



## FLINDERS SOCIAL MONITOR



Monitoring and analysing our community and social life to explore future options for society and policy

In 2006-7 the Flinders Social Monitor is using the *Australian Survey of Social Attitudes* (AuSSA) to monitor changes in social life and examine their impact on everyday lives in South Australia. AuSSA is a biennial mail survey that gathers opinions from approximately 4,000 Australians aged 18 or above who are selected randomly from the Electoral Roll. It is managed by the ACSPRI Centre for Social Research in the Research School of Social Sciences at the ANU (<http://aussa.anu.edu.au/>). In 2005, the Flinders Social Monitoring and Policy Futures Network commissioned a special sample of South Australians resulting in 1,019 SA respondents. Details about this survey can be found in the Social Monitor 'About AuSSA'.

### Couples Living Apart Together in Australia

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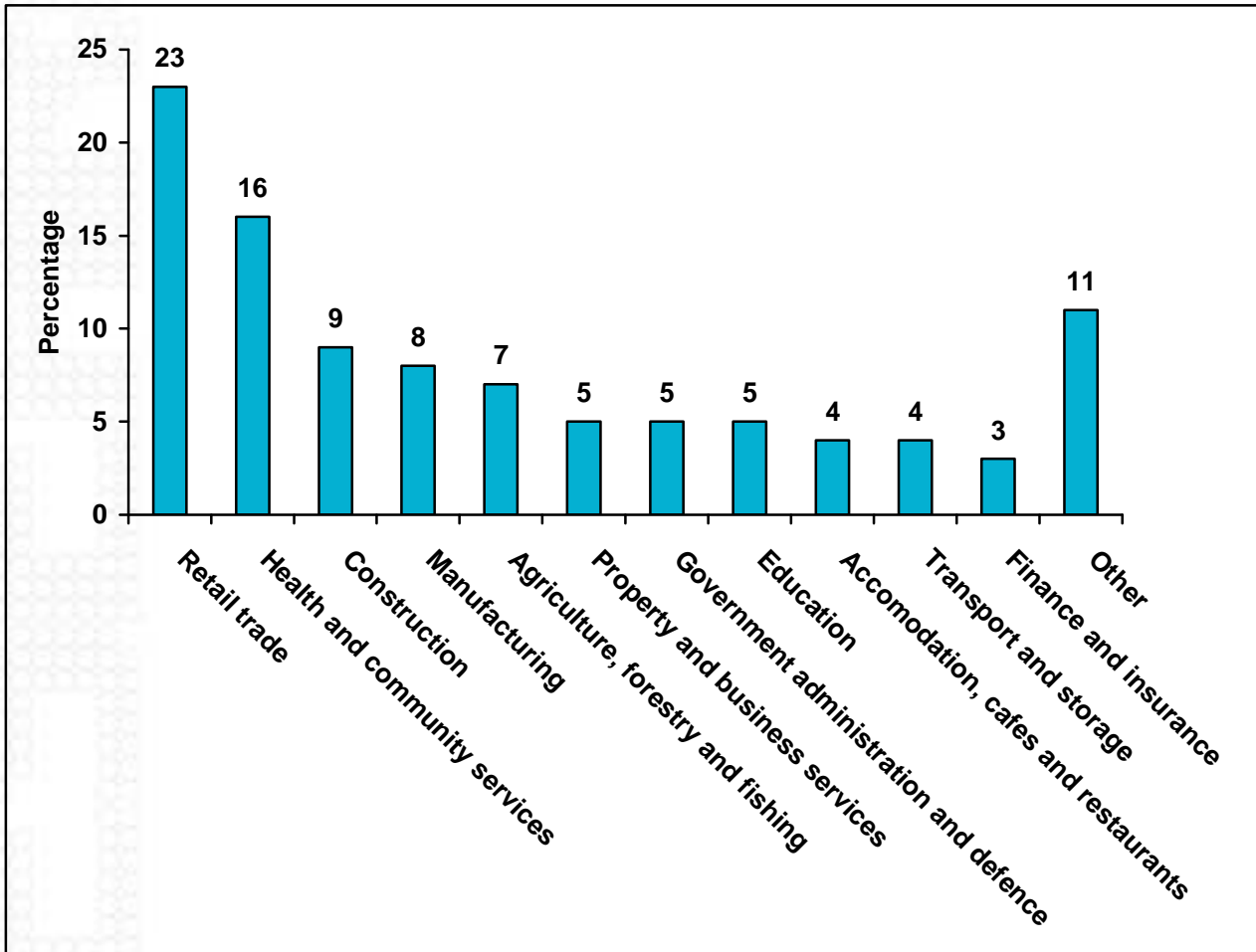
Australians tend to expect that committed partners will live together, but there are couples who do not share a household. Not counting separated or divorced couples, the AuSSA data suggests that around 2% of the adult population of Australia have a partner who lives in another household. But more people may experience living apart at some point in their relationship than these snapshot figures suggest (Bell 2001). Couples living apart together (LATs) appear to be fairly typical Australians but different to LATs in other countries. Almost all (90%) were married couples and heterosexual. Why might they live apart?

