

# **The Negotiating the Life Course Survey experience**

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## **The Negotiating the Life Course Survey**

The Negotiating the Life Course Survey (NLC) is a project of the Research School of Social Sciences of the Australian National University and the University of Tasmania. The survey examines the ways in which Australians negotiate the pathways through their work and family lives. Detailed information is gathered relating to lifetime experiences of paid employment, education and training, relationships and childbearing. Considerable information is also gathered in relation to current employment and training, child care, household division of labour, caring and voluntary work, and a range of attitudes, values and expectations. In addition, standard socio-demographic descriptors are obtained<sup>1</sup>.

The first round of the survey was conducted in October-November 1996 and February-April 1997. The survey is a national random telephone survey using the electronic white pages as its sample frame. NLC is set up as an indefinite life, panel survey<sup>2</sup>. The second round of the survey is being conducted from April-June 2000, implying an interval between rounds of just over three years. Ninety-seven per cent of respondents in the first round agreed to participate in following rounds of the survey.

The survey population at the first round was persons aged 18-54 years. Only one person per selected household was interviewed. This person was randomly selected from all 18-54 year-olds in the household as the person with the most recent birthday. The selection of only one eligible person per household means that a system of weights needs to be applied to the sample population when the sample is used to obtain population estimates. Where the respondent was married or in a cohabiting relationship, a wide range of information about the partner was provided by proxy by the respondent.

Between rounds, two small and one large follow-up surveys were conducted for specialised sub-samples of the original sample. Recontact details of the large follow-up survey are provided below.

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<sup>1</sup> The first round codebook and database can be accessed through the Social Sciences Data Archives, Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University.  
<http://ssda.anu.edu.au/SSDA/CODEBOOKS/LCP97/title.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Interviews at the first round were conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies out of Melbourne. Second round interviews are being conducted by the University of Queensland out of Brisbane.

## Response rates and participation

A total of 2,231 persons were interviewed from a sample of 7,721 randomly selected telephone numbers. Table 1 indicates the breakdown of outcomes for all selected telephone numbers by State with Sydney and Melbourne separated from the rest of NSW and Victoria. The overall response rate is estimated to be between 52 and 63% depending on the denominator used. The lower response rate includes all shaded categories in the denominator and the higher rate only the dark shaded categories. The reason for this range is the indeterminate eligibility of those in the two pale shaded categories.

**Table 1: NLC response rates by State and Territory**

	Melb.	Other VIC.	Syd.	Other NSW	QLD	SA	WA	Tas.	NT	ACT	Total
Interviewed	397	166	374	296	400	206	234	70	29	59	2,231
Ineligible	363	197	457	352	411	207	198	73	6	19	2,283
Refused immediately	125	21	161	65	102	52	63	13	1	8	611
Refused but eligible	186	79	230	142	203	93	108	18	13	17	1,089
Partial interview	9	2	8	3	7	3	5	1	1	0	39
Language difficulty	53	1	82	6	11	11	7	1	1	1	174
Business number	24	5	39	22	22	20	11	7	1	3	154
Disconnected	105	33	102	61	118	65	43	18	10	6	561
Non-contactable	82	32	105	46	80	31	37	6	5	5	429
Interview not possible	27	3	30	15	30	17	14	10	1	3	150
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,371</b>	<b>539</b>	<b>1,588</b>	<b>1,008</b>	<b>1,384</b>	<b>705</b>	<b>720</b>	<b>217</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>121</b>	<b>7,721</b>
Response rate (high)	61.6	66.9	53.9	66.2	64.4	65.8	66.1	77.7	65.9	76.6	63.1
Response rate (low)	49.8	61.0	42.3	56.2	53.1	53.9	54.3	61.9	63.0	67.0	52.0

The response rates were highest in Tasmania and the Australian Capital Territory, intermediate in Queensland, South Australia, Western Australia and in New South Wales and Victoria outside of Sydney and Melbourne. Sydney and Melbourne had lower response rates with Sydney being particularly low. Language difficulties appear to have been a major reason for the lower response levels in Sydney and Melbourne. No provision was made in the survey for language interviewing. The implication is that HILDA should include provision for language interviews.

By current standards, the response rates for NLC were relatively high, however, in absolute terms, low response is a considerable concern in contemporary surveying. It is important

therefore to investigate the representativeness of the sample through comparison of the sample population with the general Australian population.

## **Comparison of various indicators from the Negotiating the Life Course Survey with the general Australian population**

### **States and Territories of residence**

Despite the differing response rates, the NLC had a similar distribution to the total Australian population across the States and Territories (Table 2). New South Wales was under-represented and the ACT was over-represented.

### **Age and sex**

The NLC is heavily biased towards women (Table 3). Reasons for this could be that women are more likely to be at home, to have time or to be willing to talk. This effect has been found in other surveys both in Australia and internationally. If HILDA is a survey in which all adult members of the household are interviewed, the question of interest is whether this will have the effect in couple households of raising response rates for men or of lowering them for women. Overall, there would seem to be little question that the response rate will be lower if all members of the household are to be interviewed compared to just one person per household. Of course, as average household size is around two persons, a design in which all adult members of the household are interviewed will represent only half of the households that would be represented where only one person is interviewed (assuming the same number of interviews is conducted).

