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# Riding the boundaries and bridging the divides: The Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS)

Presented by

**Professor Alan Hayes AM**  
Director, Australian Institute of Family Studies

at the

## **Workshop**

*Linking research and policy: Working at the boundary*

on Thursday 7 February 2013

conducted by the

**HC Coombs Policy Forum, Crawford School of Public Policy**  
**Australian National University**

Canberra  
7 February 2013

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with whom I am privileged to work.

The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and may not reflect the views of the Australian Institute of Family Studies or the Australian Government.



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# Overview of presentation

- A brief introduction to AIFS
- Succinct consideration of evidence-informed policy and evidence-based practice
- Discussion of four examples of research and evaluation that have informed policy and practice to build family resilience
  - ◆ The first two relate to family relationships and supports
  - ◆ The second two relate to understanding resilience *and* vulnerability and the extent to which community-based interventions can address these



# Overview of presentation (contd)

- Reflection on the importance of boundary organisations in bridging the research, policy and practice divides
- Concluding reflections on evidence-informed policy and evidence-based practice; and the effective transfer of knowledge and communicating the research, evaluation and practice evidence

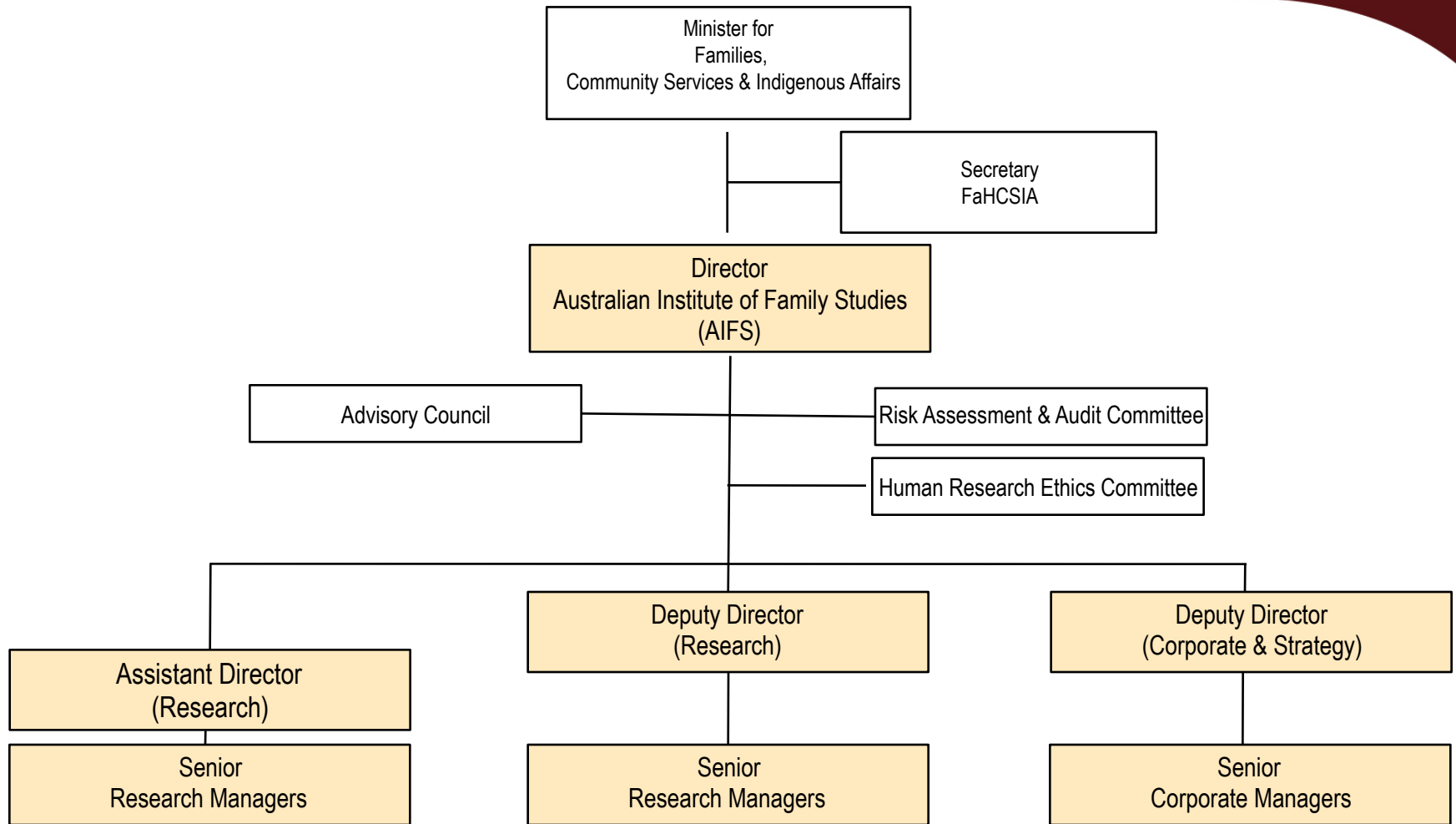


# About the Institute

- Melbourne-based Australian Government Statutory Authority
- established 1980
- under the *Australian Family Law Act 1975*
- located within the Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs Portfolio
- AIFS is a prime source of research expertise on families and the factors that impact on their wellbeing.



# Organisational Structure



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# Organisational Overview

- Employs approximately 80 staff across two areas:
  - ◆ Research; and
  - ◆ Corporate and Strategy
- Appropriation: \$3.4 million (2012-13)
- Other revenue: \$7.0 million (2012-13)



# Partnerships

- Australian government agencies, including:
  - ◆ FaHCSIA; PM&C; AGD; DEEWR; DHS; DIAC; AIHW; AIC; ABS
- State and Territory Governments including:
  - ◆ Department of Human Services, Victoria; Department of Human Services, NSW; Chief Minister's Office, NT
- Community organisations, including:
  - ◆ SNAICC, Benevolent Society, Brotherhood St Laurence, Smith Family
- Universities and other research organisations, including:
  - ◆ ACER, University of Melbourne, University of Adelaide, University of New South Wales, University of Sydney, University of Queensland, ANU, Telethon Institute, Queensland University of Technology
- International organisations, including
  - ◆ OECD, Norwegian Institute of Public Health, Millennium Cohort Study, New Zealand Families Commission





# Work guided by Research Directions: Australian families in a rapidly changing world

- Research Directions - 2012-2015
- Development involving key stakeholders across Australia
- Research focuses on following themes:
  - ◆ Family change, functioning and wellbeing
  - ◆ Social and economic participation for families
  - ◆ Child and family safety
  - ◆ Services to support families





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## Australian Institute of Family Studies Directions 2012–15



*Australian families in  
a rapidly changing world*



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## AIFS research directions 2012–15



*Australian families in  
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# Evaluations of policies and programs

- National evaluation of the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy (evaluation undertaken in partnership with the Social Policy Research Centre, UNSW)
- Evaluation of 2006 changes to the family law system
- Evaluation of the Magellan Project
- Current Programs:
  - ◆ Evaluation of the National Income Management program in the Northern Territory
  - ◆ Indigenous Justice Programs Evaluation
  - ◆ Pilot programs of new models of service delivery in relation to family law services



# Major longitudinal studies

- *Growing Up in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC)*
- Australian Temperament Project (ATP)
- *Stronger Families in Australia*
  - ◆ Collected as part of evaluation of the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy
- Longitudinal Study of Separated Parents
  - ◆ Collected as part of evaluation of family law changes
- *Pathways of Care: Longitudinal Survey of Children in Out-of-home care (NSW Pathways of Care) and Children and Young People Leaving Care (Vic)*
- *Building a New Life in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Humanitarian Migrants*



# Information Exchanges at AIFS

- Child Family and Community Australia
- Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault
- Closing the Gap Clearinghouse

(The Closing the Gap Clearinghouse website is hosted by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare)



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# Evidence-informed policy

Long-term challenges, such as building family resilience, demand a rigorous, evidence-based approach to public policy



# Policy relevant research

- Policy-relevant research
  - ◆ “presents what has been, what is, and what is likely to be, in a specific social context, in order to inform policy decisions.”

