FAMILY DIVERSIFICATION IN AUSTRALIA—THE INCREASING SHARE OF BLENDED AND STEP FAMILIES

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Non-traditional couple families with children appear to be becoming more widespread in Australia. These include families with step children and families that consist of both step children and the couple's natural children (blended families). Measuring the prevalence of these non-traditional families is difficult. However a new family-blending variable in the 2006 census gives us a more accurate picture than before.

INTRODUCTION

Australian families have undergone extensive change over the last century. Families are becoming smaller and family forms are becoming more diverse. Many factors have influenced changing household forms. Within families changing gender roles, social expectations and relationship patterns have resulted in major changes. We are experiencing what has been described as a 'mainstreaming of family forms that were once regarded as marginal'.[1]

The number of sole parent families has risen from 14 per cent of families with children under 15 in 1986 to 88 to 22 per cent in 2004 to 06.[2] The majority of these families are formed through relationship breakdown. Half of the 26,000 divorces in 2006 involved dependent children.[3] Breakdown of de facto partnerships, also an increasingly common family form,[4] adds considerably to the number of children affected.

Being a sole parent is often a transitional phase prior to forming a new relationship. As people re-partner following relationship breakdown, more complex family forms emerge. These may include children from one partner's or both partners' previous relationship(s), children born within the new relationship or a combination of child types. Families with natural children of both partners only are commonly referred to as 'intact families'. Those with step children only are 'step families', while those with both step and natural children are 'blended families'.

Estimates of the number of step and blended families have been available from previous censuses and from surveys. However for the 2006 census of population and housing additional coding was undertaken which was designed to better identify such families. This paper provides some background on previous estimates then outlines the way in which these family types were identified in the 2006 Census.

The paper examines the new family-blending variable available in the 2006 census. The count of step and blended families is disaggregated to provide previously unpublished figures of family-blending type by the sex of the step parent. The accuracy of both census counts and previous estimates is explored, highlighting strengths and weaknesses and exploring additional research opportunities available with the introduction of the new variable.

SURVEY DATA

When analysing complex family relationships, surveys have the advantage of being able to include interrelated questions that fully explore the nature of connections within a family. They have the scope to include both current circumstances and previous relationship history, and are able to focus in depth on an area of interest—in this case, family form. In addition, as relatively few people are included, many

surveys are conducted by an interviewer either by phone or face-to-face. This ensures greater consistency in the way responses are collected and coded.

However, few large surveys have included data on family blending. Most recent research has used data from the 1997 and 2003 surveys of family characteristics or waves of the Household Income and Labour Dynamics Australia (HILDA) survey.

The survey of family characteristics is conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). It is a household-based survey, conducted as a supplement to the monthly population survey (MPS), which includes around 30,000 private dwellings. The survey of family characteristics is completed by households in the sample with at least one child under the age of 18.[5]

HILDA is a longitudinal panel survey, conducted in annual waves by the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research, under contract from the Australian Government Department of Family, Community and Indigenous Services (FaCSIA). The initial wave in 2001 included 7,682 households, re-interviewed in subsequent waves.[6]

To produce estimates for Australia as a whole from a survey sample, a complex weighting process is undertaken. Total population counts known as benchmarks are used to calculate weights for particular groups. The weights are then applied to the survey data to produce national-level estimates. Finally, standard errors are calculated to account for the degree to which the sample selected in the survey may differ from the full population.

For the 2003 survey of family characteristics, the ABS used counts at the person and household level, by state, part-of-state and household composition as benchmarks.[7] In this case, benchmarks at the family level were not available. The estimated resident population (ERP)—itself an estimate, as the name indicates—was used to provide benchmark totals. At the time of survey processing, the ERP calculated from the 2001 census was not yet available, so a 2003 ERP projected forward from 1996 census data was used. Household composition types used for benchmarking did not include a family-blending type breakdown.