**Table 2: NLC and Australian population by State and Territory**

	<b>ABS</b>		<b>NLC</b>	
	<b>n.</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>n.</b>	<b>%</b>
New South Wales	3,323,541	33.6	771	30.6
Victoria	2,461,195	24.9	653	25.9
Queensland	1,824,078	18.4	441	17.5
Western Australia	970,158	9.8	255	10.1
South Australia	785,852	7.9	224	8.9
Tasmania	245,981	2.5	78	3.1
Australian Capital Territory	185,249	1.9	69	2.7
Northern Territory	105,263	1.1	30	1.2

Source: ABS. Estimated Resident Population by Sex and Age. June 1995. p 18-19.

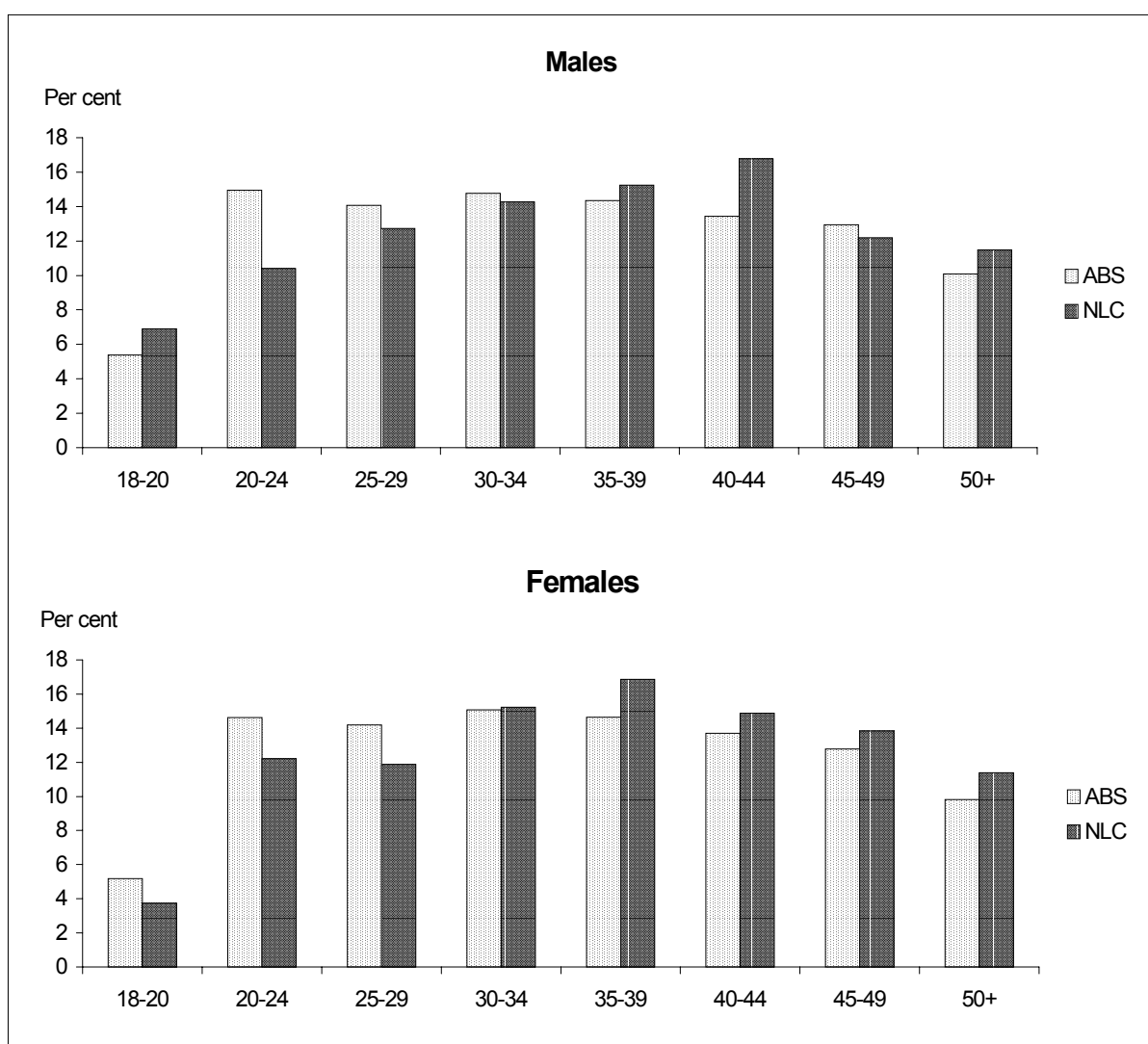
**Table 3: NLC and Australian population by sex**

	ABS		NLC	
	n.	%	n.	%
Males	8,988,670	49.8	1,115	43.9
Females	9,060,346	50.2	1,425	56.1

Source: ABS. Estimated Resident Population by Sex and Age. June 1995. p18-19.

There was a slight bias in the NLC towards people in the older ages (Figure 1). Those under age 25, especially males, were under-represented. Apart from the younger ages, the NLC distributions were similar to Australia as a whole.

