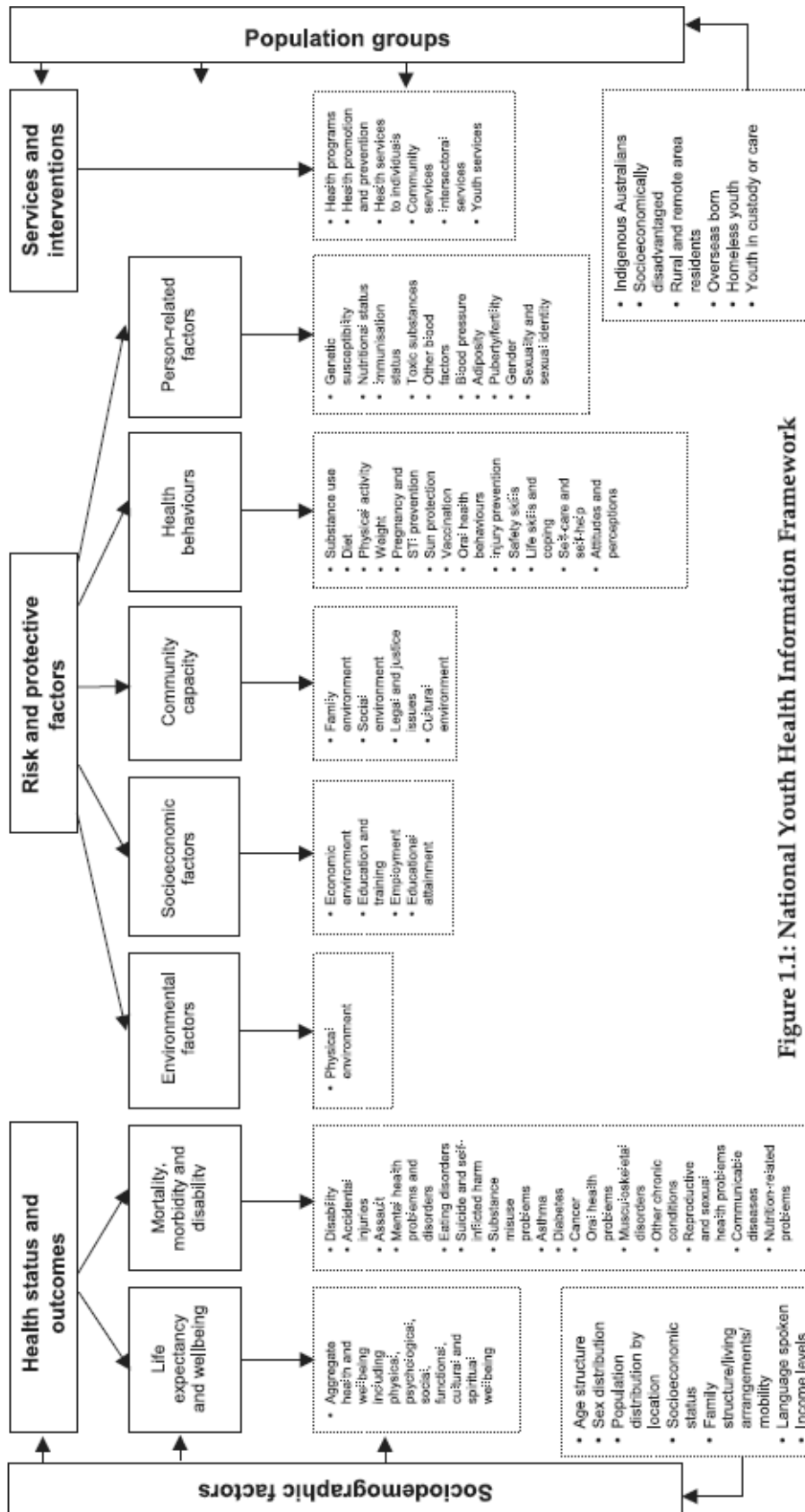


Figure 1.1: National Youth Health Information Framework

Source: Australia's Young People—their health and wellbeing, 2003 (AIHW cat. no. PHE 50)

### 3.2.4. Frameworks of relevance to both children and youth

- Education and Training Statistics<sup>16</sup>

Statistics on education and training have traditionally been organised according to sector, e.g. school, vocational education and training, and higher education.