Clearly, the estimation process will affect the accuracy of estimates produced

Table 1: Survey estimates: couple families with children,[a] Australia, 2003

Group	Count of families		Children aged 0–17	
	Number	per cent	Number	per cent
Intact family	1,775,500	90.3	3,333,800	89.2
Step family	98,600	5.0	158,400	4.2
Blended family	78,100	4.0	224,400	6.0
Other family	14,900	0.8	21,500	0.6
Total couple families with children	1,967,000	100.0	3,738,200	100.0

Source: *Family Characteristics, Australia, June 2003*, catalogue no. 4442.0, ABS, Canberra, 2004.
Note: [a] Families with children aged 0–18 years.

for intact, step and blended families. In the case of the 2003 survey, the estimation process is far from ideal for producing accurate estimates of family-blending type.

Estimates from the survey of family characteristics are most commonly cited in Australian research into diverse family forms, and the 2003 estimates are shown in Table 1. The majority of couple families with children are intact (1,775,500 or 90 per cent). Step families comprise five per cent of all couple families with children, while blended families comprise four per cent. The remaining one per cent are couple families with children who do not have a parent–child relationship with either member of the couple. While step and blended families accounted for nine per cent of couple families with children under 18, they were home to over 382,000 children under 18, or over ten per cent of all children in couple families.

Many people are aware of the large number of sole-parent families in Australia—estimated at just over one in five families with children under 18 in the 2003 survey of family characteristics.

However, it is less commonly known that the same survey estimated that a further eight per cent of all families with children under 18 had a step parent. In total, the survey estimates that between a quarter and a third (28 per cent) of children are living in families that do not contain both natural parents of all children. This is an increase from the 26 per cent estimated in the 1997 survey of family characteristics.[8]

CENSUS DATA

The census, with almost complete coverage of Australia,[9] provides a strong base for analysis. However, due to the scale of the census it is self-reported and questions are not as in-depth or as focused as in a sample survey. With respondents completing their census form largely unassisted, respondent error is also an issue. Respondent error occurs when forms are unintentionally or wilfully filled in incorrectly, or insufficient information is provided. For family coding this is particularly problematic. Family relationships can be complex, and often do not fit within the standard definitions used on the census form.

Issues in coding family relationships

In the census, family relationships are coded according to each person's relationship to a family reference person. This is usually person 1 or person 2 on the census form, although another resident may be designated as the reference person if these are not suitable. The census form asks 'What is this person's relationship to person 1/person 2' both for people present and for people usually resident who are absent on census night. As the census codes family relationships using relationship to a single person, some family relationships may be lost depending on the order in which a householder has added residents to the form.

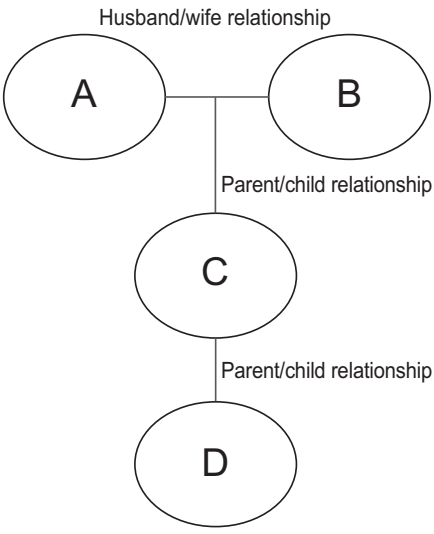
Consider the example in Figure 1. This household contains three generations, and how it is coded will depend on the order they were included on the form. If A and B were persons 1 and 2 on the census form, they will be recorded as a couple family. Their parent–child relationship with C will be identified through the 'relationship to person 1/person 2' question. However, the parent–child relationship between C and D may not be identified if they have responded that D's relationship to A and B is 'grandchild'. They would be coded as a couple family with a natural child and an 'other' child. Without further information, it would not be possible to determine whether D is the child of C, or C's niece/nephew.

If however, C was person one on the form, or if additional information had been written on the form to identify the second parent–child relationship, the household

would be coded as containing one couple family and one lone parent family, with the parent–child relationship between the families recorded in a separate 'relationship between families' variable.

A further issue with census family coding is that it is possible for a person to be legitimately included in the coding of more than one family. As a person is defined as a usual resident if they live in a household for 'six months or more', it is possible to spend six months in each of two households. This commonly occurs in the case of children with joint residency split between two separated or divorced natural parents. The child should only be counted once—they are only physically present in one place on census night—but they are factored into the coding of family composition for both families. In practice, both parents may list a child as physically present or a child may be listed as an absent usual resident when they spend less than six months of the year in a household, causing double counting and incorrect family coding.

