

18. Family environment

Young people in Australia live in a diverse range of family types and environments. Some live at home with parents, some live independently – either with friends or alone – some live with a partner, and others may have their own children and live either in a couple relationship or as a sole parent. The way young people progress through life stages has changed over the past 30 years. Young people are remaining in education for longer, achieving economic independence at a later stage in their life, and thus remaining in the parental home for longer periods of time. Consequently, in 2001, the majority of young people aged 15–24 years (62%) lived at home with their parent/s. This chapter focuses mainly on the family environments of young people still living at home. Data are generally available only for those aged less than 18 years, although some data are presented on the living arrangements of the overall population aged 15–24 years.

The family setting in which a young person has been and is living is the most important determinant of how well they will pass through the transition between childhood and adulthood. During the last 30 years, family circumstances have changed markedly (Weston et al. 2001; Gregory 1999). Some of the more notable changes include declining fertility rates, an increasing number of individuals living alone, decreasing marriage rates and increasing divorce rates, increasing cohabitation rates, increasing numbers of one-parent families, and increasing labour force participation by women of child-bearing age.

Changes in the prevalence of different family types are associated with social and economic changes. For example, delayed child-bearing and reduced fertility have led to an increase in the number of couple families without children, and an increase in divorce and remarriage rates has led to an increase in the number of one-parent, step and blended families. The ABS predicts that single-parent families will increase by between 30% and 60% over the next 20 years. Much of the increase in one-parent families is the outcome of marriage breakdown, separation and divorce. The increasing separation and divorce rate has a number of serious implications for young people in Australia.

It has been known for some time that children have difficulty in adjusting to the break-up of their parents' relationships. As a result of family conflict, children and young people can show behavioural problems even before the final breakdown of the relationship. But research in the United Kingdom shows that children whose parents remarry following divorce are more likely to have serious problems than children whose parents do not remarry. For example, stepchildren are more likely than children living with a single divorced parent to leave school at age 16, to leave home and to marry by the age of 20. These occurrences are also more likely for children of single divorced parents than for children whose parents have not separated (Kiernan 1992). Of course, divorce or the breakdown of parental relationships does not necessarily mean that social or behavioural problems in affected young people will always arise. Fortunately, young people can adapt to new situations provided social support networks are available (Smart 2000).

Female headed one-parent families are likely to have significantly lower incomes than male-headed one-parent families or couple families, and this can have significant implications for child-rearing. Lone mothers are less likely to be employed than mothers in a couple family. Employed lone parents may have less time to spend with children. A low income can mean poor nutrition, inadequate health care, crowded housing, lack of cognitive stimulation at home, and an inability to meet teachers' expectations. It can also lead to low parental self-esteem, low parental aspirations and social isolation. Low-income couple families can also suffer from these problems, but

they can be exacerbated by one parent having to face them without the support of a partner (Wise 2003).

Young people with poor health and wellbeing outcomes are more likely to have experienced the greatest number of adverse conditions and events or risk factors, such as low socioeconomic status and poor family functioning. Multiple risk factors across a person's life have a cumulative effect, and adverse conditions in early childhood can place these children at risk then and later in life. Risk factors can often cluster in families and communities and these will influence vulnerability (Wise 2003).

This chapter presents information on the family environment of young people such as living arrangements, family type, marriage rates, divorce rates and family cohesion. In addition, information on young people who come to the attention of community services departments as in need of protection from abuse or harm is also presented. Research has shown that these people have multiple family risk factors.

Living arrangements

The relationships within the households of young people aged 15–24 years are shown in Table 18.1.

Table 18.1: Relationship in the households of young people aged 15–24 years, 2001

Category	Number	Per cent
Dependent full-time student (15–24 years)	876,047	35.7
Non-dependent child	642,191	26.2
Group household member	210,410	8.6
Partner in de facto marriage	166,629	6.8
Other related individual	120,051	4.9
Visitor (from within Australia)	109,810	4.5
Husband or wife in registered marriage	97,738	4.0
Lone person	89,324	3.6
Unrelated individual living in family household	61,845	2.5
Lone parent	40,364	1.6
Overseas visitors	38,356	1.6
Total	2,452,765	100.0

Source: ABS 2002a.

- In 2001, over one-third of young people aged 15–24 years living in a household were dependent full-time students (36%) and over one-quarter (26%) were non-dependent children (non-full-time student under the age of 25 years).
- A higher proportion of young people aged 15–24 years were partners in a de facto relationship (7%) than in a marriage (4%).

Family type

Family type can have an impact on young people's health and wellbeing. The family types for young people who live with their families are presented in Table 18.2.

