



**Honey, I'm home – alone: how Queenslanders' living arrangements have changed and projections for the future**

Alison Taylor and Jim Cooper

Planning Information and Forecasting Unit  
Queensland Department of Local Government, Planning, Sport and Recreation  
Phone: 07 3235 4044  
Email: [Alison.Taylor@dlgpsr.qld.gov.au](mailto:Alison.Taylor@dlgpsr.qld.gov.au) or [James.Cooper@dlgpsr.qld.gov.au](mailto:James.Cooper@dlgpsr.qld.gov.au)

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### 1. Introduction

This paper explores two questions. First, what have been the main changes to the living arrangements of the Queensland population over the past 15 years (1986-2001) and second, what changes are anticipated over the coming decades? These questions have considerable significance for several reasons.

The important contribution of families to the growth, health, happiness and welfare of their members is well acknowledged. In turn, families, and the individuals within them, are a fundamental component of our communities, driving much of the social interaction, contributing to our social institutions and maintaining societal values.

However, the persistent view of the 'traditional' family of mum, dad and a couple of kids is at some variance from the reality of contemporary families. While, it is well acknowledged that considerable change has occurred in the structure of family life in Australia in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is important to note the scale of those differences and ensure that clear investigations are undertaken in each context.

In the particular case of Queensland, the enormous population growth experienced over recent decades has resulted in increased numbers of each family type and each living arrangement. However, this growth masks sizeable changes to the composition and shares of the different groupings. In addition, many children are now living in quite different circumstances to those experienced by most adults, in fact the very adults who are likely to be making policies and regulations that affect these children.

How families and individuals group together to form households is also a significant issue. This is important not only for the overall functioning of our society – many goods and services are provided to the household - but is also of more direct importance in planning terms. Catering for continuing population growth brings this into sharp focus. For example, in recent past years new communities were planned to accommodate families mostly in three or four bedroom houses with yards for the children to play in, local playgrounds, sporting fields, a primary school and occasional high school, some retail outlets and possibly a community hall. While this model community is slowly being complemented by the construction of increasing numbers of medium density units and townhouses in new suburbs, will this be appropriate for the households of the future? Will this housing mix match the aspirations of future households or even their needs? Will the move towards more medium density dwellings, often argued as being required because we anticipate larger numbers of smaller households in the future, actually result in less choice? Given the large investment in dwelling stock and community infrastructure, how will our existing communities need to adapt to cater for changes in the way we live together – or increasingly alone?

It is clear that detailed research into the changes in families and households to date is required. These findings need to be appropriately conveyed to ensure that policy makers appreciate the changed environment in which that fundamental building block of our communities, the family, is now operating. Similarly, it is vital that we are aware of the continuing swell of change; driven in part by already existing age structures but also significantly, ongoing societal changes, to create a different set of living arrangements in the future. Change is a constant and we should be factoring

adaptability into our planned communities in order to cope with anticipated changes to the way that people choose to live together or apart.

## **2. Background**

The Australian Institute of Family Studies notes that diversity is a feature of families (AIFS, 2006). This is particularly apparent in terms of the variety of family forms. In 1976, 48% of Australian families were couples with dependent children (the 'traditional' family type) with 28% being couple only families. Just 25 years later in 2001, the proportion of couple only families had jumped to 36% while couples with dependent children had declined to 39% of all families (AIFS, 2006). Yet even within these two family types there was considerable diversity. Couples with dependent children varied from those with very young children, to those with older children or those with a mix. In addition, the dependent children may have been adult children undertaking tertiary studies and largely considering themselves to be independent (except for home cooked meals, washing etc). Similarly, the couple only families may have been young couples yet to have children or older couples whose children had left home.

Over the 25 years to 2001, one of the fastest growing family types was lone parent families with dependent children, increasing from 7% to 11% of all families. However, there were also blended families (at least one natural child and one stepchild) comprising 3% of families. In addition, there has been considerable growth, over this period, in the number of people living alone.

These trends in changing family and household forms can be related to several significant societal changes that occurred at the same time. First, the impact of the baby boom has been widely noted. As many of the baby boomers (born between 1946 and 1965) moved into their main child-bearing years during the 1970s there was an associated upsurge in births (sometimes referred to as the baby-boom echo). This coincided with a second important change, the steady increase in women's participation in the labour force. Increasing numbers of women returned to work following the birth of their children, often to help fund home purchase but with the added impact of developing increasing financial independence and confidence in their ability to support themselves and their children. This was important given the third significant societal change impacting on families, the rapid increase in the number of divorces and separations following the introduction of the Family Law Act in 1976. While this might easily explain the increase in lone parent families (and the increase in younger males living alone following divorce or separation) over the past few decades, it does not explain what has led to the large increase in couple only families at the expense of the traditional family type.

The explanation lies yet again with the baby boomers but also with another impact of these societal changes – the declining fertility rate. As many of the leading cohort of baby boomers completed their child-rearing, they found themselves alone at home, either as part of a couple (if the marriage had survived) or single. This has been called the empty-nest period. In combination with the increasing number of people choosing to live alone or left alone through the death of a partner, this has led to a large

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increase in the numbers of older couple only families and older people living alone. In contrast, it is largely societal change in terms of increased participation in higher education and the workforce by young women, aspirations for lifestyles without the costs or constraints imposed by children and increased emphasis on the pursuit of individual pleasures that has led to the increase in younger couple only families.

These trends will continue to shape the future of our communities. For example, as the baby boomers move into older age, their needs will change. In past generations, older people tended to be cared for by their children or extended family. In the future, this will become less common as many people did not have children or had fewer children who may now not be willing to take on the responsibility and cost of caring for an older family member. There has also been a gradual fracturing of family networks as family members became less numerous and more widely distributed leading to fewer and more scattered family resources.

In combination with increasing life expectancy, these trends will lead to the expansion of the population of older people in our communities; older people who might not be able to call on their family for support and who might not have the financial resources to purchase that support. This example highlights the pressing need for continuing investigations into the formation and functioning of family units and other living arrangements, especially those anticipated to occur in coming decades.