Figure 1: Example of census family coding



It is difficult to determine how often such errors occur. Most census forms are automatically coded, with sample checking undertaken to ensure coding is correct. Census forms that are damaged, illegible or contain multi-mark responses are reviewed manually by ABS officers, and coded as correctly as can be ascertained. In families with step children, this may include reference to information such as a child's surname to clarify relationships. While the ABS conducts a post-enumeration survey to determine levels of undercount, this is determined at a broad level and does not include undercount by family type.

Given the complexity of coding family relationships in a self-enumerated census, the census cannot be assumed to be a consistent and absolutely correct dataset. It essentially provides a self-identification definition of families. Provided the user is aware of these limitations the census provides a valuable source of family data. The coding of families, and particularly multi-generational families and families with step children, has been identified by the ABS as an area requiring further development for the 2011 census.

CENSUS DATA OVER TIME

Prior to 2006, census family coding did include absent people when coding family type. However, as the family-blending output was not standard, previous censuses did not consider the type of child absent. For example, a couple in which one partner and all children were absent on census night was coded as a 'couple family with children' in the variable 'FMTF Family Type', but it was not possible to determine whether it was an intact, step or blended family. Although the relationship of absent people to person one and person two was collected in earlier censuses, it was not retained beyond processing and standard coding as a variable for later use.

However, it was possible to create a customised count of intact, step and blended families defined according to the type of children present on census night. The ABS has produced some data of this type for earlier census years,[10] and Table 2 shows the percentage changes in these figures observed from 1996 to 2006. Prior to 1996, census data including child type were only available for primary families, and the figures are therefore not comparable. Nonetheless, the census data indicate that the numbers of step and blended families are increasing at a much faster rate than are numbers of intact families. Between 1996 and 2006, the number of intact families grew by one per cent, compared with a 13 per cent increase in step families and a 17 per cent increase in blended families.

With the introduction of the ABS survey of families in Australia in 1992, the HILDA survey in 2001 and the later surveys of family characteristics in 1997 and 2003, census data ceased to be the primary data source relating to diverse family forms. The ability to factor absent children into family coding is important for families with step children. In the case of a non-resident parent (formerly termed 'non-custodial' parent) or joint residency between parents, these children are more likely to be absent from a household on any given night. Therefore counts based only on children present are likely to under-estimate the number of step and blended families. Absent children could be taken into account in the family surveys but, until 2006, could not in census data.

THE NEW FAMILY BLENDING VARIABLE

The 2006 census standard variable—'FBLF Family Blending'—classifies couple families according to parent–child relationships, using both those residents who are present and those usually resident but absent on census night, and including the type of child absent.

Using the example given previously, a couple family where one partner and all the children are absent on census night could now be classified as an intact, step or blended couple family rather than just as a couple family with children. Again, the relationship type for absent people is not retained beyond the processing and coding of census forms, but it is integrated into the coding of the family blending type variable. The three family types of interest (intact, step and blended families) are defined in Figure 2.

The standard output (Figure 3) enumerates (1): intact families with no other children present; (2) step families with no other children present; and (3): blended families with no other children present. In addition there are four categories where other children are present in intact, step, blended and other couple families. In total, these families with other children present comprise less than one per cent of couple families with children.[11] At the national level the standard output for families with

Table 2: Increase in families by type, Australia, 1996 to 2006

Group	1996	2006	per cent increase
Intact families	2,035,147	2,059,253	1.2
Step families	130,402	147,123	12.8
Blended families	74,579	87,331	17.1

Sources: Unpublished data from the 1996 and 2006 censuses of population and housing, ABS, Canberra, 2007; author's calculations.

other children contains relatively low values, particularly for step and blended families. Consequently, in standard output for smaller areas, cell counts for the family-blending variable are often unavailable or adjusted to protect respondents' privacy.