**Figure 1: NLC and Australian population by age and sex**



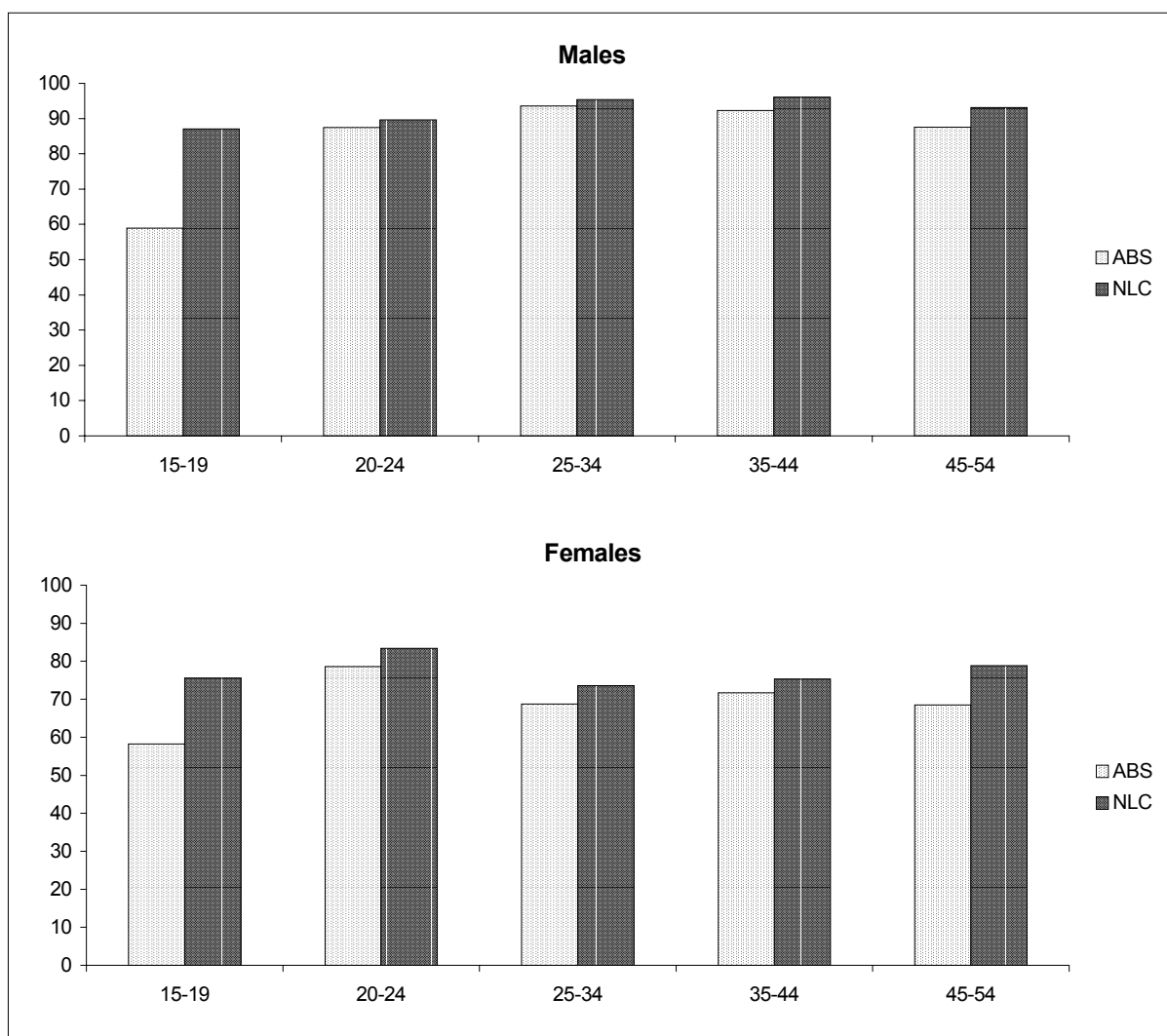
Source: ABS. Estimated Resident Population by Sex and Age. June 1995. pp 18-19.

## Labour Force Participation Rates

The labour force participation rate is the percentage of the total population who are in the labour force, either working full- or part-time or looking for work. The labour force participation rates in the NLC correspond closely with the ABS Labour Force Survey estimates for March 1997.

The difference in the youngest age group is not accurate as the NLC data refer only to those at ages 18-19. The ABS data for ages 18 and 19 give a participation rate of 74%, which is much closer to the NLC figure. Excluding the youngest age group, it appears that the NLC sample is slightly more likely to be in the labour force particularly for women.

**Figure 2: Labour force participation rate by age and sex, NLC and Australia**



Source: ABS. Labour Force Australia. March 1997 p 22.

## Marital Status and cohabitation

Table 4 shows the comparison by age and sex of the marital status distributions in NLC and in the ABS estimates for June 1996. Looking first at the percentages never married, the differences in age group are relatively small and unsystematic, that is, in some age groups the NLC results are higher and in others they are lower than the values for Australia as a whole. However, NLC had higher proportions divorced for women in every age group and for men in the older age groups. Proportions married in NLC were correspondingly lower. This may be related to the somewhat higher representation of people living alone in NLC compared to the census (see below).