### 3. The data

Special tables outlining the numbers of people, by age, in each of 15 different types of living arrangements were purchased from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). The data, sourced from the relevant Census of Population and Housing, covered the years 1986, 1991, 1996 and 2001 providing a 15 year span over which to assess change. These tables were used to derive various propensity measures, which were then used to project future household types based on the projected population. (Some slight adjustments were required to apply propensity trends based on Census Counts to population projections based on Estimated Resident Population.) A similar method to that used by ABS (2004) to prepare capital city and balance of state household projections was used at the Queensland Statistical Division level (Wilson, Cooper, Bell and Edwards, 2006). (This work was undertaken by [Jim Cooper and others at] the Queensland Centre for Population Research at the University of Queensland for the Queensland Government [Office of Economic and Statistical Research]. Further detail about the method used and some preliminary results can be obtained from <http://www.geosp.uq.edu.au/qcpr> or <http://www.oesr.qld.gov.au>.)

The analysis in this paper focuses on past changes evident in the living arrangement data over the 15 year period between 1986 and 2001 and anticipated changes in the household projections to 2026. Only trends at the state level are discussed here although it is acknowledged that there are substantial spatial differences below the state level, differences that are significant in terms of planning for the specific provision of services and facilities. Nevertheless, substantial change is evident at the state level and provides a useful starting point and context.

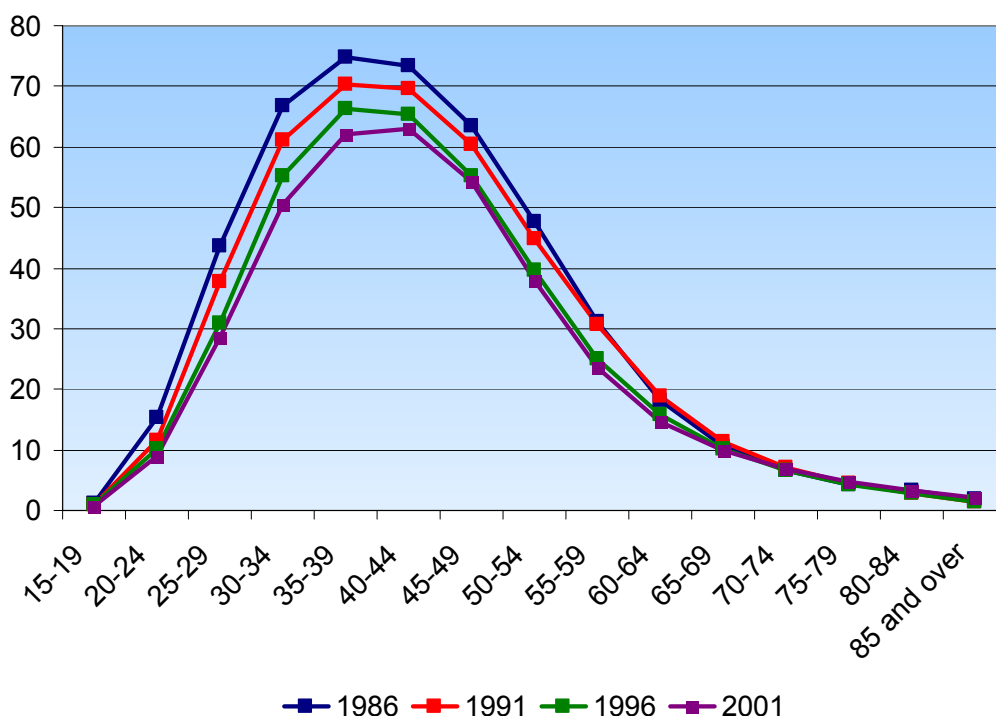
#### 4. How have Queenslanders' living arrangements changed between 1986 and 2001?

There have been considerable changes to family and household composition over recent decades. In terms of household size for example, the average in Queensland has declined from 2.89 persons per household in 1986 to 2.57 persons in 2001. This is a direct result of fewer children in each family as the total fertility rate declined, as well as an increase in the number of lone parent families and people choosing to live alone. The following analysis discusses each of the major types of living arrangements in turn.

##### 4.1 Couple families

Queensland's population increased from 2.4 million in 1986 to 3.3 million in 2001. The number of parents in couple families also increased from 700,470 to 814,600 during this period reflecting the strong population growth. However, the proportion of the population made up of this family type steadily declined providing evidence of the underlying trend away from the traditional family structure dominated by couple families with children. In Queensland in 1986, 29.0% of the population were parents in couple families. Over the following years this proportion declined to 28.1% in 1991, 26.1% in 1996 and reached 24.7% in 2001. This trend was evident in all the main age groups, although the decline was most apparent among those aged between 25 and 44 years as young couples increasingly deferred childbirth (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Parents in a couple family, Queensland, 1986, 1991, 1996 and 2001 (proportion of each age group)**



Source: ABS, unpublished data

There was a corresponding decline in the proportion of children in the more traditional couple family with children between 1986 and 2001. In addition, there has