(Wolf, 2004, p. 68)



# Policy relevant research (contd)

- But—may not always be available
  - ◆ “... needs to be the right evidence; it needs to occur at the right time and be seen by the right people.”

(Banks, 2009, p. 8)

- And—may not always be timely
  - ◆ “Researchers aim for a detailed understanding of an issue—policy-makers/practitioners often need information quickly and simply to take action.”

(Lewig, Arney, & Scott, 2006)





# A first example:

## Right evidence at the right time

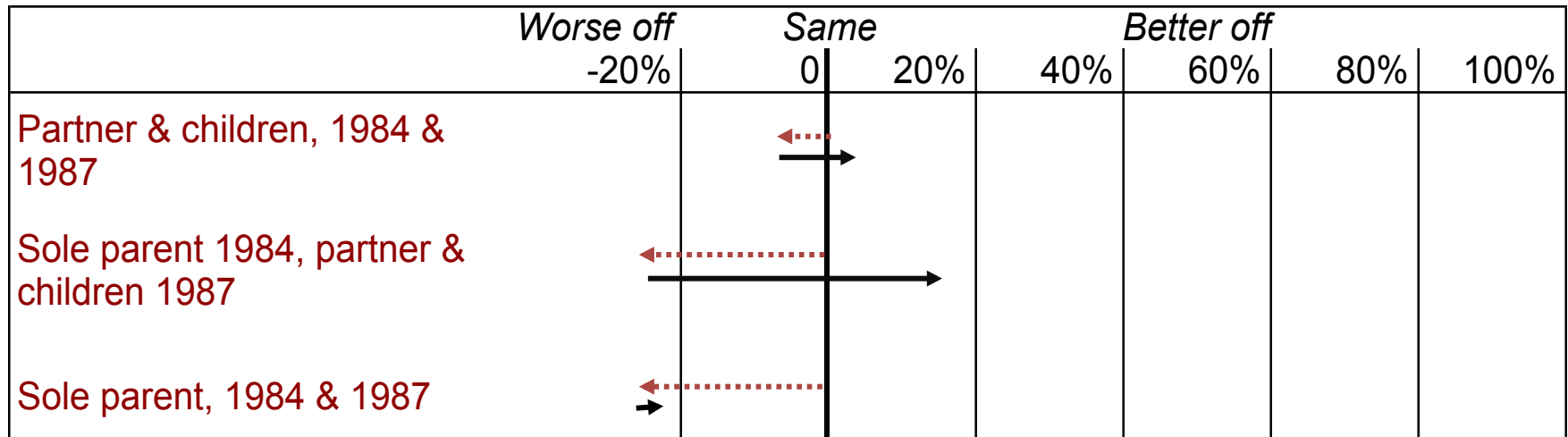
- AIFS Economic Consequences of Marital Breakdown Study (1984)
  - ◆ Low “coverage” of resident parents with maintenance orders or agreements
  - ◆ Persistently low levels of compliance with maintenance orders where they existed
  - ◆ Low payment rate



# Mothers & Children:

## *Changes in financial living standards*

Percentage of income above/below pre-separation living standards for different family types



# Policy impact

- The Study demonstrated the need for a Child Support Scheme, subsequently introduced in Australia in 1988
- Further research provided the evidence for major changes to the Scheme in 2006



# A second example: Assessing what works

- Evaluation of the 2006 family law reforms



# Policy objectives of reform package

- Prevention
- Parental involvement and child protection
- Information, advice, family dispute resolution (FDR) to help parents reach agreement
- New entry points to family law system
- Reduction in use of the family courts



# New gateways to the system

- Family Relationships Centres
- Family Relationships Advice Line
- Family Relationships Online



# Key findings

- Overall—the system is working well for the majority of children and their parents
- The reform goal of getting separated parents to work things out for themselves is being achieved
  - ◆ Reduction in child-related parenting matters reaching court
  - ◆ Increased use of relationship services
  - ◆ Most parents report friendly or at least cooperative relationships with other parent



# Key findings: Care arrangements

- Shared care time (35%–65% of nights with each parent)
  - ◆ More likely to take place among parents with financial assets and higher levels of education
  - ◆ Appears to work well when:
    - ◆ The child's two homes are reasonably close to each other
    - ◆ Each parent was strongly involved in the child's everyday activities before separation
    - ◆ The parents have a friendly or cooperative relationship
    - ◆ Arrangements are flexible