**Table 4: Marital status by age and sex, NLC and ABS**

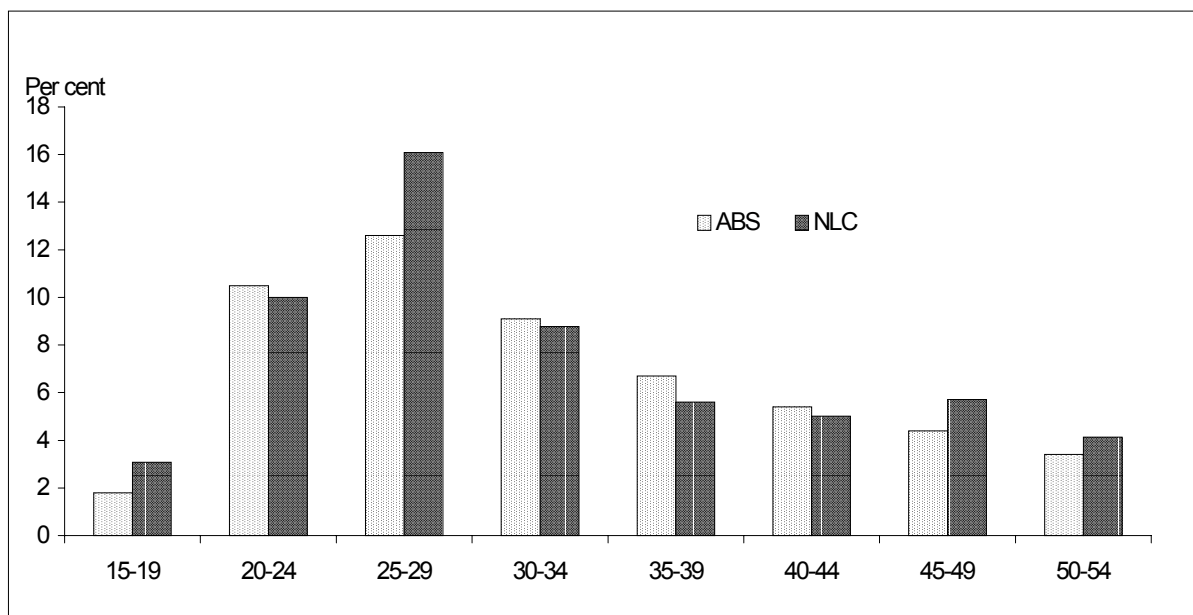
	15-19	20-24	25-29	30-34	35-39	40-44	45-49	50-54	Total
<b>Australia-Males</b>									
Never Married	99.3	91.7	61.4	34.1	20.5	13.0	8.8	7.1	38.7
Married	0.6	8.0	36.8	60.9	71.8	76.9	79.6	80.9	55.0
Divorced	0.1	0.2	1.8	4.8	7.5	9.7	10.9	10.8	5.9
Widowed	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.1	0.2	0.4	0.7	1.2	0.4
<b>NLC-Males</b>									
Never Married	98.7	94.8	57.0	40.3	21.8	15.0	8.1	6.3	37.2
Married	1.3	5.2	40.8	56.0	69.4	79.1	75.7	76.6	55.7
Divorced	0.0	0.0	2.1	3.8	8.8	5.9	15.4	15.6	6.8
Widowed	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.7	1.6	0.3
<b>Australia-Females</b>									
Never Married	97.7	81.6	44.8	22.4	13.3	8.4	5.6	4.4	30.4
Married	2.2	17.8	51.7	70.1	76.2	77.8	78.3	77.8	60.5
Divorced	0.1	0.5	3.3	7.0	9.8	12.4	13.6	13.0	7.8
Widowed	0.1	0.1	0.2	0.5	0.8	1.5	2.5	4.8	1.2
<b>NLC-Females</b>									
Never Married	100.0	82.8	49.7	18.9	10.0	9.0	6.6	3.1	26.9
Married	0.0	16.7	46.7	71.4	75.4	76.9	72.6	71.6	60.8
Divorced	0.0	0.6	3.6	9.7	13.8	12.7	17.8	17.3	10.6
Widowed	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.8	1.4	3.0	8.0	1.7

Source: ABS. Marriages and Divorces 1997. p 81-82.

The 1996 Census also allowed for the collection of data on cohabiting relationships. Figure 3 shows the proportion of the population at each age group living in a cohabiting union. The proportion cohabiting in the NLC is similar to that collected in the 1996 Census with

the most notable differences occurring at ages 15-19, 25-29 and 45-49. The youngest age group is not a good comparison as the NLC sample is only aged 18-19. Other differences could be due to collection methods. The Census asks relationship to the person completing the form. If a cohabiting couple lives with other people and someone else completes the form the relationship would not be recorded. However, the NLC asks the question directly to each respondent in the form of a relationship status question.

**Figure 3: Proportion cohabiting by age group, NLC and 1996 Census**



Source: ABS. Marriages and Divorces. 1998. p 63.

### **Respondent's position in household**

Table 5 shows a comparison of individual family or household status for respondents in NLC and for persons of the same age and sex in the 1996 Census. Apart from the broad similarities of the distributions from the two sources, the main feature of this table is the apparent over-representation in NLC of lone persons and sole parents for both men and women. It seems that response rates are higher when there is only one adult in the household. This bias would seem to be an even more likely feature of HILDA if all adult members of the household are to be interviewed.