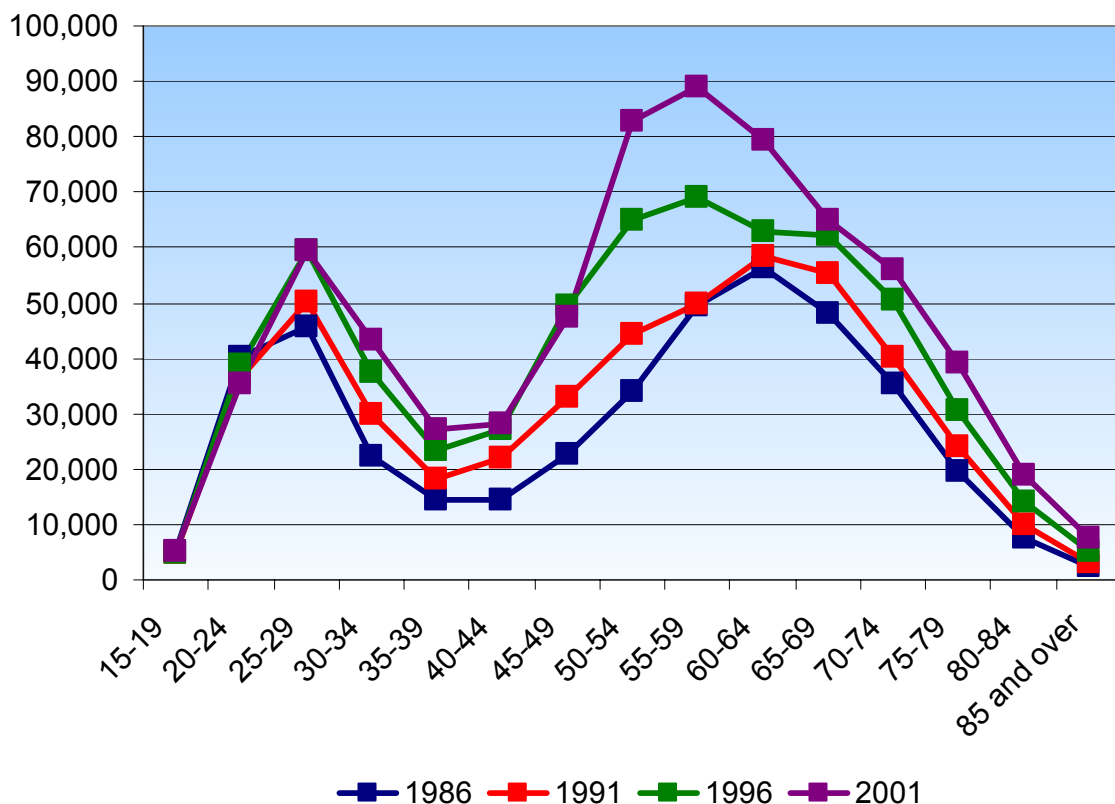
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actually been a slight decline in the number of children aged less than five and those aged between 10 and 14 years in this family type between 1996 and 2001. These trends have significant implications for patterns of demand in Queensland communities, from the need for birthing facilities in hospitals to demand for playgrounds in public places and requirements for childcare places.

### 4.2 Couple only families

While the trend over recent years has been away from couple families, family types that have increased have included both couple only families and lone parent families. At the same time as Queensland's total population increased by 36.3% between 1986 and 2001, the number of people in couple only families increased by 63.7%. However, this increase has been largely among people aged between 50 and 64 years in 2001, an age group that included a large number of the baby boom cohort (Figure 2). These people have reached the age where their children have left home to form families of their own and they are now in the category sometimes referred to as 'empty nesters'.

**Figure 2: Number of people who were partners in a couple only family, Queensland, 1986, 1991, 1996 and 2001**

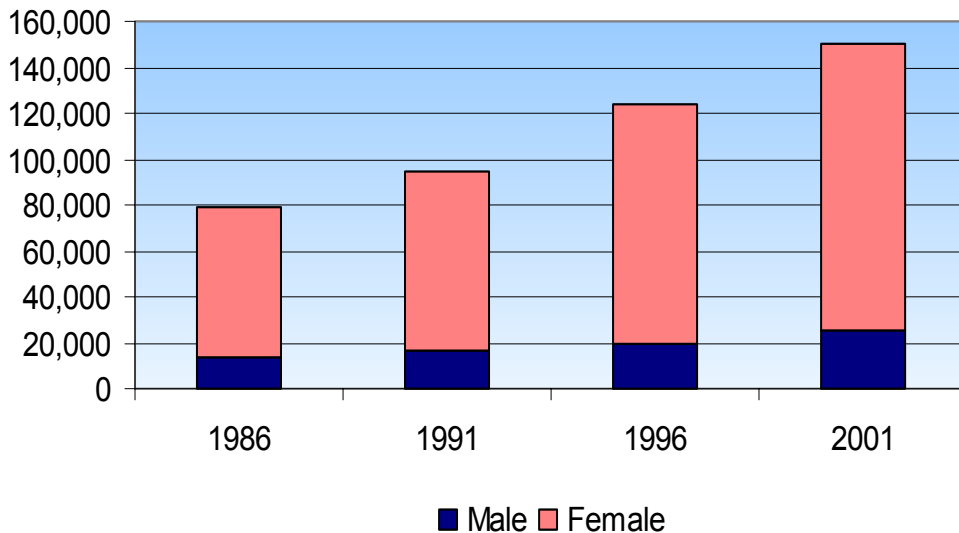


Source: ABS, unpublished data

### 4.3 Lone parent families

Equally significant changes are evident in the increasing likelihood of being a lone parent. Over the 15 years to 2001, the number of lone parent families in Queensland increased by 71,000 to 149,850. Such families may be formed by choice but others have resulted following separation or divorce. In Queensland in 1986, the proportion of people aged between 40 and 44 years that were lone parents was 6.6%. By 2001, this figure had increased to 9.8%, along with 9.3% of people aged 35 to 39 years and 8.4% of those aged 45 to 49 years. The majority of lone parents in Queensland in 2001 were female, outnumbering male lone parents by nearly 100,000 people. Between 1986 and 2001, the number of male lone parents increased by 11,600 to 24,900, while the number of female lone parents increased by 59,400 to 124,900 (Figure 3). However, of particular importance in terms of the social implications, are the increasing numbers of children in lone parent families.