Table 18.2: Distribution of Australian families by family type, 2001

Family type	Number	Per cent
Couple family with children	2,321,165	47.0
With children under 15, with and without non-dependent children ^(a)	1,331,514	27.0
With dependent students ^(b) (15–24 years), with and without non-dependent children	289,576	5.9
With children under 15 and dependent students (15–24 years), with and without non-dependent children	283,032	5.7
With non-dependent children	417,043	8.4
Couple family without children	1,764,167	35.7
One-parent family	762,632	15.4
With children under 15, with and without non-dependent children	378,301	7.7
With dependent students (15–24 years), with and without non-dependent children	90,272	1.8
With children under 15 and dependent students (15–24 years), with and without non-dependent children	61,396	1.2
With non-dependent children	232,663	4.7
Other family	88,864	1.8
Total	4,936,828	100

(a) Non-full-time student under the age of 25 years.

(b) Full-time student under the age of 25 years.

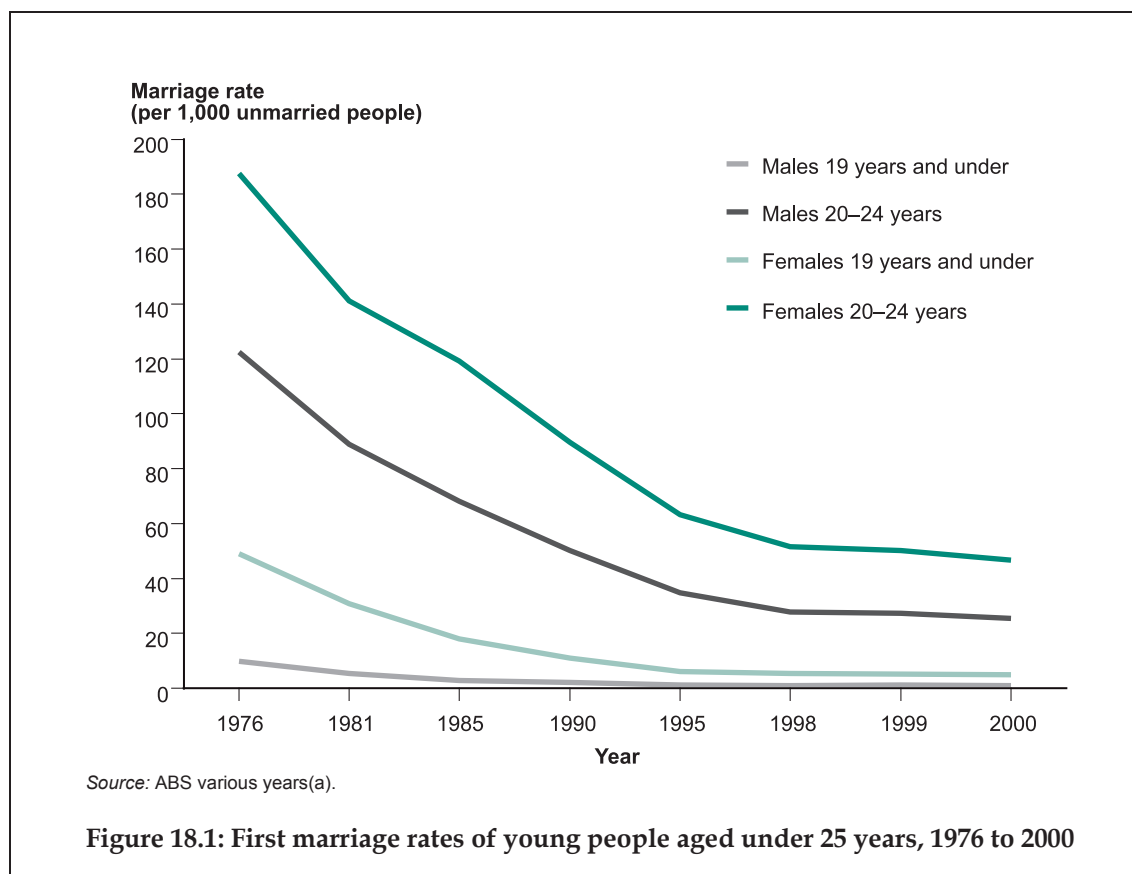
Source: ABS 2002a.

- At the 2001 Census, there were 4,936,828 families in Australia. The majority of those were couple families with children¹ (47%), followed by couple families without children (36%) and one-parent families (15%).
- Within couple families with children, the highest proportion were those with children under 15 with and without dependent students (27%). This was followed by families with non-dependent children (8%) and with dependent students aged 15–24 years with and without non-dependent children (6%).
- Of the 762,632 one-parent families, the majority were with children under 15 with and without non-dependent children (8%) and with non-dependent children (5%).