ALTERNATE OUTPUT CATEGORIES

An alternative to the standard output is to group families with reference to the sex of step parents. Data from surveys such as HILDA are available grouping families with step children according to whether the family contains a step mother, a step father or both in addition to whether they are step or blended families. This allows analysis of which natural parent step children are living with, and which couples choose to have additional children in a new partnership. As well as providing a valuable basis for analysis, output based on the sex of the step parent also provides more robust data at lower geographic levels. Such a breakdown of step and blended families would be a valuable addition to the census data. Disaggregating the family-blending variable to provide such an alternate output is possible. The family-blending variable has

Figure 2: Census definition of family-blending types

Intact families
Couple families containing at least one child who is the natural or adopted child of both partners in the couple, and no child who is the step child of either partner in the couple. Intact families may also include other children who are not the natural children of either partner in the couple, such as foster children and grandchildren being raised by their grandparents.

Step families
Couple families containing one or more children, at least one of whom is the step child of one of the partners in the couple, and none of whom is the natural or adopted child of both members of the couple. Step families may also include other children who are not the natural children of either partner in the couple.

Blended families
Couple families containing two or more children, of whom at least one is the natural or adopted child of both members of the couple, and at least one is the step child of either partner in the couple. Blended families may also include other children who are not the natural children of either partner in the couple.

Source: *Census Dictionary, Australia, 2006*, catalogue no. 2901.0, ABS, Canberra, 2006

Figure 3: Family-blending standard census output categories

FBLF Family Blending

Applicable to: Couple families with children

1. Intact family with no other children present
2. Step family with no other children present
3. Blended family with no other children present
4. Intact family with other children present
5. Step family with other children present
6. Blended family with other children present
7. Other couple family with other children only
8. Not applicable

Total number of categories: 8

Source: *Census Dictionary, Australia, 2006*, catalogue no. 2901.0, ABS, Canberra, 2006
Note: Not applicable (8) category comprises one parent families, other families, non-family/ Non-classifiable households and unoccupied private dwellings

been created using the relationship-in-household variable and the non-release relationship-of-absent-person variables. For all of these, step child consists of two categories—step child of male parent and step child of female parent. Although the variables for absent people are not retained for separate release or to build new customised data requests, manipulation of the existing family-blending variable can produce an alternate output that includes the sex of the step parent and does not compromise respondents' confidentiality.

Table 3 presents the results of such manipulation of the family-blending variable, undertaken by the author at the ABS. The presence of other children has not been differentiated in the categories. Although disagreggation that combines both the standard census output and the categories in Table 2 is theoretically possible, it produces figures that are too small to publish for the more unusual family types. This problem would be compounded in analysis of smaller areas or population groups. The alternate output variable is held by the ABS and the data are available by request.

The 2006 census counts indicate that the majority (2.1 million or 89 per cent) of couple families with children are intact families. Step families comprise seven per cent of all couple families with children, while blended families comprise four per cent. The majority of families with step children have a step father present (78 per cent), indicating that children who do not live with both natural parents are more

Table 3: Census counts:[a] couple families with children, Australia, 2006

Group	Sub-group	Count of families		Children aged 0–17[b]	
		Number	per cent	Number	per cent
Intact family	Natural parents	2,100,622	88.9	3,100,327	88.1
Step family	Step father	109,858	4.6	111,118	3.2
	Step mother	37,238	1.6	34,269	1.0
	Step father and step mother	10,652	0.5	23,645	0.7
	Total step families	157,748	6.7	169,032	4.8
Blended family	Step father	74,483	3.2	188,348	5.4
	Step mother	16,916	0.7	38,374	1.1
	Step father and step mother	2,749	0.1	10,013	0.3
	Total blended families	94,148	4.0	236,735	6.7
Other family	No natural parent	10,062	0.4	14,319	0.4
Total couple families with children	All parent types	2,362,580	100.0	3,520,413	100.0

Sources: Unpublished data from the 2006 census of population and housing, ABS, Canberra, 2007; author's calculations.

Notes: [a] Figures differ slightly from published data due to confidentiality adjustments applied to census data.
[b] Children under 15, dependent students and non-dependent children present on census night. Includes dependent children only for 'other family with children'.

likely to live with their mother.