# Key findings: Vulnerabilities

- But toxic circumstances for children were also evident
  - ◆ History of family violence
  - ◆ Parental mental health, substance misuse, (other) addictions
  - ◆ Conflict between parents
  - ◆ Safety issues relating to ongoing contact
    - ◆ ... are even *more* damaging for children with shared care time



# Impacts

Led to further legislative change to the *Family Law Act* to focus on family violence and its effects



# A third example:

## A key policy relevant data source

- *Growing up in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC)*
  - ◆ Developmental pathways through life



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# *Growing up in Australia*

- National longitudinal study
- Conducted by AIFS in partnership with FaHCSIA and the ABS
- Measures all aspects of children's development
- 2 cohorts of children in 2004
  - ◆ B cohort—aged 0–1 years and the K cohort—aged 4–5 years
- 10,000 families recruited
- Funded for 8 waves, collected every two years, to 2019



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# Broad research questions

The broad research questions cover:

- How well are Australian children doing on a number of key developmental outcomes?
- What are the child, family and community factors that are related to different child outcomes?
- What helps maintain an effective pathway, or change one that is not promising?



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# Resilience and vulnerability

Resilience and vulnerability show their effects both early in life as well as across the life course, and reflect social gradients and developmental change



# Outcomes for infants to 8–9 year-olds



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Source: LSAC, Waves 1, 2 & 3