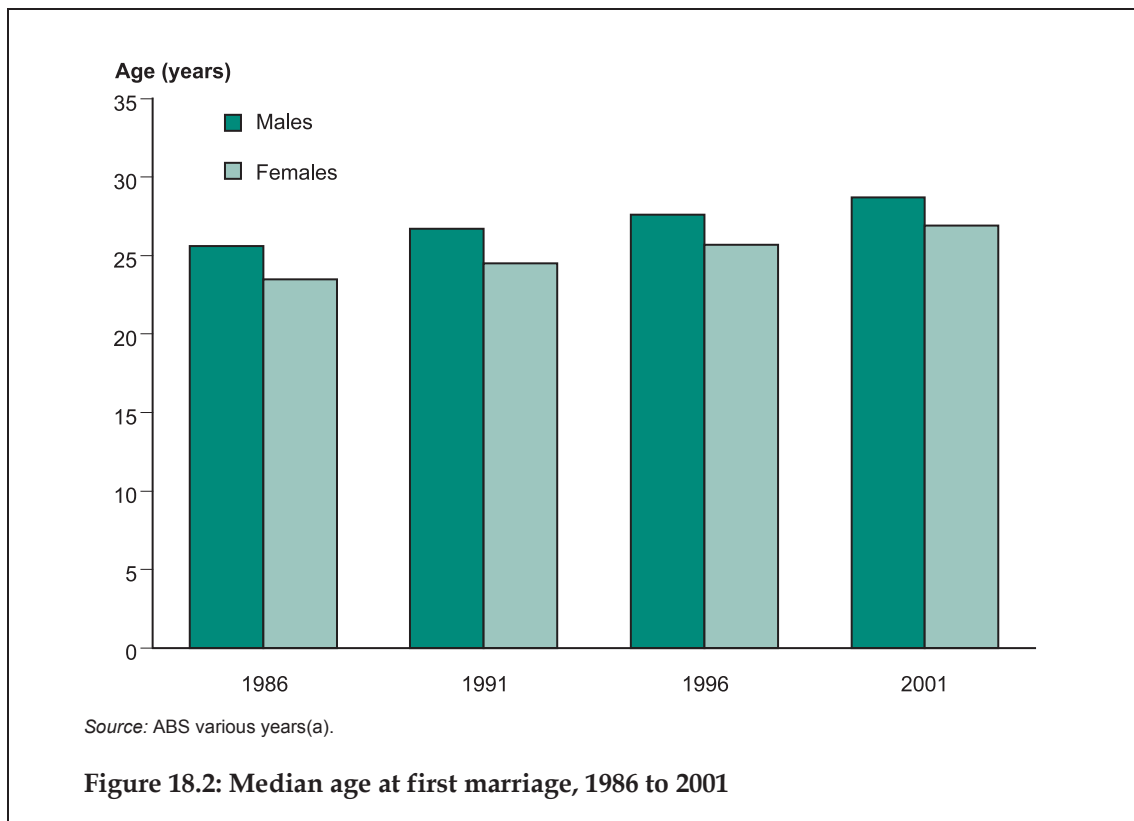
1. A couple family with children is a couple family who have children (regardless of the age of the children) usually resident in the family.

Youth and marriage

First marriage rates of young people aged under 25 years between 1976 and 2000 are shown in Figure 18.1.