However, there is an increasing need to address questions that involve more than one sector. The ABS has developed a framework for education and training statistics<sup>16</sup>, which encompasses seven key elements:

- Context: representing the wider decision making environment and the way elements of the framework interact with each other;
- Participants: those who are undertaking learning activities;
- Non-participants: those who are not undertaking learning activities;
- Providers: organisations, and in some cases individuals, which deliver learning activities;
- Resources: the financial, human and physical resources which may be necessary for learning to occur;
- Activities: learning activities and other activities of educational institutions, as well as the activities of non-participants; and
- Outputs and outcomes: the results and/or effects of learning activities.

These seven elements are cross-classified by three levels within the framework. The levels refer to individuals, organisations and systems.

|        |                | Elements   |  |  |  |  |  |   |  |   |
|--------|----------------|--|--|--|--|--|--|---|--|---|
|        |                | Context  | Participants   | Non-participants   | Providers  | Resources  |  |   | Activities   | Outputs & Outcomes  |
|        |                |  |  |  |  | Financial  | Human  | Physical  |  |   |
| Levels | Individual     | Factors which may influence an individual's participation in learning activities           | Number and characteristics of students and learners  | Number and characteristics of non-participants<br>Barriers to participation                        | Number and characteristics of self-employed teachers and trainers                                      | Expenditure relating to learning activities<br>Income and financial support  | Number and characteristics of all teachers and trainers                  | Measures of individuals' use of and access to learning facilities and equipment | Characteristics of learning activities undertaken by individuals                 | Measures of the results and effects of learning activities (or lack of them) related to individuals |
|        | Organisational | Factors which may influence an organisation's provision of education and training services | Number and characteristics of organisations consuming external education and training services | Number and characteristics of organisations not consuming external education and training services | Number and characteristics of organisations providing or not providing education and training services | Measures of sources and uses of funds  | Measures relating to teachers and trainers in organisations              | Measures relating to the stock of learning facilities and equipment             | Characteristics of learning activities provided and/or consumed by organisations | Measures of the results and effects of learning activities (or lack of them) on organisations       |
|        | Systemic       | Strategic measures relating to factors which may influence education and training          | Strategic measures relating to participation   | Strategic measures relating to non-participation   | Strategic measures relating to the provision or non-provision of education and training                | Strategic measures relating to financial resources in education and training | Strategic measures relating to human resources in education and training | Strategic measures relating to physical resources in education and training     | Strategic measures relating to learning activities                               | Strategic measures relating to results and effects (or lack of them) of learning activities         |

Source: Measuring Learning in Australia, A Framework for Education and Training Statistics, Australia, 2003 (ABS cat. no. 4213.0)

- Trends in the Wellbeing of America's Children and Youth, 2000<sup>17</sup>

This project reports on over 80 indicators of wellbeing bringing together data from a range of sources. While there is no formal conceptual framework, the breadth of the indicators suggests an ecological based approach with an emphasis on child development. Five domains are identified:

- o Population, family and neighbourhood
- o Economic security (employment, income, financial support, consumption)
- o Health conditions and health care (mortality, health conditions, health care)
- o Social development, behavioural health (physical health, safety, substance abuse) and teenage fertility
- o Education and achievement (literacy, participation, attainment)

### 3.3. Relationships between frameworks

Of the frameworks presented here, most have some commonality and degree of overlap. Differences between them relate to the differing uses to which each specific framework has been put. In that sense there is no one correct framework. Ideally, frameworks can interlock and retain compatibility, with each adding extra dimensions according to the specific subjects they were created to address.