# Outcomes for infants to 8–9 year-olds





# Outcomes for infants to 8–9 year-olds

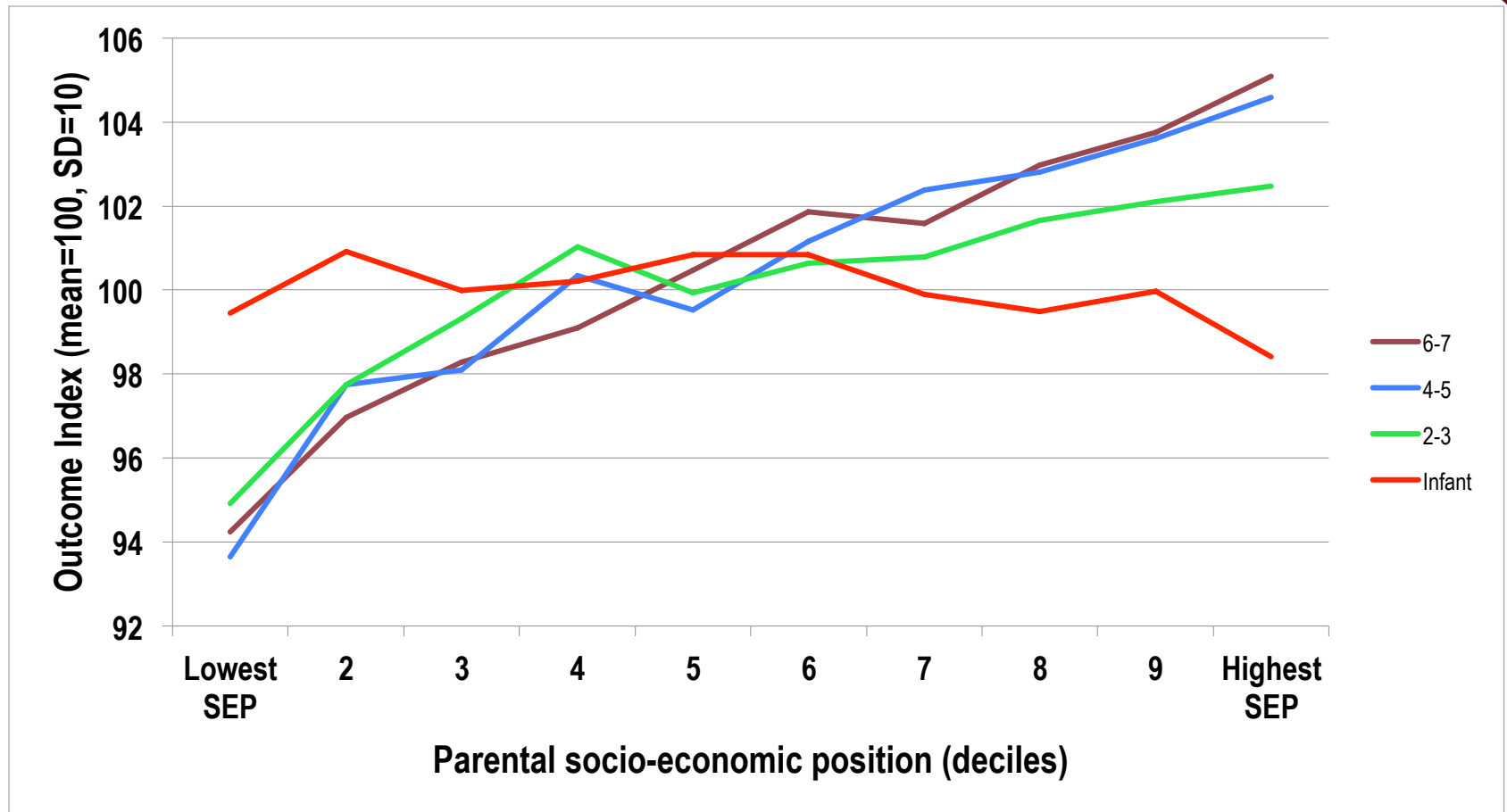


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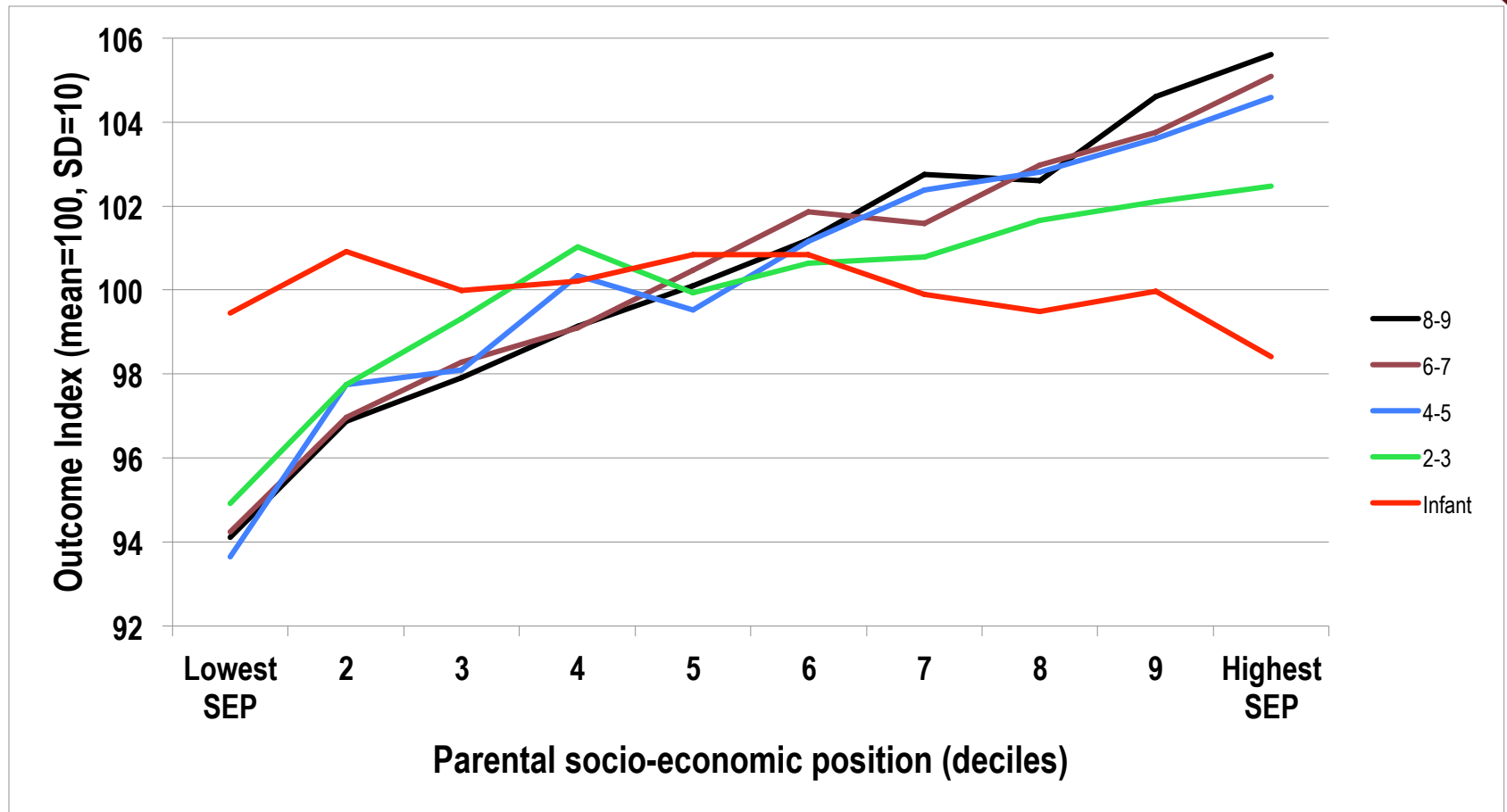
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# Outcomes for infants to 8–9 year-olds