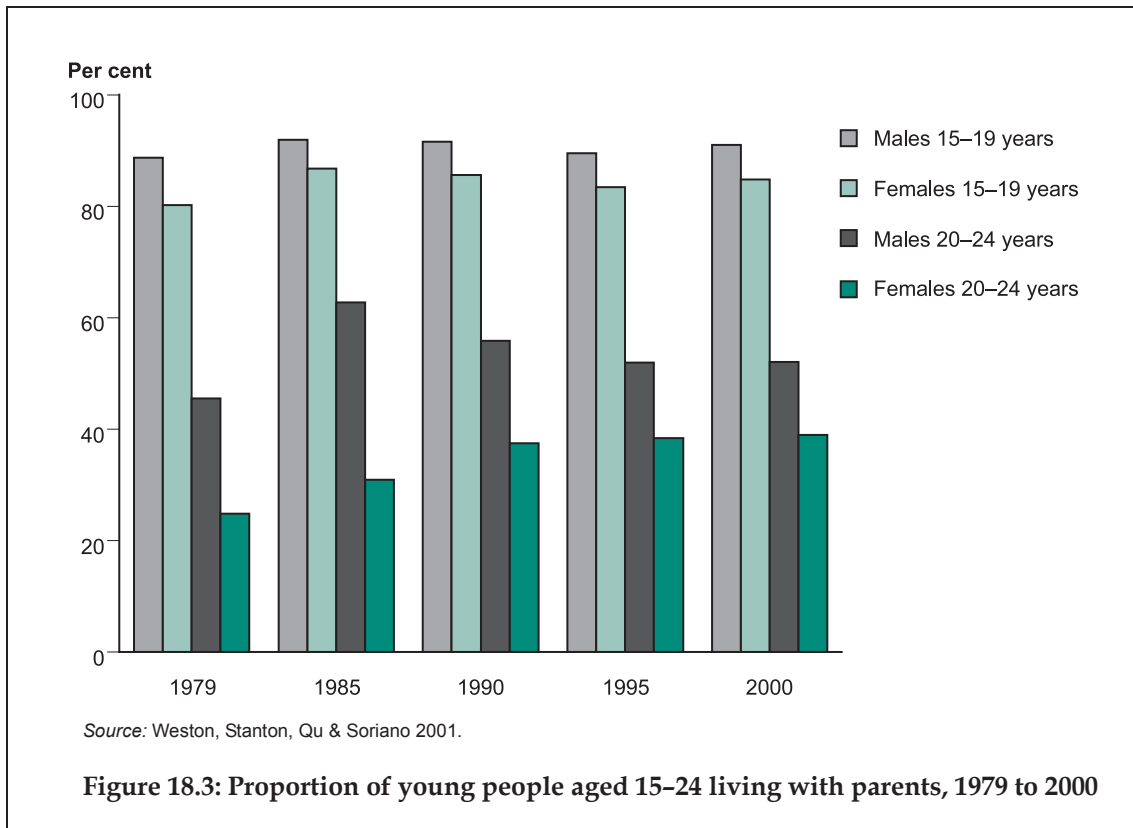


- Between 1976 and 2000, marriage rates declined for young people under 25 years for both males and females.
- In 2000, rates of first marriage per 1,000 unmarried people were less than 1.0 for males aged 19 years and under, 4.9 for females aged 19 years and under, 25.4 for males aged 20-24 years and 46.6 for females aged 20-24 years. Part of this decline can be attributed to an increase in the prevalence of de facto relationships among young people and the result of young people delaying the age at which they get married. This delay is illustrated by the increase in the median age at first marriage for people of all ages (Figure 18.2).



- Between 1986 and 2001, the median age at first marriage increased from 25.6 years to 28.7 years for males of all ages, and from 23.5 years to 26.9 years for females of all ages.

Another aspect of young people's changing family circumstances is an increasing tendency for young people to live in the family home for longer. In both 1981 and 2001, the majority of young people aged 15–19 years were living at home, but over the period the proportion of those aged 15–19 years and 20–24 living at home increased markedly. The proportion of young people living at home is shown in Figure 18.3.



- Between 1979 and 2000, the proportion of young people aged 15-19 years living with their parents was higher than those aged 20-24 years. More males than females were living with their parents, irrespective of age. For example, in 2000, 91% of males and 85% of females aged 15-19 years were living at home, compared with 52% and 39% for males and females aged 20-24 years, respectively.
- Over the period 1979 to 2000, the proportion of young males aged 15-19 years living with parents ranged between 89% and 92%, and the proportion of females aged 15-19 years ranged between 80% and 87%.
- A higher proportion of both males and females were living at home in 2000 than in 1979.

Many young people who left home had returned at least once. The percentage of young people aged 20-24 years who were living at home, had never left home, or had left home and returned at least once is shown in Table 18.3.

Table 18.3: Proportion of young people aged 20–24 years who had never left home, were living at home, or had left home and returned at least once, 1981 and 1998

	Males		Females	
	1981	1998	1981	1998
Those living at home when surveyed	54.8	64.8	37.5	53.5
Those who had never left home	35.2	35.1	24.2	35.9
Those who had left home but returned at least once	52.2	66.7	44.3	66.9

Source: Weston et al. 2001.

- In 1998, about two-thirds of young people aged 20–24 years who had left home had returned at least once – 67% of both males and females. The proportion increased from 1981, when 52% of males and 44% of females who had left home returned at least once.
- The proportion of young males who had never left home remained constant between 1981 and 1998, but the proportion for females increased from 24% to 36%.