The frameworks also encompass a number of cross-cutting themes. The theme of participation (social, economic, and civic) is particularly important. Children and youth are influenced by their participation in a variety of settings, including education and work and through their interactions with their environment. Furthermore, the life outcomes children and youth experience are also shaped by the environments in which they live and the social and economic factors to which they are exposed. The frameworks aim to draw together such elements to allow the statistics to provide a fuller and more dynamic picture of children and youth in relation to their environments.

The frameworks generally focus around outcome indicators, but input indicators (particularly those related to service provision) are present. Some frameworks are obviously designed to specifically measure the performance of a system. The frameworks also demonstrate an interest in assessing 'early interventions', for children in particular. This is due to an emphasis in current policy on preventative measures particularly in terms of health, but also in terms of other aspects of children's lives that impact on their development, such as education and social participation.

Five of the eight frameworks reviewed are concerned with the health of children and youth generally, or aspects of it. As such, these health related frameworks focus around a core of indicators that measure health status, health risk and protection and health services. Some of these frameworks recognise the broader social context that health sits within and as such also encompass indicators that relate to areas such as socioeconomic status, social capital and the environment.

The *National Child Health Information Framework*<sup>7</sup> and the *National Youth Health Information Framework*<sup>15</sup>, both developed by the AIHW, are similar to each other. They are very much concerned with assessing population health status, risks and services. In comparison, the *Canadian Early Childhood Development Agreement*<sup>10</sup> has indicators on physical health and motor development which are quite narrowly focussed indicators, although health status and risk indicators are there, services are not represented. The European *Child Health Indicators of Life and Development*<sup>11</sup> also covers health status indicators and some risk factor and protective indicators, but not services.

The *Families First Framework*<sup>8</sup> covers far more than just health and is more akin to the *Early Childhood Development Agreement*<sup>10</sup> and the *Trends in the Wellbeing of America's Children and Youth*<sup>17</sup> report, in terms of scope. One can see the overlap in these and the ABS framework for measuring social wellbeing, in that various areas of social concern are often represented. Certainly the areas of health and education appear in these three and development is also a focus. The *ABS Framework for Education and Training Statistics*<sup>16</sup> is not specific to children or youth, although because of its scope it covers the children and youth population groups in the main. Like some of the other frameworks it is in part concerned with outcomes and measures not just participation and attainment aspects, but also covers resources which encompass financial, human and physical capital.

*Best Start*<sup>12</sup> and *Our Kids*<sup>14</sup> frameworks are based on an 'ecological' model of child development. This approach originates from Urie Bronfenbrenner. In this model, child development is seen as a process in which biological and other child characteristics interact reciprocally with the environment over the course of life, so children affect their environments as well as being influenced by them. The current *Growing up in Australia* study (the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children)<sup>18</sup> also uses the ecological framework approach, as does the Department of Family and Community Services report *Indicators of Social and Family Functioning*<sup>19</sup> released in May 2000.

## 4. Statistical standards

Differing statistical standards are used in Australia to define children and youth. For example, ABS often uses mutually exclusive age groups for children (0-14 year olds) and youth (15-24 year olds). The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare often refer to children as 0-14 years of age and youth as 12-24 year olds.<sup>15</sup> Administrative collections containing data on children and youth also define children and youth differently according to the purposes for which the collection was designed, e.g. the National Schools Statistics Collection includes all primary and secondary school children, while the Causes of Death Collection includes all child deaths.

Children are often defined by their age, but dependency (e.g. economic, physical, emotional, etc.) is an important consideration in determining someone's status as a child. Common age ranges chosen to represent the period of childhood are 0-11/12/14/18 years. These age ranges being based around education levels. In addition, subgroups of children are often chosen according to developmental milestones (e.g. 0-6 months, or 0-1/2/5/8 years). Sometimes age cut-offs indicating the end of childhood are concerned with the age at which children finish compulsory education and can legally enter full-time employment. There can also be varying start and end points to the age range chosen to represent youth. Sometimes the age ranges chosen to represent children and youth overlap. The age range at which youth ends often revolves around a person's participation in full-time education and is thus linked to the concept of economic dependency.