**Table 5: Respondent's position in household, ABS and NLC**

	15-19	20-24	25-29	30-34	35-39	40-44	45-49	50-54
<b>Australia-Males</b>								
2 parent family-parent	0.3	5.6	23.1	49.2	64.6	68.6	64.1	52.0
2 parent family-offspring	71.1	40.1	15.8	5.9	2.9	1.6	0.8	0.4
1 parent family-sole parent	0.2	0.3	0.6	1.1	1.9	2.9	3.2	2.8
1 parent family-offspring	16.2	9.3	5.0	3.1	2.4	2.1	1.8	1.5
Living in a family household	6.0	9.9	6.7	4.0	2.7	2.0	1.8	1.8
Couples without offspring-partners	0.8	11.2	25.4	19.0	11.1	9.9	16.1	28.9
Member of group household	3.8	16.6	12.8	6.8	4.0	2.9	2.4	2.3
Member of lone person household	1.6	7.1	10.5	11.0	10.4	10.0	9.8	10.3
<b>NLC-Males</b>								
2 parent family-parent	0.0	1.7	23.9	42.1	66.5	69.0	61.8	50.0
2 parent family-offspring	68.8	57.8	11.3	4.4	2.9	1.1	0.7	0.8
1 parent family-sole parent	0.0	0.9	0.0	0.6	4.1	4.8	5.9	6.3
1 parent family-offspring	14.3	11.2	5.6	1.9	1.2	1.6	0.0	0.8
Living in a family household	2.6	3.4	3.5	5.0	1.2	1.6	0.7	0.8
Couples without offspring-partners	5.2	11.2	28.2	18.9	5.3	9.6	12.5	20.3
Member of group household	9.1	8.6	12.7	6.3	1.8	0.5	0.7	0.0
Member of lone person household	0.0	5.2	14.8	20.8	17.1	11.8	17.6	21.1
<b>Australia-Females</b>								
2 parent family-parent	1.2	11.3	34.4	59.4	68.7	66.6	56.3	39.8
2 parent family-offspring	66.4	28.6	8.5	2.6	1.1	0.6	0.4	0.2
1 parent family-sole parent	1.4	6.3	8.8	10.9	12.8	13.1	11.4	8.9
1 parent family-offspring	15.1	6.4	2.6	1.3	1.0	0.9	0.9	1.0
Living in a family household	6.2	7.8	4.0	1.9	1.2	1.2	1.3	1.8
Couples without offspring-partners	2.6	18.5	26.8	14.5	8.2	10.5	20.9	36.7
Member of group household	5.5	15.2	8.4	3.6	2.0	1.7	1.8	1.9
Member of lone person household	1.7	6.0	6.6	5.7	5.0	5.4	7.0	9.7
<b>NLC-Females</b>								
2 parent family-parent	0.0	8.6	37.9	56.7	67.5	69.3	56.9	45.7
2 parent family-offspring	52.8	37.4	7.1	1.4	0.8	0.5	0.5	0.6
1 parent family-sole parent	3.8	5.2	10.1	13.8	17.1	13.7	18.8	13.6
1 parent family-offspring	26.4	9.2	3.6	0.0	0.4	0.5	0.0	0.6
Living in a family household	0.0	2.9	2.4	0.5	0.4	0.0	0.0	0.0
Couples without offspring-partners	1.9	16.7	24.9	17.5	7.1	9.4	16.2	26.5
Member of group household	13.2	13.8	5.9	1.8	2.1	0.5	0.0	0.0
Member of lone person household	1.9	6.3	8.3	8.3	4.6	6.1	7.6	13.0

Source: ABS. Customised table from the 1996 Census.

## Respondent's country of birth

As mentioned, language was a barrier to participation particularly in Sydney and Melbourne. This is evident in the proportion of NLC respondents who were born in a non-English speaking country. Table 6 indicates that the NLC is well under-represented among people born in non-English speaking countries. The sample has a similar proportion of people born in English-speaking countries.

**Table 6: Respondent's country of birth**

	<b>ABS<sup>a</sup></b>	<b>NLC</b>
	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>
Australia-born	74.1	80.0
Born in English-speaking country <sup>b</sup>	10.0	11.4
Born in other country	15.9	8.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>

a) Aged 15-54 years

b) United Kingdom, Ireland, USA, Canada, South Africa and New Zealand

Source: ABS. Migration Australia 1996-97. Table 41.

## Summary

Overall, despite the concern about the response rate, NLC appears to be broadly representative of the Australian population. This tends to be a common finding in surveys. There is little indication here of under-representation of employed persons. Indeed, they appear to be a little over-represented. There does appear to be under-representation of young persons especially in the age group 20-24 years and especially among those living in group households. There is a strong over-representation of persons living alone and lone parents, perhaps because they are glad of the opportunity to chat. There is also a bias towards English speaking respondents as there were no facilities for translation. The outstanding bias, however, relates to the most basic characteristic of all, sex. Women are very much more likely to respond to surveys than men.

## Proxy reporting of partner's labour force status

To examine the issue of the accuracy of proxy reporting for a partner, the labour force status of partnered respondents has been compared to the labour force status of partners of respondents of the opposite sex. While there is a small difference in age between the two groups, the idea is that the two sets of females, or males, would show similar distributions if the reporting was accurate. Table 7 shows the labour force status of partnered respondents in the NLC and the reported labour force status of the respondents' partners.

**Table 7: Labour force status of respondents and their partners, NLC**

### Partnered respondents

	Male		Female		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Employed full-time	573	87.9	339	37.3	912	58.4
Employed part-time	26	4.0	301	33.1	327	20.9
Looking for work	32	4.9	26	2.9	58	3.7
Not in the labour force	21	3.2	244	26.8	265	17.0
Total	652	100.0	910	100.0	1,562	100.0

### Partners

	Male		Female		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Employed full-time	751	82.5	230	35.3	981	62.8
Employed part-time	65	7.1	213	32.7	278	17.8
Looking for work	40	4.4	28	4.3	68	4.4
Not in the labour force	54	5.9	181	27.8	235	15.0
Total	910	100.0	652	100.0	1,562	100.0

NOTE: 12 same-sex couples were removed from this analysis.