Step and blended families account for almost 11 per cent of couple families with dependent children. However, they are home to a larger proportion of all children who are aged under 18 and living in couple families—over 405,000 or 12 per cent. Using the family-blending variable in combination with the count of dependent children in sole-parent families, the census counted over 1.2 million children living in families that do not contain both natural parents of all the children—or 29 per cent of children under 18.[12]

COMPARING FIGURES

Previous and current census figures

Table 4 compares the number of intact, step and blended families counted in the 2006 census using both the new family-blending variable and the previously available method. The relationship-in-household variable was used to count children present in couple families by type. Counts were created for natural children, step children and other children present on census night. These were used to classify families according to the census definitions of family-blending type (see Figure 2) to create previous-count-method data. Previous-count-method data, based on those children who were present on census night, can be compared to the family-blending variable data, based on both children present and absent. By doing this for one census year, it is possible to determine the extent of the undercount produced when absent children are not included in the coding of family type.

Although all family types were undercounted by the previous count method, the undercount was considerably higher for step (seven per cent) and blended families (eight per cent) than for intact families (two per cent) (Table 4). As step children are likely to have regular contact with a non-resident parent, or to have joint residency with both their natural parents, a higher proportion of these children are absent from families on any given night. Further analysis by sex of step parent showed that the undercount was largest where the step children were the natural children of the male partner, at 10 per cent for step families with a step mother and 18 per cent for blended families with a step mother.

As Table 4 does not include all family types, overall changes are not visible. However, overall changes were calculated from the full dataset. In total, 55,380 families were added to the count of couples with children using the family-blending variable. These were families with all children absent on census night. In the 'FMCF Family Composition' variable (which replaces 'FMTF Family Type' used in previous censuses), these families were coded as couple families with children but it was not possible to determine their family-blending type without reference to the type of children absent.

A further 10,439 families changed their

Table 4: Count of families by type and count method, Australia, 2006

Group	Previous count method	New count method	Per cent difference
Intact families	2,059,253	2,100,620	2.0
Step families	147,123	157,747	7.2
Blended families	87,331	94,149	7.8

Sources: Unpublished data from the 2006 census of population and housing, ABS, Canberra, 2007; 2006 *Community Profile Series*, catalogue no. 2001.0, ABS, Canberra, 2007; author's calculations.

family-blending category once the type of absent children was included. Over 40 per cent (4,365) of these movements occurred where the children of the male partner were absent. This is significant given that families with a step mother represent only 27 per cent of all step and blended families.

Although the census household form asks for information about absent people who live for six months or more in the household, there is no certainty that respondents have read, understood or chosen to follow these instructions. Child residency is a sensitive issue, and parents may record a child as a usual resident when the child does not meet this definition. In these cases, the census will include the child in the family whereas a survey interviewer may not. It is possible that the census count of step-mother families has been inflated by fathers with regular contact who consider their child to be a family member, but who do not meet the formal residence definition. This would explain why the undercount is particularly large for step-mother families, as the proportion of children absent will increase as the proportion of time that they are in that household declines.

Survey and census data

In terms of absolute numbers, survey of family characteristics estimates are lower for intact, step and blended families in comparison to census figures. Over 75,000 more step and blended families were counted in the census, and over 325,000 more intact families (Table 5). This difference is much larger than would be expected over a three-year period. Survey of family characteristics estimates are 15 per cent lower than census counts of intact families, 37 per cent lower for step and 17 per cent lower for blended families. As census figures show a minimal increase in intact families over the ten years to 2006, and increases of 13 and 17 per cent respectively for step and blended families, much of the difference must be due to methodology rather than to actual growth between 2003 and 2006.

However, despite previously discussed issues and differences in years of collection, Figure 4 shows that the proportional split between family types was similar across all major collections examined. The proportion of intact families is lower in the census counts (89 per cent compared with 90 per cent in both surveys). The proportion of step families is higher (seven per cent in the census compared with six per cent in HILDA and five per cent in SFC), while the proportion of blended families was consistent across all three collections (four per cent).