### 4.1. Current ABS standards

Apart from administrative by-product collections, such as those on births and deaths, the ABS collects the majority of the data it has on children from household surveys. To do so the ABS identifies relationships within the sampled households as well as age of the usual residents (and dependency) to provide information on children and on youth. Children are sometimes identified according to a parent-child relationship. The presence of a parent-child relationship is particularly important when collecting information from households with children. Much current policy is aimed at children in families and a definition based on the parent-child relationships within households is therefore of value.

While the ABS has no standard definition for youth, it does have a standard definition for a child which is used to identify children in family households. In the current family standards, children are identified by four factors: relationship status, age, full-time student status, and usual residence. The current definition of a child is—

A person of any age who is a natural, adopted, step or foster son or daughter of a couple or lone parent, usually resident in the same household. A child is also any individual under 15, usually resident in the household, who forms a parent-child relationship with another member in the household. This includes otherwise related children under 15 and unrelated children under 15. In order to

be classified as a child, the person can have no partner or child of his or her own usually resident in the household. There are three types of child included in the ABS Relationship in Household classification: child under 15; dependent student; non-dependent child.

The definition goes on to discuss the two types of child dependency relationships. One is the relationship between a related or unrelated child aged less than 15 years and a nominal parent with whom he or she usually lives. The other is the relationship between a natural, adopted, step or foster child who is 15-24 years old and attending a secondary or tertiary education institution full-time, and a nominal parent with whom she or he usually lives. The nominal parent must be over 15 years of age. This definition assumes that dependent children are not generally able to provide for themselves financially.

The ABS only measures economic dependency. In ABS standards, economic dependency is assumed to exist when an individual in a family household is likely to be unable to support himself or herself financially and is thus reliant upon another person in the household for the provision of his or her needs (meals, accommodation, other expenses).

Factors which indicate whether a person is likely to be able to provide for themselves financially include the following:

- o age (whether a person is aged over 15 years);
- o level of income;
- o labour force status (whether a person is employed and the number of hours per week they work;
- o life cycle stage (whether a person is partnered or has a child); and
- o involvement in non-remunerative activities such as full-time study.

In the ABS, the criteria considered when determining economic dependency for the purposes of identifying family types involving dependent children are age (any person under 15 years of age is regarded as dependent and any person aged over 24 years is regarded as non-dependent), life cycle stage (any person living with a partner or child of their own is regarded as non-dependent) and full-time student status (any full-time student aged 15-24 years living at home is regarded as dependent).

Those aged 15-24 years old and studying full-time, are assumed to be unable to support themselves financially, by virtue of their student status. Natural, adopted, step, and foster children can all be defined as dependent students. Children over the age of 15 years who are not studying full-time are classified as non-dependent children.



Thus, in ABS statistics, 'youth' denotes the period between early teens and mid-twenties, and is distinguished as the transitional phase between childhood and adulthood or between adolescence and adulthood. Persons in this age group (15-24 year olds) are 'dependent students' if they partake in full-time study, or 'non-dependent children' if they do not (as long as they satisfy the usual residence and relationship status criteria as well). The four current constraints in ABS standards (relationship status, age, full-time student status, and usual residence) act as the parameters to determine dependency.

In ABS output youth are often referred to as those aged 15-24 years. However, this is not an ABS standard as such and the age group chosen often reflects the data source (for example, the ABS General Social Survey only collects data for those aged 18 years and over) and issue under analysis.

## **4.2. International standards**

In terms of international policies and the statistical collections and standards of overseas statistical organisations, children and youth are defined in various ways. The following section highlights some of the definitional issues and articulated standards.