# Outcomes for infants to 8–9 year-olds



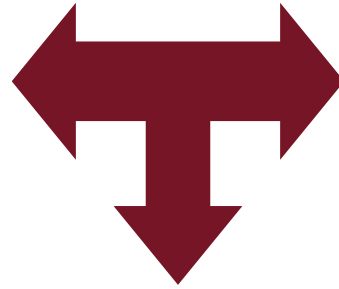
# A fourth example: Evidence of what works

- Evaluation of the *Stronger Families and Communities Strategy* (2000–2009)
  - ◆ The longitudinal evaluation of *Communities for Children*



# The *Communities for Children* model

**Facilitating Partners**



***Communities  
for Children  
Committee***

**Develop plans and manage funds**

**Community Partners deliver services**

**Logic = provide new services + increased service coordination and cooperation = improved outcomes**



# Outcomes for the disadvantaged groups

- Reduction in jobless families
- Reduction in harsh parenting

**But**

- Increase in reported parental and child health problems



# Policy adjustment in response to evidence

- Re-funding of existing *Communities for Children* program
- *Communities for Children Plus* established with a focus on areas with high child protection concern



# Communicating the research, evaluation and practice evidence

## Through

- Publication
- Presentation
- Electronic resources and social media
- Promotion of *Promising Practice Profiles*
- Clearinghouses





# Promising Practice Profiles

- An effective way of sharing practices that work, how they work, in what contexts and with whom
- Facilitate knowledge transfer and peer-to-peer learning
- An example
  - ◆ the database of 58 profiles from programs funded under the *Stronger Families and Communities Strategy*  
([www.aifs.gov.au/cafca/ppp/ppp.html](http://www.aifs.gov.au/cafca/ppp/ppp.html))



# Making the evidence available: Information Exchanges and Clearinghouses at AIFS



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# Clearinghouses at AIFS

## **Child Family Community Australia (CFCA)**

### **Research Practice and Policy information exchange**

- preventing and responding to child abuse and neglect
- improving services to children and families in disadvantaged Australian communities
- enhancing families and relationships (aimed at broad-base of service providers, including Family Relationship Centres)

## **Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault (ACSSA)**

- preventing and responding to adult sexual assault

## **Closing the Gap Clearinghouse**

- overcoming disadvantage for Indigenous Australians

(The Closing the Gap Clearinghouse website is hosted by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare)



# Concluding thoughts

- Boundary organisations such as the Australian Institute of Family Studies can effectively, and sustainably bridge the research policy and practice borders.
- Rigour, relevance and responsiveness underpin AIFS' provision of evidence to inform social policy and provide a solid base for practice lie at the heart of the matter
- Effective scanning over the horizon and timely communication of research, evaluation and practice evidence are essential skills for the boundary rider





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*The Boundary Rider* by AH Fullwood  
Josef Lebovic Collection  
National Museum of Australia

# Thank you very much



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