**Figure 3: Number of lone parents in lone parent families, Queensland, 1986, 1991, 1996 and 2001**



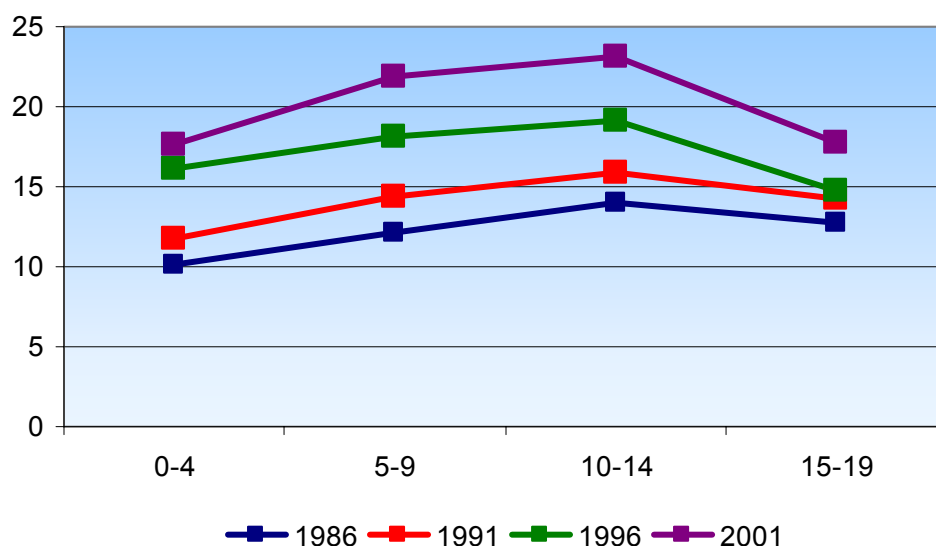
Source: ABS, unpublished data

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### 4.4 Children in families

The trend towards living in lone parent families is evident among children aged to 15 years. For some age groups, it is becoming increasingly common to live in this type of family, although the majority of children still live in couple families. In Queensland in 2001, one in every five children aged between five and nine years and nearly one in every four children aged between 10 and 14 lived with one parent only (Figure 4).

**Figure 4: Children in lone parent families, Queensland, 1986, 1991, 1996 and 2001 (proportion of each age group)**



Source: ABS, unpublished data

Even as the majority of children in Queensland continue to live in couple families (nearly nine out of every ten children aged between 0 and 14 years in 1986 and nearly eight out of every ten in 2001), there has been a strong trend towards children living in lone parent families. In 1986, 12.2% of 0 to 14 year old children lived in lone parent families with this proportion rising to 21.0% by 2001. The number of children aged less than 15 years increased by 21.0% to nearly 125,700 over the 15 years to 2001. Over this period, the number of children living in couple families increased by only 9.0% compared with an increase of 108.4% in the number living in lone parent families (Table 1).

**Table 1: Change in living arrangements for persons aged 0-14 years <sup>(a)</sup>, Queensland, 1986 to 2001**

	1986	2001	Change 1986-2001	
			No.	%
Total	599,361	725,046	125,685	21.0
In couple families	522,722	569,535	46,813	9.0
In lone parent families	72,909	151,970	79,061	108.4

(a) Not all living arrangements are reported in this table. A small number of persons aged 0-14 also lived in non-private dwellings.

Source: ABS, unpublished data

In summary, there have been significant changes over the past 15 years to the living arrangements of Queensland's children aged less than 15 years. These changes are not only significant in terms of individual children's lives but they represent a

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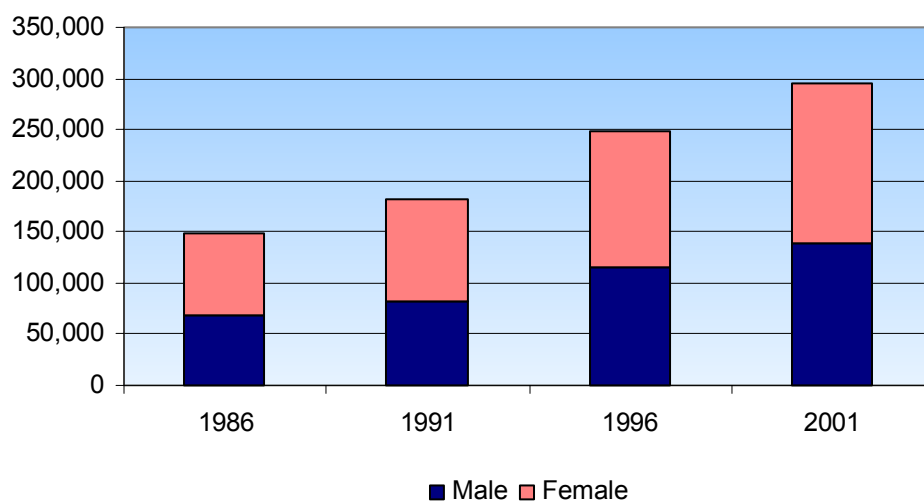
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considerable change in the social structure of our communities. Lone parent families may find it more difficult to combine employment and child care but they also face difficulties in managing household finances, undertaking normal parental tasks like after school activities and sport, as well as finding time to participate in voluntary activities like tuckshop duties or meals on wheels. While many dual income couples are also time poor, the additional income achieved by two earners goes some way towards compensating by allowing for the possibility of a higher standard dwelling or purchasing household help. Combined with the increasing number of families where there is no income earner, children in these and lone parent families may be subjected to significant disadvantages.

### 4.5 Lone person households

The number of people living alone in Queensland rose from 148,500 in 1986 to 295,520 in 2001, an increase of nearly 100% (99.0%). The biggest increase occurred between 1991 and 1996 when the number grew by over one-third (36.2%) or 66,940 additional people living alone. This was nearly twice the growth in lone person households in Queensland between 1986 and 1991 (33,880). Since 1996, the increase in lone person households has slowed with an additional 47,190 people living alone or an increase of 19.0% by 2001. Although most people living alone are female, the number of male lone person households grew more quickly over the 15 years to 2001 resulting in a slowly increasing proportion from 45.9% of all lone person households in 1986 to 46.8% in 2001 (Figure 5).