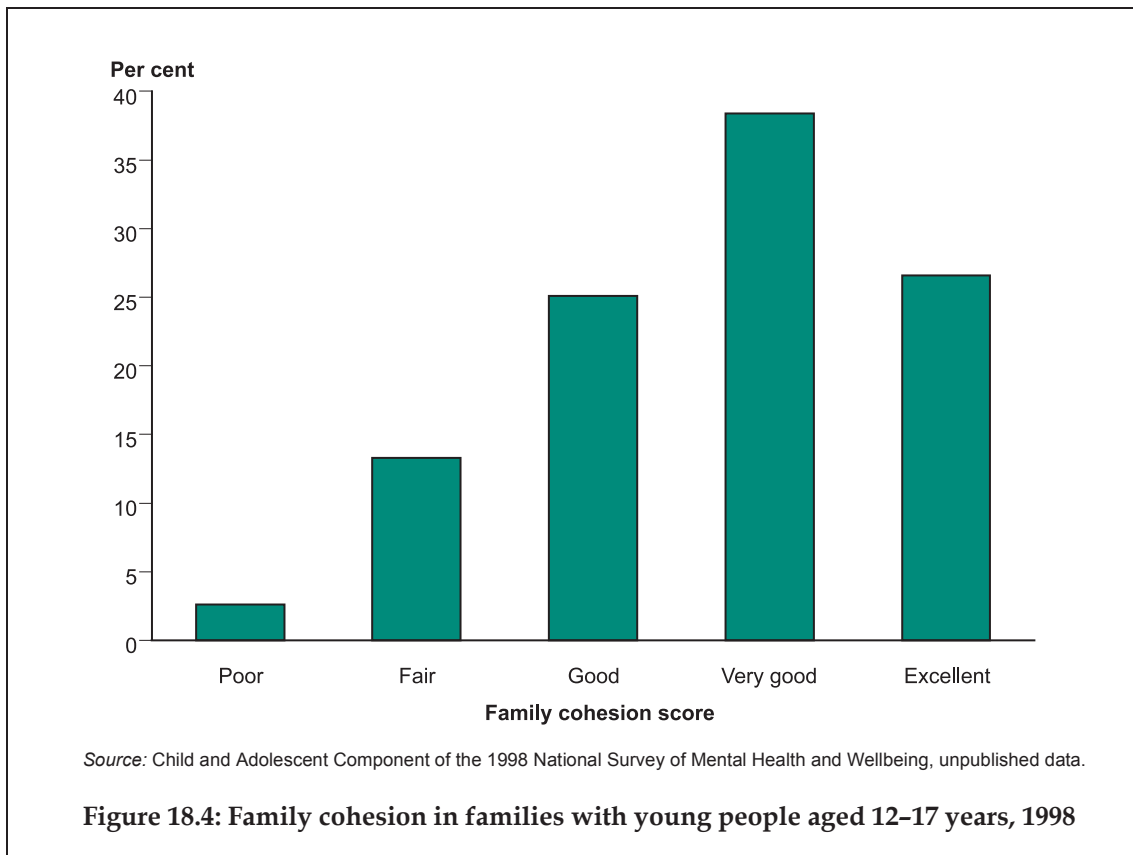
Family functioning

Family functioning has an important effect on the health and wellbeing of young people (AIHW: Al-Yaman et al. 2002). Silburn et al. (1996) defined family functioning as ‘achieving some degree of acceptance of each individual reaching consensus on decisions, communicating feelings and solving day-to-day problems’. The following section examines two aspects of family functioning that can affect young people: family cohesion and divorce. The data presented are for families with children aged 12–17 years.

Family cohesion

The 1998 Child and Adolescent Component of the National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing examined the relationship between the level of family cohesion, and the mental health of children aged 4–17 years (Sawyer et al. 2000). The survey measured family cohesion by asking parents with a child aged 4–17 years about their family’s ability to ‘get on with one another’. Families with difficulty getting on with one another were characterised as follows – ‘They do not always agree and they may get angry’. The ability of families to get on was rated on a five-point scale, from ‘poor’ to ‘excellent’.

Data for families with young people aged 12-17 years are presented in Figure 18.4.



- In 1998, 16% of young people aged 12-17 years reported that their family's ability to 'get along' was 'poor' (3%) or 'fair' (13%).
- Almost two-thirds (65%) of those aged 12-17 years rated their family's ability to get on as 'very good' (38%) or 'excellent' (27%).

Family cohesion (as reported by adolescents) by emotional and behavioural problems (as reported by parents) is shown in Table 18.4. The clinical cut-off reflects the level of emotional and behavioural problems typically experienced by young people with mental health problems and disorders.

Table 18.4: Family cohesion, by emotional and behavioural problems of young people aged 12–17 years, 1998

Family cohesion	Below the clinical cut-off	Above the clinical cut-off
Poor	1.8	8.7
Fair	11	26.9
Good	24.6	30.9
Very good	40.2	26.9
Excellent	22.4	6.7

Source: Child and Adolescent Component of the 1998 National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing, unpublished data.

- A higher proportion of young people aged 12–17 years with emotional and behavioural problems lived in less cohesive families – 36% of young people with emotional and behavioural problems lived in families with ‘poor’ or ‘fair’ family cohesion, compared with only 13% among those without emotional and behavioural problems.
- The relationship between family cohesion and young people’s emotional and behavioural problems may act in two ways: the poor degree of family cohesion may affect mental health of the young person, but also young people with emotional and behavioural problems are likely to affect family cohesion.

Divorce rates

Research in Australia, as overseas, has found that parental separation and divorce tend to have negative effects on children’s emotional and mental health in the short term. However, in the long term, the health of most (but not all) children is not seriously affected and they adjust to their changed family circumstances (Amato 1987, 1997). Studies suggest that, in the longer term, children’s emotional and mental health is affected more by the level of family conflict than by the divorce of their parents (Dunlop & Burns 1989). Parental separation and divorce can result in a considerable fall in income of female-headed lone-parent families. Behavioural difficulties are evident in children where a high level of family conflict, family violence or abuse and neglect occurs, and these children are also more likely to have problems as adults

Data on young people under the age of 18 whose parents divorce are presented in Table 18.5. Data are not available on the number of young people who experience the break-up of their parents’ de facto relationship. In 1997, 9% of couple families with children were living in de facto relationships (ABS 1998a).

Table 18.5: Young people under 18 years affected by divorce, 1991 to 2001

	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
Number	46,700	45,700	48,100	47,500	n.a.	52,500	51,700	51,600	53,400	49,600	53,400
Rate per 1,000 young people	10.2	10.0	10.5	10.1	n.a.	11.2	11.0	11.0	11.3	10.4	11.1

Source: ABS various years(a).