### 4.2.1. Legal definitions

The United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child<sup>20</sup> is a key international human rights treaty, adopted by the United Nations on 20 November 1989. Australia is one of 191 countries to have ratified the Convention (although at this stage its articles have not been enacted into Australian law). Article one of the convention states:

For the purposes of the present Convention, a child means every human being below the age of eighteen years unless, under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier.<sup>20</sup>

Such definitions of children based on age are common. They are often dictated by a country's laws relating to children and employment. Many countries, including Australia, use age 15 years because of this employment criterion and international agencies such as the International Labour Organisation<sup>21</sup> present statistics on international comparisons with the child/adult boundary set at age 15 years for the same reason.

The minimum age for employment statistics in the ABS is 15 years; the classification of employed, unemployed and not in the labour force are based on criteria not related to student status in any way. Furthermore, part-time employment (common among youth) is based on hours worked (usually or actually working less than 35 hours a week).

#### 4.2.2. Statistical standards

With regards to dependency there is no commonly accepted international standard for what constitutes a dependent child and therefore no real comparability between different countries' statistics on dependent children. Many countries, including the United States, also do not have an explicit definition of dependent children. Instead, they have definitions of 'child' which carry notions of dependency implicit within them. That is, their definition of a child ends where independence begins (reaching a specified age indicated by milestones such as the age at which someone is legally considered an adult in the country, leaving the parental home, marrying, having a child of their own, etc.). Under these definitions, anyone who is considered to be a child is also considered to be dependent. Meanwhile some countries, such as Italy and Switzerland, do not use an age limit when defining dependent children.

The United Kingdom's Office of National Statistics and Statistics New Zealand do have a specific definition of 'dependent child'. For example, in the UK, a dependent child is 'a person in a household aged 0-15 years (whether or not in a family) or a person aged 16-18 years who is a full-time student in a family with parent(s)'.<sup>22</sup> An adult in a household is defined 'as a person who is over 16 years'.<sup>23</sup> In New Zealand a child is 'a person of any age who usually resides with at least one person who is a parent (natural, step-, adopted, or foster) and who does not usually reside with a partner or child (or children) of his or her own'.<sup>24</sup> And a dependent child is further defined as 'a person who is aged under 18 years and who is not employed full-time'.

<sup>24</sup> Statistics New Zealand define children as under 14 years of age in the context of their Childcare survey<sup>25</sup>, while youth are considered to be between 12 to 25 years—representing a diverse range of people undergoing development.<sup>26</sup>

Statistics Canada use age to define children (0-14 years), but also relate children to a parent whether by birth, adoption, step parenting or fostering (guardianship). Youth are defined as 15 to 24 year olds.<sup>27</sup>

## **5. Measurement issues**

### **5.1. Collecting information directly from children and youth**

There are difficulties in terms of collecting statistical information from children and youth. Information gathered on household collection forms (including the Census of Population and Housing) is usually provided by adults and mostly parents. Information gathered on youth may also sometimes be provided by an adult on their behalf. Some collections deliberately exclude children and persons under 18 years of age because of the difficulties associated with gathering reliable information about them.

In addition, young people aged 15-24 years are typically one of the most mobile groups in the population and hence can be difficult to capture in household collections. Indeed the census has some difficulty obtaining information from younger people. In 2001 it was estimated that information was not gathered for around 2.5% of people aged 15-24 years.<sup>28</sup>

There are also issues surrounding the availability of data from administrative data sources covering children and youth. Privacy issues and confidentiality sometimes restrict the release of data from these sources. Administrative sources also often need to collect data on children via their parents or guardians, or sometimes with parental or guardian consent. In addition, although there is a vast array of quality State and Territory based administrative data, difficulties can arise when attempting to combine such data into a national picture. For example, data may be available for different age groups or collected at different points in time, or actual statistical measures and standards can differ according to the jurisdictional source.

### **5.2. Time series data on children and youth**

There are three different designs used in survey research: the cross-sectional design, the successive independent samples design and the longitudinal design. The cross-sectional design relates to a single point in time and describes either the characteristics of a single population, or the differences between two or more populations. In contrast, the successive independent samples design and the longitudinal design collect information over time, enabling changes in attitudes or opinions to be measured. Successive independent sample designs collect the same information from different population samples, while longitudinal designs survey the same respondents over time.