**Figure 5: Lone person households, Queensland, 1986, 1991, 1996 and 2001**

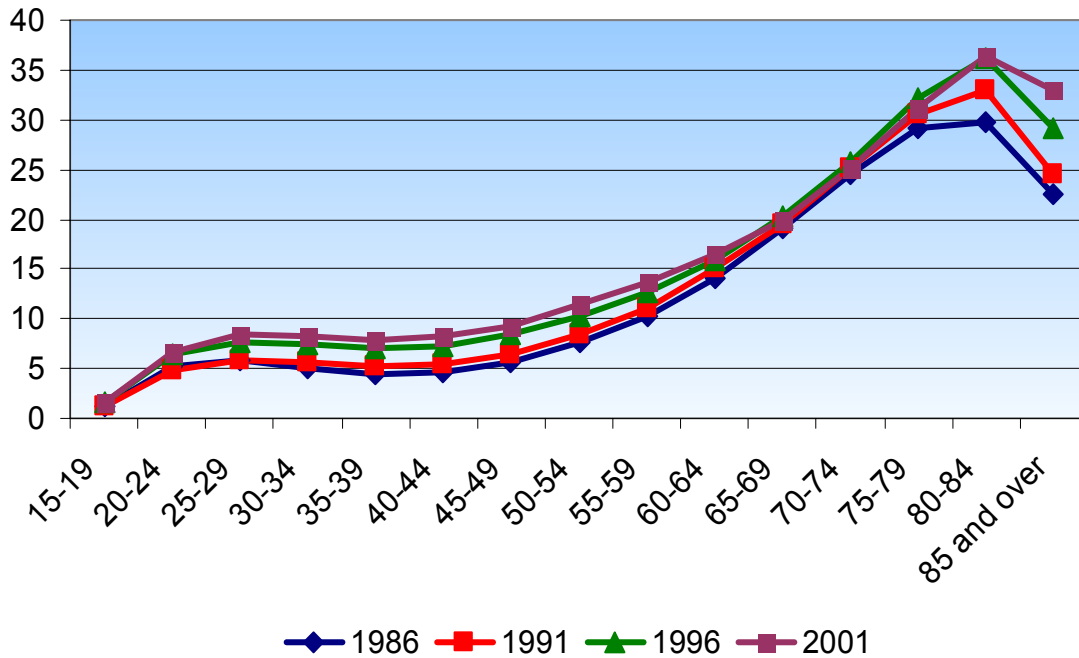


Source: ABS, unpublished data

While in the past, older people occupied the majority of lone person households this situation is changing. In 1986, people aged 55 years or more occupied 57.1% of lone person households, but by 2001 this proportion had declined to only 51.0% of lone person households. Despite this change, the proportion of each age group that are lone person households has changed very little and remains much higher among the older age groups (Figure 6).

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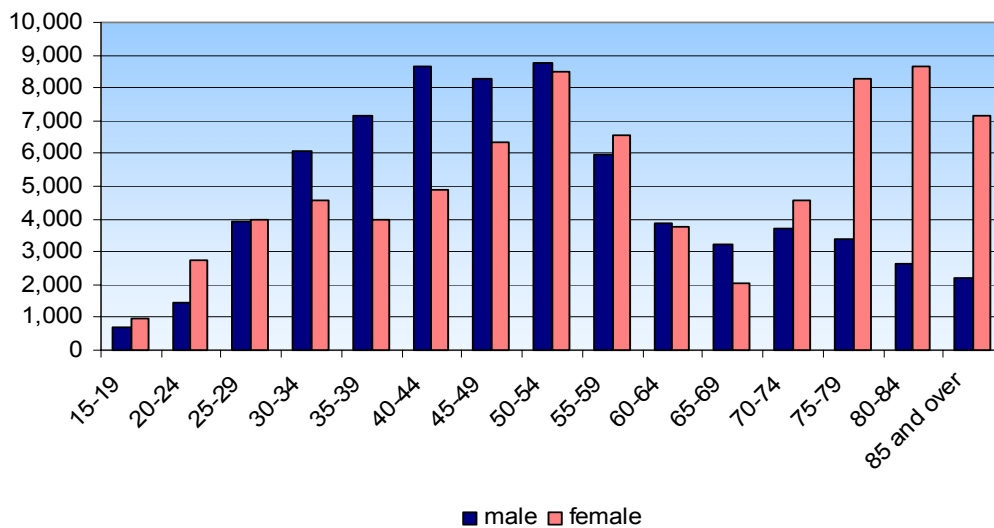
**Figure 6: Lone person households, Queensland, 1986, 1991, 1996 and 2001 (proportion of each age group)**



Source: ABS, unpublished data

However, a consideration of the growth in numbers of lone person households by age shows clearly that the largest growth has been among younger age groups. Between 1986 and 2001, there was an increase of 80,990 people aged less than 55 years living alone compared with an increase of 66,030 people aged 55 years or more (Figure 7). While there is no doubt that there has been an increase in the numbers of younger people living alone, this large growth is not likely to be repeated as much of the increase can be attributed to the movement of the baby boom generation through these age groups.

**Figure 7: Growth in lone person households, Queensland, 1986-2001**



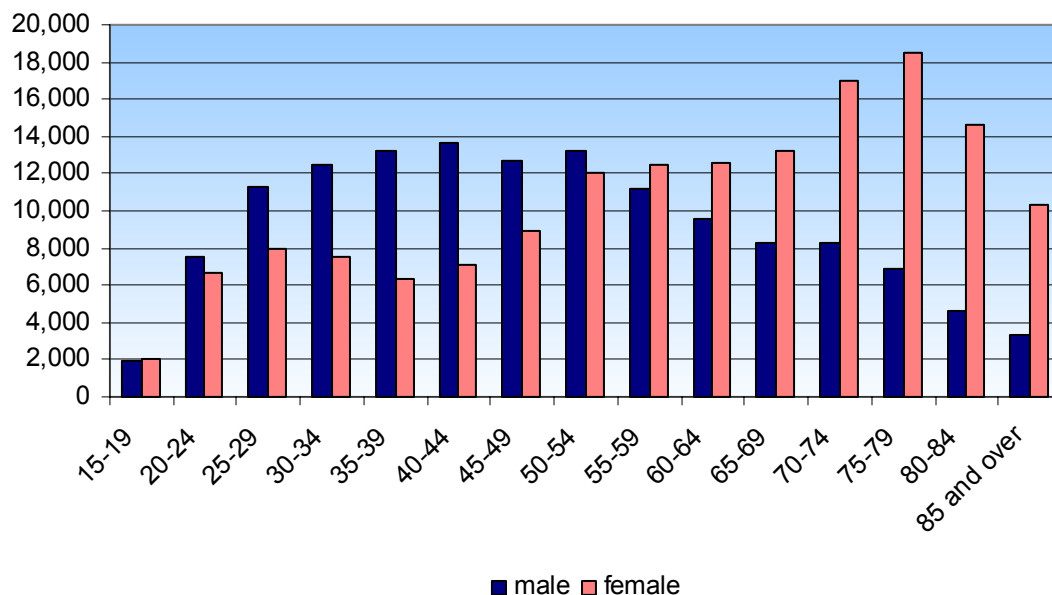
Source: ABS, unpublished data

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The increasing numbers of younger male lone person households may be attributed to family and relationship breakdowns as well as to changing preferences. It is clear that younger lone person households tend to be male, while older lone person households tend to be female (Figure 8).