- From 1991 to 2001, the rate per 1,000 young people of those under the age of 18 whose parents divorced increased only slightly, from 10.2 to 11.1.

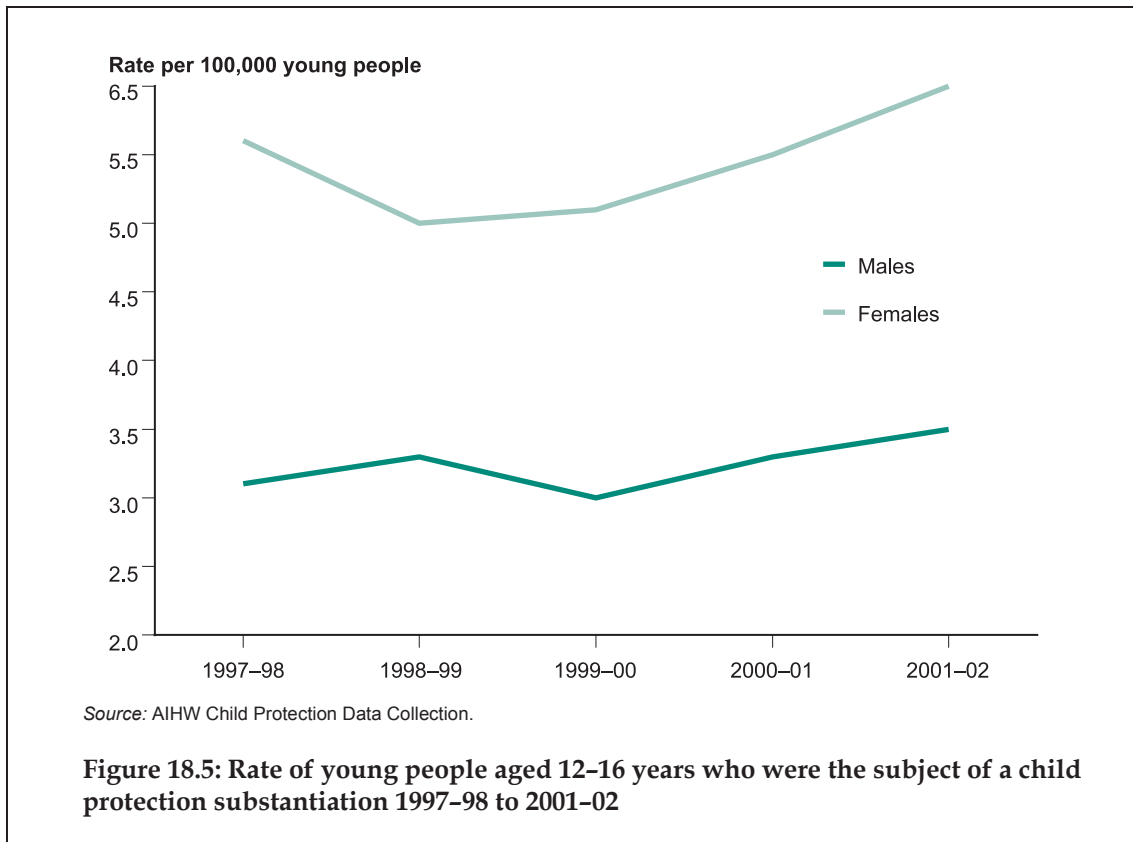
Young people in need of protection

Children and young people who are in need of protection include those who have been abused, neglected or otherwise harmed, and whose parents cannot provide adequate care and protection. Child abuse and neglect is associated with low socioeconomic status, family disruption, domestic violence and substance abuse (AIHW 2001a). Children and young people in need of protection are of concern to health professionals because of the profound negative impact abuse and neglect can have on their health and wellbeing.

The following section provides data on young people who were the subject of a child protection substantiation, who were in out-of-home care and who were on care and protection orders, which are indicators of the number of children and young people in need of protection.

Young people in substantiations

Child abuse, neglect or harm to a child is substantiated if, in the professional opinion of officers of the child protection authority, there is reasonable cause to believe that a child has been, is being or is likely to be abused or neglected or otherwise harmed (AIHW 2001a). The rate of young people aged 12–16 years who were the subject of a substantiation from 1997–98 to 2001–02 is shown in Figure 18.5.



- The number and rate of children aged 12-16 years who were the subject of a substantiation increased slightly from 5,699 (4.4 per 1,000) in 1997-98 to 6,419 (4.8 per 1,000) in 2001-02.
- Changes in the number and rate of young people in substantiations in the second half of the 1990s are partly due to changes in child protection policies in a number of states and territories. Policies were introduced that allowed for a substantial proportion of reports of concerns about children to be dealt with outside the formal child protection system.
- From 1997-98 to 2001-02, the rate for females who were the subject of a child protection substantiation was consistently higher than the rate for males. In 2001-02, 3,993 females aged 12-16 years (or 6.0 per 1,000 females in this age group) were the subject of a child protection substantiation compared with 2,415 males aged 12-16 years (or 3.5 per 1,000 males in this age group).