While successive independent samples designs do enable changes in populations over time to be studied, longitudinal designs are advantageous as they enable the direction and extent of change in an individual to be measured. Longitudinal designs also overcome the possibility that samples may not be comparable, which is a problem in successive independent samples designs. However, longitudinal designs may be influenced by the fact that people have completed the survey before and the sample may be affected by people dropping out of the survey (attrition bias).

While work is currently underway to expand the range and nature of data available on children and youth, most of the currently available data on children and youth are based on a cross-sectional design and relate to a single point in time. In terms of creating a picture of trends over time, surveys have been repeated (i.e. the successive independent samples design). This yields data on successive cohorts of children.

There has been increased interest in longitudinal surveys in recent years, despite their high cost and greater complexity. There is much interest in obtaining information on outcomes relating to children and youth using such surveys. Policy makers, researchers and others are interested in the outcomes of various childhood experiences for the child, and the child's consequential developmental path.

There have been a number of important children and youth focussed longitudinal surveys commissioned in recent times, including the *Growing Up in Australia* study (Longitudinal Study of Australian Children)<sup>29</sup>, the *Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children* (Footprints in Time study)<sup>30</sup>; and *Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth*.<sup>31</sup>

Over time, issues for children and youth change. New issues emerge and older issues may assume less priority. As the issues change, so do the concepts required to measure them. For example, the transition from education to work for youth is a long standing issue, but issues associated with broader social participation have received much more attention in recent times. Statistical surveys need to provide time series data on such issues and maintaining stable concepts can be difficult as the nature of the issue changes and ideas about how to best measure it develop.

## Appendix. Differences in legal ages for youth by State and Territory

|             | Age of Consent |             |             | Provisional driving licence | School leaving age | Legal age             |                               |                                |
|-------------|----------------|-------------|-------------|-----------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|
|             | M-F            | F-F         | M-M         |                             |                    | cannot be responsible | responsibility must be proved | can be charged as an adult (a) |
|             | (years)        |             |             |                             |                    |                       |                               |                                |
| <b>NSW</b>  | 16             | 16          | 16(b)       | 17                          | 15                 | 10                    | 10-14                         | 18 - "adult"                   |
| <b>Vic.</b> | 16             | 16          | 16          | 18                          | 15                 | 10                    | 10-14                         | 17 - "child"                   |
| <b>Qld.</b> | 16 or 18(c)    | 16 or 18(c) | 16 or 18(c) | 17                          | 16(d)              | 10                    | 10-14                         | 17 - "child"                   |
| <b>SA</b>   | 17             | 17          | 17          | 16 yr 6 mths                | 16                 | 10                    | 10-14                         | 18 - "youth"                   |
| <b>WA</b>   | 16(e)          | 16(e)       | 16(e)       | 17                          | 15                 | 10                    | 10-14                         | 18 - "young person"            |
| <b>Tas.</b> | 17             | 17          | 17          | 17                          | 16                 | 10                    | 10-14                         | 17 - "youth"                   |
| <b>NT</b>   | 16             | 16          | 18          | 16 yr 8 mths                | 15                 | 10                    | 10-14                         | 17 - "juvenile"                |
| <b>ACT</b>  | 16             | 16          | 16          | 17                          | 15                 | 10                    | 10-14                         | 18 - "young person"            |

(a) Terminology used to describe the people under the age where they can be charged as an adult.

(b) In May 2003 legislation was passed in NSW to reduce the age of male-male sex from 18 years to 16 years.

(c) Queensland law specifies an age of consent of 18 for anal sex (sodomy), 16 for all other sexual activities.

(d) Minimum school leaving age is 16 years or having completed year 10, whichever happens first.

(e) The *Acts Amendment (Lesbian And Gay Law Reform) Act 2002* came into effect on 21 September 2002 and has equalised the age of consent for most sexual activity in WA to 16.

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