**Figure 8: Lone person households, Queensland, 2001**



Source: ABS, unpublished data

### 5. What changes are projected for Queensland households over coming decades?

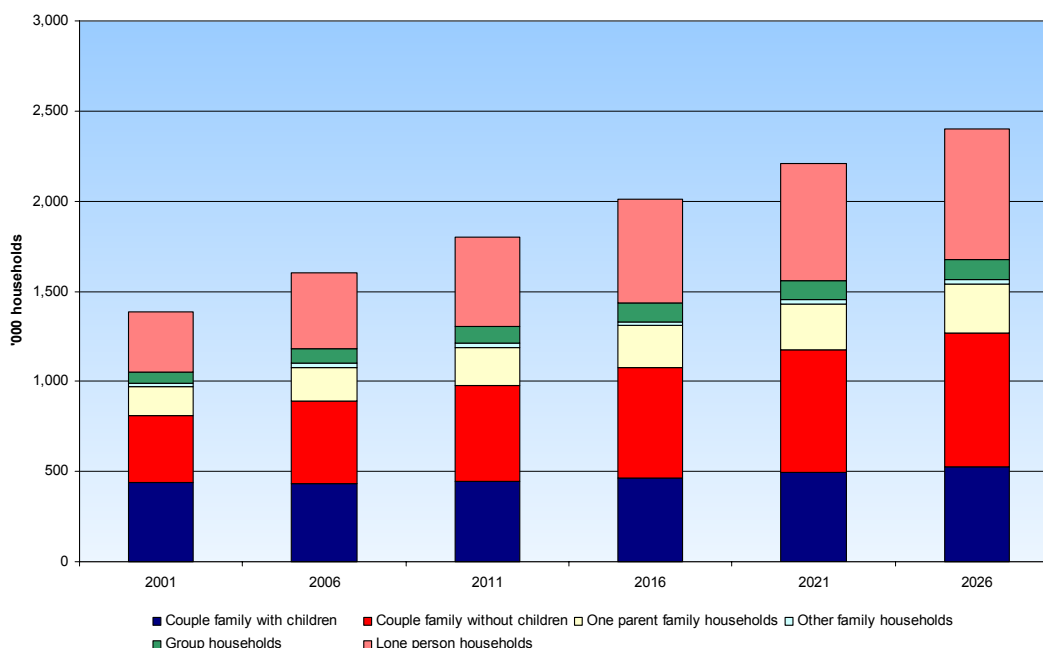
Due to declining household size, the number of households is anticipated to grow faster than the population. Between 2001 and 2026, Queensland's population is projected to grow by 54% (Queensland Government 2006 edition, medium series projections) while the number of households is projected to increase by 73% (unpublished Queensland Government 2006 household projections). This more rapid rate of increase in the number of households will contribute to a rapidly escalating demand for many goods, services and infrastructure, particularly those demands that are household-based.

Interestingly, the 2006 series of population projections assumed a slightly higher fertility rate than in the previous series. Along with other changed assumptions, this resulted in a significant increase in Queensland's projected population growth of nearly 295,000 people compared with the previous set of projections produced in 2003 (medium series). However, as a consequence of the new fertility rate assumption, over 40% of the additional projected growth comprises children aged less than 15. Much of this increase in growth is assumed to occur by way of the slowing of a previously identified trend towards a declining average number of children per household. This is significant because while the increase in growth might initially be thought to result in a corresponding increase in households, this is not the case. Instead, the projected increase in total households is lower than would otherwise be expected. This is because much of the increased growth comprises additional children who will be added to existing family households.

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The number of households in Queensland is projected to increase from 1.38 million in 2001 to 2.40 million in 2026, an increase of just over one million households (1,014,000). While the total number of households is projected to grow by 73%, different types of households are expected to increase at different rates (Figure 9). The slowest growing household type over the next two decades will be couple families with children, which are projected to increase by 20%.

**Figure 9: Number of households, Queensland, 2001 to 2026**



Source: Queensland Government household projections, 2006

In contrast, lone person households (119.3%) and couple only households (99.5%) are projected to have the fastest rates of increase over the next two decades. There are anticipated to be an additional 394,000 people living alone by 2026, most of whom will be females. Similarly, there is projected to be an extra 369,000 couple only households in 2026 compared with the number in Queensland in 2001. This means that of the 1.014 million additional households projected for Queensland between 2001 and 2026, three-quarters or 75% will be one or two person households. (In addition, some lone parent households may also only comprise two people – a parent and one child.)