Looking firstly at the females, it is apparent that the reporting of female labour force status by male partners is accurate, as the distributions are nearly identical.

However, for males, the respondents are more likely than the partners of female respondents to be employed full-time and less likely to be working part-time or to be not in the labour force. This may partly be due to the age difference between the two groups of men. Partners of female respondents aged 18-54 will be older than male respondents aged 18-54 years. Thus, some may have retired or reduced their hours of work. In general,

however, proxy reporting by the respondent of the partner's labour force status seems to be very accurate. While accurate reporting of partner's labour force status might have been expected, it is reported below that respondents also gave very accurate reports of the time spent by their partners on various household tasks.

## **Collection of retrospective life histories using CATI**

A central aim of the Negotiating the Life Course Survey is to study the changing relationships between the timing of education and employment involvements and family formation. This required the collection of detailed histories of the respondent's involvement in education and employment, relationship formation and dissolution and births. Conventionally, detailed life histories are collected in face-to-face interviews so that respondents have the opportunity to see the chart of their lives and to be able to verify the timing of events through relating one event to another. This visual approach is not possible in telephone interviews and so it had been assumed that collection of detailed life histories is not possible or considerably more difficult using CATI.

As CATI was the preferred data collection method for the Negotiating the Life Course Survey, we were faced with the issue of collecting detailed histories by telephone. For employment and education, the approach used was for a full screen to be generated by CATI providing lines for each year of age of the respondent from age 15 years onward. There were also two columns relating to the respondent's employment and education status in each of those years. Respondents were asked to 'think back to when you turned 15 and come forward to 1996 telling me in which years you worked full-time, part-time, or not at all and in which years you were studying full-time, part-time or not at all'. The availability on screen of the full history enabled the interviewer to clarify any conflicts and fill all gaps. The system proved to be highly effective and we believe it provides good information on the basic aspects of employment and education history.

To supplement this annual historical data, respondents were also asked to provide an occupation history. They were asked first about their current occupation. They were then asked about their first main occupation (what it was, whether they were employed publicly, privately or self-employed, and the year they started in that job). Finally, they were asked about any other occupations they had had for at least 12 months. For the two longest of these, they were asked year of commencement and year of ending this occupation. Thus,

information was obtained for up to four occupations that the respondent had held. Interviewers stressed that we were interested in changes of occupation, not changes of jobs or employers. For men, 57% reported only two occupations (the first and the current), 23% reported three and 20% reported four. For women, 50% reported only two occupations, 31% reported three and 19% reported four. We do not know what percentage had had five or more occupations, but the expectation is that this number was below 10% for both sexes. Education history information was supplemented by questions about first post-school qualification and highest post-school qualification. Overall, we consider that the approach provided high quality information on employment and education histories.

The proliferation of a variety of relationship types has complicated the collection of information relating to relationship formation and dissolution. In regard to the current relationship type, distinction was made in NLC between marriage, cohabitation (living together or de facto relationships) and relationships in which the couple live in separate households. Respondents were also asked the sex of their partner. In regard to relationship histories, it was considered impractical to ask about past relationships in which the couple did not live together. Respondents were first asked about all marriages (date of marriage, date of termination, how terminated, whether they had lived together before the marriage and for how long they had lived together). We allowed for the recording of up to three marriages. As it turned out, only one respondent had been married more than three times. They were then asked about cohabiting relationships that did not lead to marriage. A qualifying duration of three months was placed upon these relationships except for a current cohabiting relationship for which any duration was allowable. Information was gathered on the date of commencement and the date of termination for the first two such cohabiting relationships and for the most recent one. Twenty-four men and seven women had had more than three cohabiting relationships that did not lead to marriage and so incomplete information was obtained for these cases. There may be an argument to extend the collection of information to four relationships. This would have been sufficient to cover all relationships of all but ten respondents.

An innovation in the collection of birth history information, suggested by Helen Glezer and Eva Mills, was the question for each child: Are you the biological parent/s of this child?

The responses allowed were:

Our child (both parents in the household)

My child \ Partner's child

Adopted/foster/other child

The category, former partner's child, emerged in the interviewing. Assessment of respondent reactions and interviewer-respondent interaction on this question in a sample of interviews studied by a linguist (Marian May) indicated that this method of obtaining the status of children in the household was very successful.

## **Measurement of income**

The Negotiating the Life Course Survey obtained information about the respondent's income and the income of the respondent's partner (where applicable). In both cases, the information was provided by the respondent. For the respondents themselves, 2.7% refused to answer the income question and a further 0.9% did not know their income. Of the partnered respondents 5.6% did not provide their partner's income. For wages and salaries, respondents were given the option of reporting their weekly, fortnightly, monthly or yearly income. The result was that 28% chose weekly, 10% chose fortnightly, one per cent chose monthly and 61% chose yearly. Thus, weekly and yearly are the two more preferred options. Respondents were also given the option of stating their income in gross terms (before tax) or net terms (after tax). Seventy-nine per cent chose gross income and 21% chose net income. Business and other non-social security income were collected for the most recent financial year (1995-96). Social security income was asked in terms of the full range of pensions and benefits (named) and on the basis of the most recent fortnight. Thus different forms of income were gathered in relation to different time periods and a different range of measures of income were used. This makes calculation of income on a comparable basis a considerable exercise. Nevertheless, the procedures used led to very high percentages of people providing their income (much higher than is the case in the population census). On balance, however, we considered that the options provided to NLC respondents in the first round were too wide and, in the second round, we have reduced the number of ways in which income from wages and salaries can be reported.