Young people on care and protection orders

Most young people and families who come into contact with child protection authorities through the substantiation process or through other avenues are helped by appropriate support services. Such services include parenting education, family mediation and counselling, and in-home family support. In situations where continued involvement with the family is required in order to protect a young person, the child protection authority may apply to the relevant court to have him or her admitted to a care and protection order.

Recourse to the court is generally a last resort and is used in situations where supervision and counselling are resisted by the family, where other avenues for resolution of the situation have been exhausted, or where removal of a young person into out-of-home care requires legal authorisation. Young people on care and protection orders are those for whom there are more serious concerns about their safety and wellbeing.

Care and protection orders provide the community services department with greater authority and responsibility for the young person. These orders include guardianship and custody orders, as well as supervision orders. The data on young people on care and protection orders show the total number of children on these orders at 30 June of each year.

Young people aged 12–17 years on care and protection orders from 30 June 1991 to 30 June 2002 are shown in Table 18.6.

Table 18.6: Young people aged 12–17 years on care and protection orders at 30 June 1991 to 30 June 2002

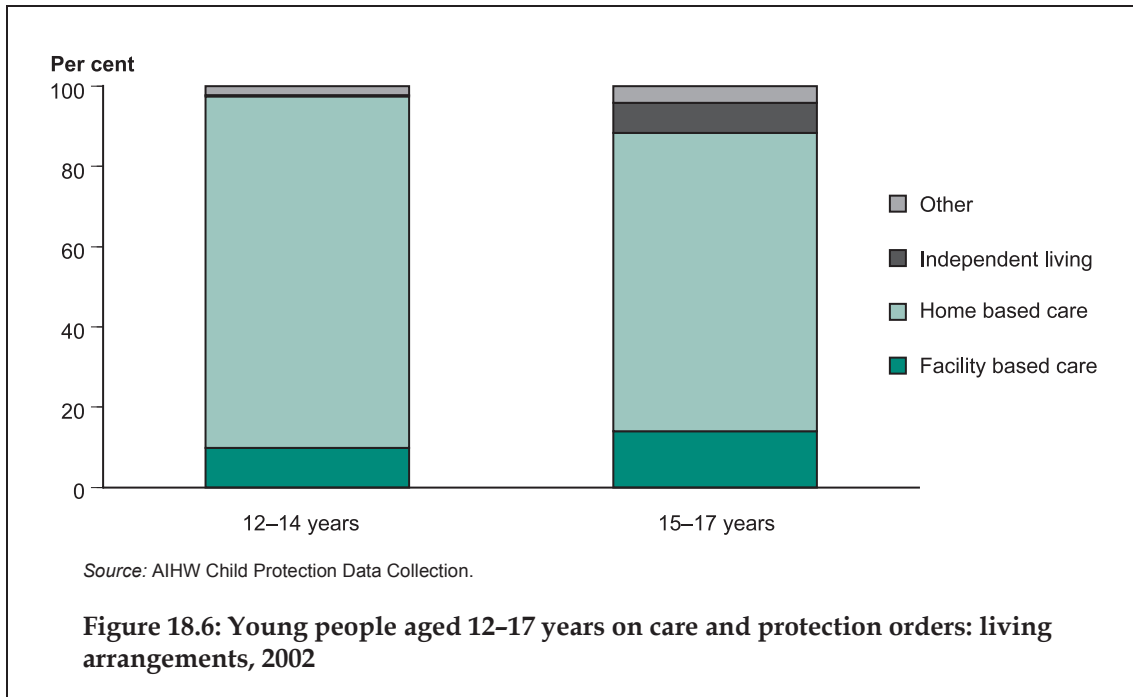
Age (years)		1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002
12–14	Number	2,760	2,673	2,600	2,699	2,819	2,862	3,395	3,370	3,378	3,469	3,638	3,847
	Rate	3.7	3.6	3.5	3.5	3.6	3.6	4.3	4.2	4.2	4.3	4.5	4.7
15–17	Number	2,951	2,646	2,678	2,675	2,642	2,699	3,013	3,167	3,013	3,688	3,446	3,458
	Rate	3.7	3.4	3.5	3.6	3.5	3.5	3.9	4.0	3.8	4.6	4.2	4.2

Note: The scope of the data collection for young people on care and protection orders was changed in 1997, so the data from 1997 onwards should not be compared with previous years.

Source: AIHW Child Protection Data Collection.

- From 1991 to 2002, the rate of young people aged 12–17 years on care and protection orders increased by 28% from 5,711 (3.7 per 1,000) to 7,305 (4.5 per 1,000).
- For those aged 12–14 years, the rate increased from 3.7 per 1,000 in 1991 to 4.7 per 1,000 in 2002. For those aged 15–17 years, the rate increased from 3.7 per 1,000 in 1991 to 4.1 per 1,000 in 2002.