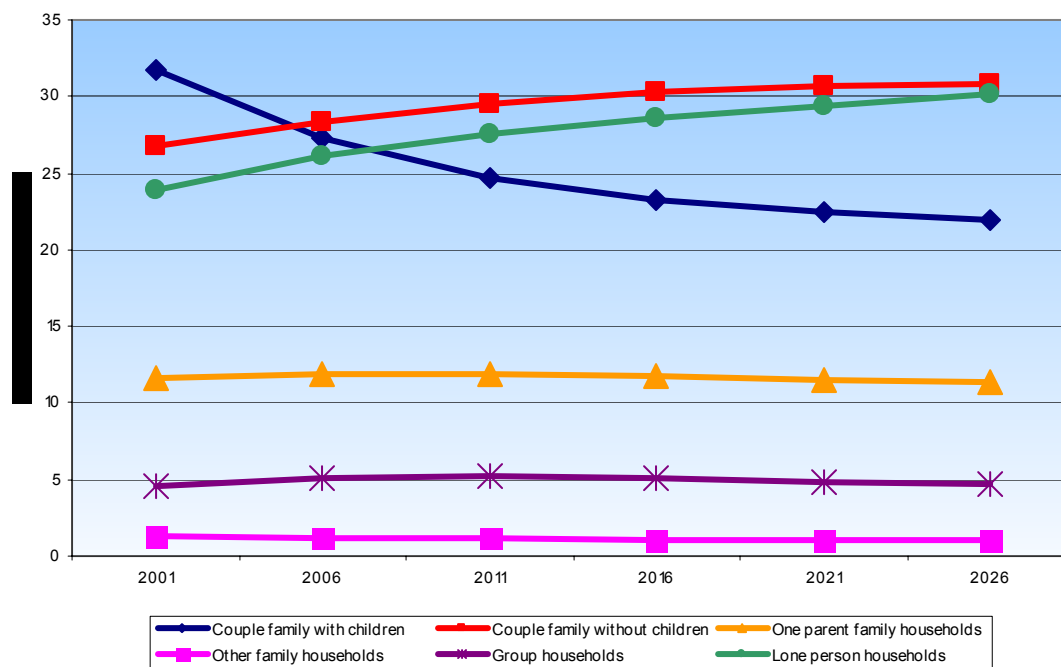
As a result of these changing household trends, different households will dominate our communities within two decades. In Queensland in 2001, couple families with children were still the most common household type, accounting for 31.7% or nearly one-third of all households. This family type has been seen as the ‘traditional’ type of household over the last century and beyond, and has driven much of the thinking behind the planning and infrastructure provision in our cities and towns. However, by 2026, two other household types will be more numerous, neither of which include children. More than six out of every ten households in Queensland in 2026 are projected to be couple without children (30.9%) or lone person households (30.2%). Couple family with children households (21.9%) and lone parent households (11.4%),

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that is households with children, are anticipated to account for only one in every three households (Figure 10).

**Figure 10: Projected households, Queensland, 2001 to 2026**



Source: Queensland Government household projections, 2006

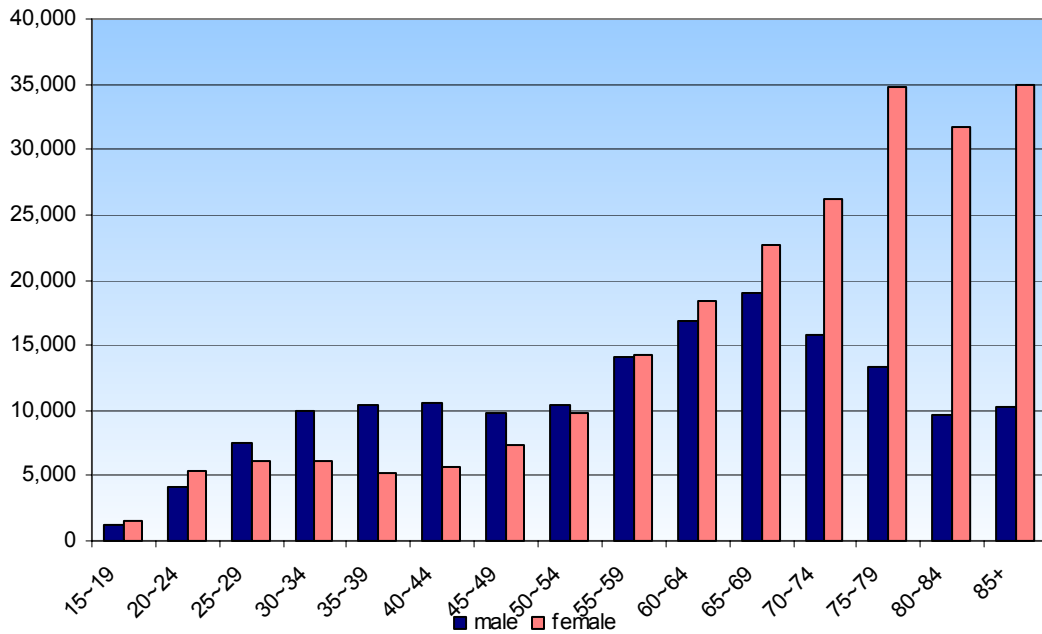
### Composition of lone person households

The projected increase in the proportion of lone person households in Queensland means that, in effect, 20% of the growth in population will comprise people living alone. This is largely a function of the existing age structure and the inevitable ageing of the population. For example, as the baby boomers in particular age, over 70% of the increase in population to 2026 will be among persons aged 55 years and over.

However, one of the most significant aspects of the ageing of the population is the extremely large increase in the number of people in the very old age groups. For example, a total of one third of the projected population growth in Queensland between 2001 and 2026 is accounted for by people aged 75 and over. As many people of this age tend to live alone, this will more than triple the number of people aged 75 years and over living alone by 2026. Significantly, among these older people living alone, three quarters will be females. This means that, based on current trends, by 2026 there will be almost 150,000 females aged 75 years and over living alone in Queensland (Figure 11).

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**Figure 11: Projected growth in lone person households, Queensland, 2001 to 2026**