Table 5: Comparison of selected survey and census figures

Group	Census 2006[a]	SFC 2003	Difference	
			Number	per cent
Intact families	2,100,620	1,775,500	-325,120	-15
Step families	157,747	98,600	-59,147	-37
Blended families	94,149	78,100	-16,049	-17

Sources: *2006 Community Profile Series*, catalogue no. 2001.0, ABS, Canberra, 2007; *Family Characteristics, Australia, June 2003*, catalogue no. 4442.0, ABS, Canberra, 2004; author's calculations.

CONCLUSION

The current size and growth of step and blended families in Australia has received little comment; it is regarded by some as of interest only to a limited audience and concerning only a small proportion of families. However, these families, number

more than a quarter of a million and form a significant group. Furthermore, with growth rates well above those of intact families, step and blended families are likely to become a prominent feature of Australia's social landscape in the future.

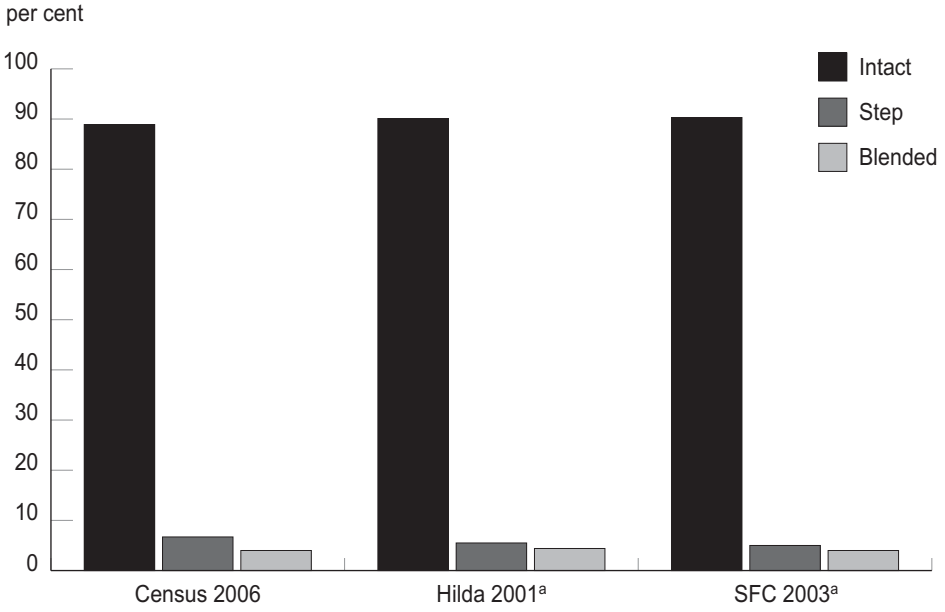
Of particular interest are the children living within these families. Some of the issues they face are similar to those of children in lone-parent households, such as coping with separation, possible financial hardship and the developmental consequences of emotional trauma. Taken in combination with children of lone-parent families, step and blended families increase the share of children without both natural parents present from around one in five to between one in four and one in three.

However, there are also additional issues relevant to children and partners in step and blended families. Particularly, the definition of roles within these families is vital in understanding family functioning, and ensuring positive outcomes for all.

With a robust family-blending variable available for the 2006 census, it is now possible to expand on existing research, particularly to explore regional variations in family patterns. Families from smaller population groups, such as Indigenous or ethnic groups, could also be studied using census data.

One smaller group with particular research potential is step-mother families. While the absolute numbers are relatively low in comparison to step-father families, almost 140,000 families in Australia

Figure 4: Family-blending type as a per cent of couples with children



Sources: Unpublished data from the 2006 census of population and housing, ABS, Canberra, 2007; *Family Characteristics, Australia*, June 2003, catalogue no. 4442.0, ABS, Canberra, 2004; D de Vaus, *Diversity and Change in Australian Families*, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne, 2004 [60]; author's calculations.

Notes: [a] Calculated for couple families with children under 18 years.

contain a step mother. As it becomes more common for fathers to take an active role in raising children following divorce or separation, this group is likely to grow substantially. It is therefore important in any discussion about step and blended families to take care not to marginalise or exclude the experiences and needs of these families, which may be very different from those of step-father or lone-parent families.

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