Living arrangements of young people on care and protection orders



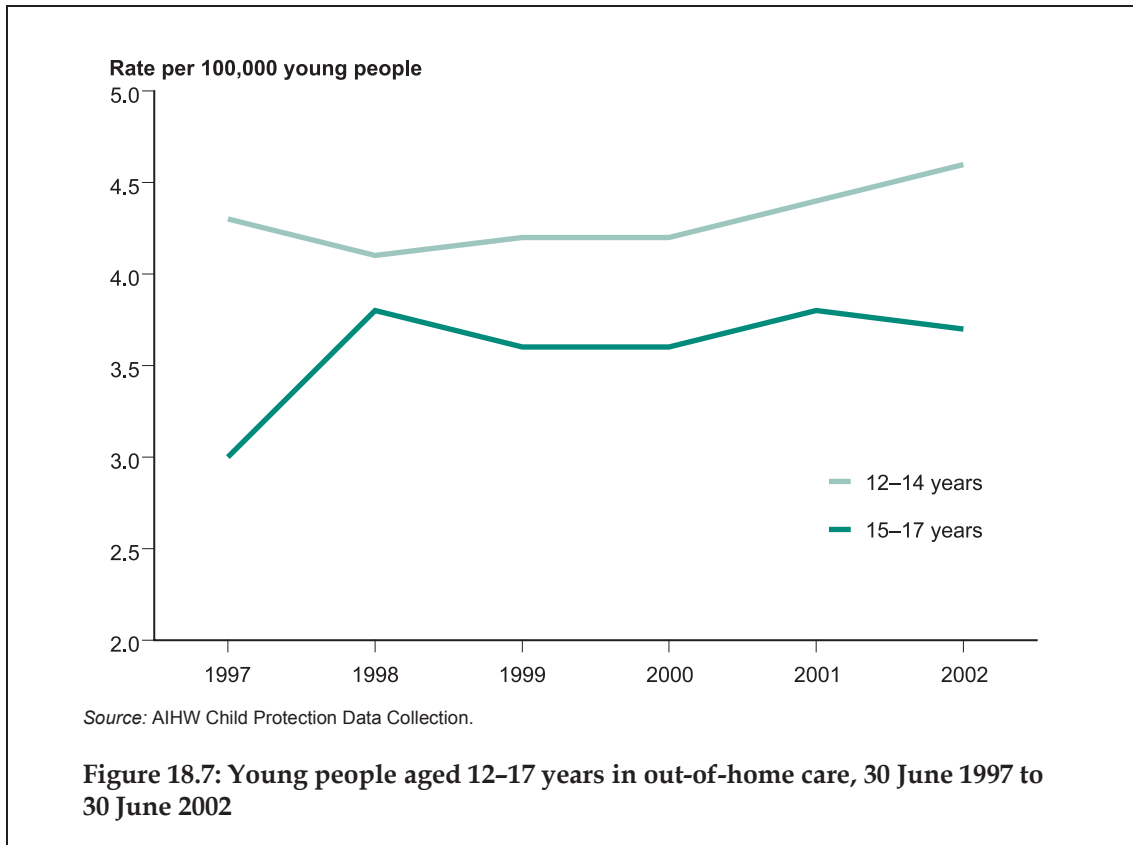
- The majority of young people aged 12-17 years on care and protection orders are living in home-based care: 88% of those aged 12-14 years and 74% of those aged 15-17 years. Home-based care includes parents, relative/kin and foster care.
- Of young people aged 12-17 years on care and protection orders, a higher proportion of those aged 15-17 years (14%) are living in facility-based care than those aged 12-14 years (10%).
- The proportion of young people aged 15-17 years living independently (8%) is considerably larger than the proportion of those aged 12-14 years living independently (0.2%).

Young people in out-of-home care

Out-of-home care is one of a range of services provided to young people who are in need of care and protection, and their families. This type of service assists and supports young people in a variety of care arrangements other than with their parents. These arrangements include foster care, placements with relatives or kin, and residential care. In most cases, children in out of home care will also be on a care and protection order of some kind.

Some young people are placed in out-of-home care because they are the subject of a child protection substantiation and require a more protective environment. Other situations include those where parents are incapable of providing adequate care, or where there is family conflict and time out is needed. There are no national data available, however, on the reasons that young people are placed in out-of-home care.

Young people aged 12–17 years in out-of-home care at 30 June in each year from 1997 to 2002 are shown in Figure 18.7.



- Between 1997 and 2002, the rate of young people aged 12–17 years in out-of-home care increased slightly. From 1997 to 2002, the rate per 1,000 young people aged 12–14 years increased from 4.3 to 4.6, and the rate per 1,000 for those aged 15–17 years increased from 3.0 to 3.7.
- The rate of young people in out-of-home care was consistently higher for young people aged 12–14 years than for those aged 15–17 years.