

# Immigrant families and change

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The family has always received a high priority in Australia's immigration program. The Family Reunion component of the program allows Australian citizens and long-term residents to sponsor their relatives living abroad to join them in this country as immigrants. In recent years it has been the largest category in the immigrant intake in terms of the number of visas issued.

Family members can be sponsored as immigrants in two categories. The Preferential Family category applies to the spouse/fiance(e), dependent parents and children of the sponsor. Other relatives such as brothers and sisters and non-dependent children can be sponsored under the Concessional Family category. Applicants to immigrate under the Concessional Family category but not those in the Preferential Family are assessed for their work skills and English language proficiency. In 1992-93, 23,877 people entered Australia as Preferential Family immigrants while 8225 came as Concessional Family immigrants.

Families can have an input into the migration process in a number of ways. Immigrants who have family members in the intended country of residence before migration can call on their relatives before migration for assistance to migrate that can range from provision of information to sponsorship. The family network itself can be the primary reason for migration, as people may want to migrate to live with, or closer to, their children, brothers and sisters.

BIPR's Prototype Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants shows that relatives living in Australia were the main sources of information to intending immigrants on a number of issues before their migration, and that family reasons were very important in the decision to migrate.

This article examines three aspects of families and the migration process: the presence of family in Australia and family sponsorship patterns; the family as the migrating trait; and changes in family structure resulting from migration. The data used to look at these issues come from *The Survey of Labour Force and Other Characteristics of Migrants* conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in 1990. The data refer to people who migrated to Australia between 1971 and 1990 and were at least 18 years old when they arrived.

## ***Having family in Australia before migration, and family sponsorship***

Considering that the largest proportion of visaed immigrant arrivals during the last 10 to 15 years were Family Reunion immigrants, it is not surprising that the survey data show that nearly 60 per cent of adult immigrants had family members in Australia before they migrated here. One in four immigrants had immediate family members such as parents, spouse and/or children, while one in three had siblings or more distant relatives only. Put in another way, nearly 60 per cent of all adult immigrants who arrived during the period 1971-90 were reunited with their family, one-quarter with immediate family members and one-third with siblings and other relatives.

Immigrants with children only in Australia before migration were disproportionately from the United Kingdom and Ireland, and Asian countries such as Singapore, Malaysia and India

but not Vietnam. Immigrants with spouse/fiance(e) in Australia before migration were disproportionately from Lebanon, Turkey and Asian countries excluding Vietnam. Immigrants with siblings only also tended to be disproportionately from Lebanon, Turkey and Asian countries. On the other hand, immigrants from the UK and Ireland were slightly over-represented among immigrants with extended family members only (such as aunts, uncles and cousins).

People coming as refugees were less likely to have family in Australia before migration than other immigrants. Only one in four refugees who arrived during the 1970s and 1980s had family here before arrival. It would appear that refugees are more disadvantaged than other immigrants in terms of being able to rely on family for support in settling into their new country of residence, since they were more likely not to have relatives in Australia prior to migration than other immigrants.

Not all immigrants who had family members here before migration were sponsored by their family. Only 54 per cent came as Preferential or Concessional Family immigrants, that is, they were sponsored by a family member. More than 20 per cent of immigrants with relatives in Australia came as independent or skilled immigrants and 12 per cent were New Zealanders who did not need visas. A very high proportion of those who had spouse and/or children in Australia before immigration came as Preferential Family immigrants.

However, only one in three who had brothers and/or sisters in Australia were apparently sponsored by their siblings as Concessional Family immigrants. A significant proportion came on their own merits as immigrants in the Independent/Skill category.

### ***The family as the migrating unit***

Nearly two-thirds of immigrants who arrived after 1970 were accompanied by family members, indicating the importance of the

family as the migrating trait. More than half arrived as part of a couple or nuclear family unit (with spouse; children may or may not be present). Another 8 per cent migrated with parents or children, and 3 per cent with relatives who were not their spouse, children or parents.

Couple family migration was most prevalent among immigrants entering as Concessional Family or Independent/Skill immigrants, with more than 60 per cent arriving as couple family units. However, 58 per cent of Preferential Family immigrants arrived alone. People in this category already had a spouse or fiance(e), children or parents in Australia and were migrating to join them, so the large proportion arriving alone is not surprising.

The other group of immigrants with a high proportion arriving alone were New Zealanders (also 58 per cent). While some New Zealanders might already have family members in Australia, it was also possible that with the ease of movement across the Tasman, there was less need for family members to migrate at the same time.

One in two immigrants identified as refugees in the survey migrated with their spouse (and children), while one-third came alone. Nearly 10 per cent were in migrating units comprising only extended family members (no spouse, parents or children), compared with 3 per cent of all immigrants. This is probably because of more family fragmentation among refugees due to war or to political instability from which they were fleeing.

### ***Family structure and living arrangements after immigration***

When immigrants arrive to join members of their family, there is a change in family structure and an expansion of their kin network in this country. Since many immigrants arrived either as part of a family unit or to join other family members, a very large proportion of immigrants in the survey were part of a family network immediately upon arrival. Two-thirds of the

immigrants had immediate family members at the time of arrival and 16 per cent had other family members such as siblings, aunts, uncles or cousins. Only 16 per cent had no family at all when they arrived, because they had no relatives in Australia before migration and they migrated alone.

Further changes in family structure can, of course, occur after immigration. Immigrants who migrated alone and had no family here before migration can form a family when other family members migrate later to join them or through marriage or a de facto relationship with an Australian resident. Data on living arrangements at the time of the survey show that nearly three-quarters of immigrants who did not have any family immediately after immigration were living in family units at the time of the survey, indicating that other family members had migrated to join them or that they had formed a family after arrival through marriage or a de facto relationship. Only 12 per cent were living alone and 15 per cent were living with non-relatives.

On the other hand, not all immigrants who had family in Australia after immigration were living with their families at the time of the survey. Nearly 20 per cent of those who had children only were living alone or with non-relatives. Immigrants who had children only tended to be in the older age groups, with more than 60 per cent being aged 55 years or more. One-third were living with their spouse and another one-third had no spouse and were living with their children as a parent or grandparent in the household.

Preferential and Concessional Family immigrants had a larger proportion living with family than immigrants in the other immigration categories and a lower proportion living alone or with non-relatives. This is not surprising, considering that immigrants in these two family categories had migrated to join family members in Australia. They also had a larger proportion than average living as a family member (other than family head) in family households, that is as an unpartnered parent,

grandparent or extended family member. Although a high proportion of refugees had no family in Australia before immigration and nearly half arrived alone or without a spouse, nearly 80 per cent were living with a partner or spouse at the time of the survey. New Zealanders had a smaller proportion living in family units and higher than average proportions living alone or with non-relatives. Overall less than 10 per cent of immigrants in the visaed categories lived alone or with non-relatives, compared with 22 per cent of New Zealanders.

Since a very large proportion of immigrants have family members in Australia after immigration, families have the potential to provide all kinds of support and assistance in the immediate settlement period and thereafter. Only a minority of immigrants have to cope with settling into the new country without family support.

Information on the kinds of help provided by family members to new immigrants in their settlement and adjustment to life in Australia will be available soon from other surveys and should provide a more complete picture of the role played by families in immigration and immigrant settlement.