The respondent's partner's income was obtained only in ranges. The 1996 Census income ranges were used for this purpose. This use of ranges for partners and the non-collection of income for household members who were not the respondent or the respondent's partner

meant that household income from NLC is rough or incomplete. Incompleteness was especially important where the respondent was a young person living in his or her parent's household as the incomes of the parents were not obtained.

Given the difficulty related to the collection of business income, in the second round of NLC (now in progress), respondents have been offered the opportunity of a call-back to enable them to look at their tax returns for the previous year. They are provided with instructions as to the appropriate line from their tax return to report.

While income is an important variable in NLC, it is clearly of greater significance in HILDA. Interviewing of all adults in the household undoubtedly would yield better estimates of household income than interviewing only one member. Young people especially have a poor idea of their parents' incomes. Depending upon the results of the NLC experiment with business income in its second round, consideration might be given in HILDA to call-backs related specifically to obtaining accurate income information. A call-in approach could also be used where respondents provided a unique identifying number together with their income by punching numbers on the telephone or through an internet link. This approach would enable them to look at their tax returns between the interview and the call-back or call-in.

## **Questions relating to domestic labour**

One of the areas covered in the Negotiating the Life Course questionnaire is time spent on domestic labour, including both child care activities and housework tasks. We ask quite detailed questions about these areas since one of the key aims of the project is to examine the ways in which responsibility for unpaid work shapes labour force participation of men and women. In Wave 1 of the survey these questions were only asked of respondents who were currently married (N= 1,231) or living with a partner in a cohabiting relationship (N=179). In Wave 2 we have changed this procedure to ask the domestic labour items of all respondents regardless of marital status. This is largely because preliminary work comparing cohabiting and married couples suggests that marital status has a significant impact on the amount of time that women spend on housework as well as the division of labour between husbands and wives in the home (Baxter 2000). In both waves of the survey, the child care questions were only asked of respondents with at least one child aged 12 years or less living at home (N=918). The questions cover both the allocation of time to

domestic labour by husbands and wives, as well as the distribution of tasks between them. In relation to child care, respondents were asked to indicate who usually did six child care tasks (helping with homework; listening to problems; taking children to activities/appointments; playing with them; bathing and dressing; and getting them to bed). Response categories were “I do most”, “I do more,” “We share this equally”, “My partner does more”, “My partner does most”. They were then asked: About how many hours per week would you spend looking after your child in these ways? And about how many hours per week would your husband/wife/partner spend looking after your child in these ways?

In relation to housework tasks a similar procedure was used. We included questions on seventeen activities (repairing things around the home; making arrangements to have repairs done; doing the dishes; preparing breakfast; preparing the evening meal; cleaning the house and vacuuming; doing the laundry; doing the ironing; cleaning the bathroom and toilet; caring for pets; taking out rubbish; shopping for food and other essentials; mowing the lawn; taking care of the garden; driving the car when you are going some where together; organising your social life; and keeping in touch with relatives). Respondents were asked to indicate who usually performed each of these tasks. They were then asked to indicate how many hours per week they would spend on three groups of activities: preparing meals and doing dishes; shopping for food and other essentials; and other housework, including laundry, vacuuming and cleaning. They were also asked to indicate how many hours their partner spent on each of these activities.

Since only one individual in the household was interviewed, we must rely on the reports of one individual to describe the allocation of labour within the household. In other words, we use proxy data to describe the domestic labour responsibilities of the non-interviewed partner. Two key methodological issues arise in relation to the reliability of collecting data on domestic labour in this way. First, how reliable is proxy data? Second how reliable are respondents’ estimates of the division of labour in the home, especially in terms of estimating time spent on specific activities.

Table 8 shows responses of men and women to questions about the amount of time spent on child care and housework. The table distinguishes between men’s and women’s reporting of self and partner’s hours on childcare and housework. The data indicate that there is very little difference between the estimates that men give of their partner’s time on these activities and the estimates that women give of their own time on these activities.



Similarly, women provide similar estimates of their partner's time on these activities as provided by the men in the sample. Remember that these are not husbands and wives of each other since only one member of each household was interviewed. But nevertheless there is evidence here that the reliability of proxy reports on time spent on child care and housework is quite high. For example, men report spending approximately 24 hours per week on child care and women report that their partners spend about 22 hours per week on child care. Similarly, men report that their partners spend about 22 hours per week on housework, while women report spending about 24 hours per week on housework. For both men and women then, it appears that there is a reasonable level of agreement about how much time men and women spend on these kinds of activities.