#### Work and LATS

Work is usually important in why people live apart (Levin 2004), but not clearly so in Australia. Only half of the AuSSA sample is in paid work. A quarter is retired. If they do work it is not in the industries we might expect. Mining is one obvious candidate for the kind of work that takes people away from their families, but only two people (including partners) are in mining. LATs are much more likely to be in retail, community or health work, or construction. It is puzzling why 20% of those not living with their partner are in retail, which one would not imagine would enforce living apart. Retail workers might be expected to be able to pick up similar work where their partner lives.



Diagram 1: Industries LAT's work in



It might also be expected that LATs are professionals. Those in specialised professional work such as academia may find it hard to get jobs in the same cities. They need to be relatively well paid to afford to keep a house each and travel to see each other. However, the majority of LATs are non-professional (55%) and not high earners (80% earn less than \$50,000 per year). Other explanations are needed for why and how these couples live apart.

### Caring

Some people may live separately from partners in order to care or avoid caring for others. They might:

- look after elderly parents,
- not want to inflict a new live-in partner on their dependent children.
- not want to move in with a new ageing partner who might soon need care (Levin 2004).

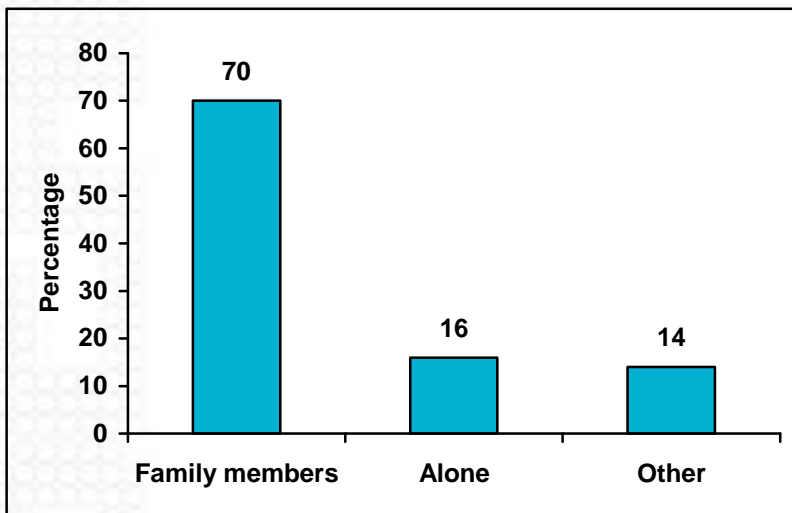
The figures suggest that few of these Australian LATs are living apart to provide care. Only a handful reported themselves as helping a family member, and only small numbers might be providing care for elderly relatives. Only five people reported having a household member over 80 and only another eight said they were living with household members in their seventies. However, one quarter of this LAT group is retired. This may suggest that older people in Australia may find new partners, but not necessarily want to cohabit.



## Experimenting with new kinds of relationships?

Young or old, Australian LATs do not appear to be a group who are forming non-conventional relationships. They might not be cohabiting with partners, but they almost all live with family members (70%) and few live on their own (16%) compared to other countries (Levin 2004).

**Diagram 2: Who LATs share a household with**



## Connected to the community?

Australian LATs also differ from those overseas (Levin 2004) in terms of their geographical stability, more than half having lived in their local area over twenty years and two thirds over ten years. It looks like they may be fairly rooted within their local communities, or at least that many LATs are not uninvolved in community activities.

## Who are LATs?

From the statistical data we can get only a limited picture of who these people are, and how they conduct intimate relationships with someone in another household. The AuSSA data indicates that almost all of these people (80%) are likely to be satisfied with their lives. It is not clear how they are able to gain that satisfaction and to what extent some distance from partners might help or hinder. Therefore it seems crucial to embark on some qualitative research to find out more about who these people are. There is much more of interest to know about their experiences and why they are living apart from their partners.

## References

- Bell, M. (2001) 'Understanding Circulation in Australia', *Journal of Population Research*, Vol. 18, No. 1, pp. 1-18.
- Levin, I. (2004) 'Living Apart Together: A new family form', *Current Sociology*, Vol. 52, No. 2, pp. 223 - 240.

All data from this publication is sourced from:

- Wilson, S. et. al. (2006) *Australian Survey of Social Attitudes, 2005* [computer file] Australian Social Science Data Archive, The Australian National University, Canberra