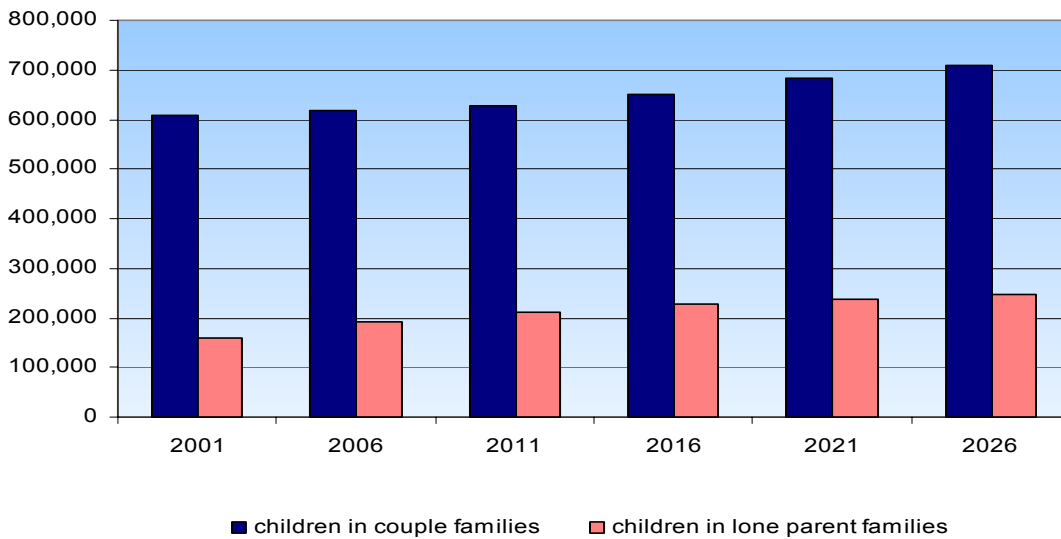


Source: Queensland Government household projections, 2006

**Living arrangements for children**

We previously noted that between 1986 and 2001, the number of children living in couple families increased by only 9.0% compared with an increase of 108.4% in the number living in lone parent families. In the future, this trend is projected to continue, albeit at a slower rate. Between 2001 and 2026 the number of children living in couple families is projected to increase by 17%. However, the number of children living in lone parent families is projected to increase by 55%. As a result of these changes, by 2026 it is projected that one in four children in Queensland will live in a lone parent family (figure 12).

**Figure 12: Projected living arrangements for children aged 0-14, Queensland, 2001 to 2026**



Source: Queensland Government household projections, 2006

## **6. Discussion**

There are a number of significant implications of the answers to the two questions posed at the beginning of this paper. First, there have been some substantial changes to the living arrangements of Queenslanders over the past two decades. Many of these changes are also anticipated to continue in the coming decades, as they are a function of the existing age/sex structure already evident in the population. This will have an impact on the living arrangements of the future population in two main ways. First, many older people tend to live alone and current projections therefore suggest a large increase in this type of household will occur over the next two decades. Second, there will also be a large increase in older couples who have either never had children or whose children have grown and left home. In summary, due to increasing life expectancy, we expect to have more older people in our communities than we have ever experienced before. This will change the look of our communities as well as the types of households contained within them and the pattern of demand for goods, services and infrastructure.

Other changes experienced to date have come about because of societal change and this may or may not continue in the future. The trend away from the dominance of the couple family with children is one such change. New population and household projections suggest that slight increases in fertility rates will stem the decline in the number of children in families. However, policy changes to support working mothers and supplement the costs of raising children may change future patterns of fertility. On present indications, couple families with children are projected to account for only 22% of families by 2026 while lone parent families will represent a further 11%. This means that only one in every three households is projected to contain children, a substantially different situation to that experienced in past decades.

The second question addressed in this paper was what changes are projected for Queensland households over the coming decades. The projected changes are considerable. Not only is the rate of household growth (73%) expected to be faster than that of the population (54%), but much of the growth will be concentrated in only two types of households. Lone person households (119%) and couple only households (99%) are projected to experience much faster rates of growth over the 25 years to 2026 than the more traditional household of a couple family with dependent children (20%). Of the more than one million new households projected for Queensland over the 25 years to 2026, 75% will be one or two person households. This is a very different situation to that of past decades when much of the growth in new households was in family households.

This raises the question of whether the growth in these smaller households will translate into a demand for smaller dwellings. While there is certainly not a one-to-one relationship between smaller households and smaller dwellings, there is no doubt that increased diversity in dwelling options will be required. There is obviously a need for more research into this issue to clearly articulate the implications of this changing household structure for future dwelling requirements.

However, while there is much we don't know there is no doubt that there will be substantial changes required for the housing industry as many of the new households will not be potential first home buyers. Instead the majority of new households will be

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headed up by older people, probably existing home owners, who will be trading up or trading down, or alternatively may decide to stay in their existing dwelling. This will require considerable changes to the type of housing product being produced to meet the demands of this changing market. In addition, given the ageing of the population, there will need to be an increased emphasis on accessibility and adaptability of dwellings to accommodate increasing frailty and disability of the occupants.

These potential patterns of housing utilisation also raise some complex challenges for planners who have to deal with calls for increased housing densities in our cities primarily in response to limited supplies of greenfield land and the burgeoning costs of servicing spreading urban areas. To this end, there may be some pressure for the existing dwelling stock to be more efficiently utilised, that is, for smaller households to occupy smaller dwellings. However, many of the small households of future decades are already living in Queensland in the housing of their choice. What incentive will there be for older people, already comfortable in their own home, to leave their familiar surroundings and memories behind to move to more space-efficient dwellings and in turn, free up larger dwellings for larger families?

Finally, there are a number of social implications of the changing living arrangements projected for the future. For example, increasing alienation, loneliness and lack of participation in the life of the community are potential outcomes of the larger numbers of people living alone. On the other hand, the need for social interaction may encourage people who live alone to participate in voluntary organisations, support clubs and societies and even work with children in an effort to provide social stimulation.

For children, a number of social implications are apparent from their changing circumstances over the past decades. Many more children now live with only one parent - 21% of those aged less than 15 in 2001 or around one in every five. Projections indicate that by 2026, there may be as many as one in every four children of this age living in one parent families. What's more, it is also possible that many of those who find themselves a lone parent in 2026, could themselves have come from a lone parent background leading to a particular social situation that spans the generations. Of course, we should not generalise about one parent families, however, as mentioned earlier in this paper and as documented in other research, children from one parent families are over-represented on indicators of disadvantage compared with children from couple families. This is of some concern given the importance of the family unit for reinforcing certain standards, morals and societal norms. It would seem that society could be faced with spiralling costs if the family unit was not able to continue to support the needs of its members.

The final point to be discussed here concerns the approach used to determine these projections of future trends in household numbers and types. The projection methodology has a relatively conservative bias by way of the assumptions regarding changing propensities. In general, the propensities are assumed to decline exponentially up until 2016 and then remain constant. As a result, some of the projected change in households by 2026 could actually occur much sooner, even within the next decade. Similarly, the actual changes that occur in the future may be even more extreme than that projected. We do know, however, that the families, households and communities of the future will be different to those of past decades or

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even those of today. How we understand, manage and cope with this change will be a substantial challenge.

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