The second issue that arises concerns the reliability of collecting information about time spent on domestic labour with summary measures such as those used in this project, compared to the more detailed estimates available through other techniques such as the time budget diary used by the ABS in their time use surveys. Similar issues are raised when we consider reports of time spent in paid work in an average week. There is considerable debate in the literature on this issue (Robinson 1985; Niemi 1990; Baxter and Bittman 1995). Robinson (1985) has argued that time diary estimates do not match up well with estimates from summary measures. He suggests that respondents tend to overestimate the amount of time spent on some activities when summary measures are used, probably as a result of the inclusion of secondary and multiple activities, for example, child care and cooking performed simultaneously, when estimating the amount of time spent on particular tasks. Niemi (1990) using data from the Finnish Time Use Survey conducted in 1987 found that respondents tended to report longer hours of paid work when using summary measures compared to estimates obtained from time diaries. This discrepancy was particularly apparent for the self employed.

There are a number of reasons why summary measures of time spent on domestic labour might give different results to time diary estimates. First there are problems of definition. Not all respondents will define housework similarly. Given this, summary measures such as used in our project which ask about the specific components of housework will probably produce more accurate estimates than measures which ask respondents to estimate the amount of time on housework in total. Second, social desirability may play a part in the accuracy of responses produced by summary measures. For example, men may be inclined

to over-estimate their contribution to domestic labour. However, the data shown in Table 1 suggest that this is not the case in the current project.

Previous work in Australia (Baxter and Bittman 1995) which has compared the estimates of domestic labour time produced by summary measures and time diary data show a high degree of overlap in the results, although there was evidence that summary measures generated larger estimates of time use than time diary estimates.

**Table 8: Average hours per week spent on child care and housework for married men and women**

Tasks	Men		Women	
	Self	Partner	Self	Partner
Child care <sup>a</sup> (N = 918)	23.5	50.2	57.9	22.3
Housework (N = 1405)	8.8	21.9	24.2	6.7

<sup>a</sup> The child care scale is calculated on a sample restricted to couples with at least one child under 13 years living in the household.

## **Tracing Negotiating the Life Course respondents: Finding respondents after two years without contact**

### **Background**

In 1999 a survey was conducted of respondents from the *Negotiating the Life Course* survey on their experiences as parents (*Parenting Survey 1999 – PS99*). A potential 872 respondents fitted the criteria for this survey, that being that they had a child twelve years or under, or that they had a child of that age in their household.

The PS99 was a mail questionnaire, and respondents were provided with a pack containing an introductory letter, the questionnaire, a reply paid envelope, and a form for new address information. This was the first contact from the NLC project that the respondents had received since they were originally contacted in late 1996 or early 1997.

On 17 May 1999, PS99 questionnaires were mailed to 780 out of a total 872 possible respondents. A further 56 were sent in the following two weeks. The remaining 36 needed to be contacted because only phone numbers were provided at the original contact. A reminder was sent on the 18 June. There was a low response rate from these attempts, with 376 out of 836 replying, and around 80 envelopes that were returned to sender (RTS).

## Tracing respondents

In order to find out what had happened to the remaining 380 and the 80 RTS, two people were hired to conduct respondent tracking. The main methods used were: (1) to phone the respondent's contact number(s); (2) to use the relatives/friends contacts that the respondent provided at the first interview; and (3) to use the whitepages online contact information (<http://www.whitepages.com.au/>).

Methods 1 and 2 were used extensively, and the most useful was phoning relatives and friends. This has been found in other studies such as Clausen's Mental Health Study whose main recommendation was to get the address of parents, siblings and good friends (Clausen, 1984).

Making contact with respondents increased the response rate. Many respondents indicated that they could not remember being contacted two years ago, but once their memories were jogged they were happy to respond. Table 9 gives a breakdown of the movement of *Negotiating the Life Course* respondents.

**Table 9: Results of phone tracing conducted in July/August 1999 of selected *Negotiating the Life Course* respondents**

Whether changed address	Number	Percent
Have not changed address or phone	523	60.0
Have changed address or phone		
Changed phone	17	1.9
Changed address but not phone	111	12.7
Changed address and phone	104	11.9
Passed away	3	0.3
Cannot contact		
No contacts	38	4.4
Cannot contact contacts	20	2.3
Contacts will not give details	5	0.6
White pages possibility	9	1.0
Moved overseas	7	0.8
Still trying with respondent or contact*	35	4.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>872</b>	<b>100.0</b>

\* It is probable that these respondents will end up in one of the 'cannot contact' categories.

In total, we made contact with 77% of the 460 respondents who had not responded to the mail-out or for whom we received an RTS. As noted, the process increased the response rate of the PS99, but many respondent details were updated even if they did not respond to the parenting survey. Some researchers are very positive about the proportion of respondents who can be found in follow-ups. Dempster-McClain and Moen suggest that with persistent and diverse approaches 100% can be found, and, in their study, they were able to find 95.6% of respondents after thirty years with no contact (1994:12-13).

## **Concluding remarks**

1. Regular contact. It is important to maintain regular contact with longitudinal survey respondents. Some people quickly forget that they were part of a survey, even when it may have taken quite a bit of time to complete. It is suggested that contact is made on a regular basis – at least once a year.
2. Get relative/friend contact information. Friends and relatives are excellent sources of contact information, as they are able to provide new contact details, or pass on information or documentation. Very few in the tracing exercise refused to provide contact details (0.6%).
3. Use other contact sources where possible. This includes the use of Whitepages information, electoral role and workplaces. This does mean that more detailed respondent information may be needed. However, as noted by Dempster-McClain and Moen, ‘the more tracking approaches that are applied, the greater the probability of locating all panel members’ (1994:10).

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