Flying the coop: 
Why is the move out of home proving unsustainable?

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Flying the coop: Why is the move out of home proving unsustainable?

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Changing social trends indicate that more young Australians are electing to live at home longer. Residing in the parental home is the most common mode of living for those aged in their 20s, with recent data indicating more than 30 per cent decisively remain in this arrangement with their parents.

While there are obviously still those who decide to move out, this housing arrangement seems to be proving unsustainable; many young adults are returning home to reside with their parents after time spent on their own in a trend increasingly referred to as the ‘boomerang’ effect.

This paper reviews the available literature on young adults’ living arrangements, identifying those factors implicated both in the leaving home process and the likelihood a young adult will return home after previously moving out. In highlighting how much of this earlier research has relied on the use of statistical methods, the paper aims to justify the need for the proposed study- a contemporary exploration of generation Y Australians’ experiences of home returning.

The study, guided by an ecological theoretical perspective, will utilise a qualitative methodology to investigate the reasons why young adults are experiencing difficulty sustaining their move to independent living. In-depth interviews will be conducted in Melbourne with young adults aged between 20 and 30 years who currently reside in the parental home after living independently for four months or more. It is anticipated the study sample will include both males and females who are currently engaged in, or have previously completed, tertiary study.

These interviews will be analysed and through the emergent themes, will provide a clearer insight into the ‘boomerang’ generation- a group of young adults who will become increasingly more common in light of the current uncertainty surrounding finances, employment and housing markets. The implications of this research will therefore be significant for those concerned with the future housing decisions of Australian society.
Flying the coop: Why is the move out of home proving unsustainable?

Introduction

Young adults today are delaying what is commonly considered the first step in adult life—moving out of the parental home (Cobb-Clark 2008; Flatau et al. 2007; Weston et al. 2001). Instead, significant proportions of young adults are remaining at home, with estimates from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2009) indicating that, in 2006, 31% of people aged 20–29 years lived at home with their parents, with 44% of those aged 20 to 24 and 17% of 25 to 29 year olds still at home in this same year (ABS 2009). While the number of young adults living in this arrangement has only marginally increased since 2001, when close to 30% of those in their twenties lived at home (ABS 2005), it has risen significantly over the last two decades. In 1986, 24% of those aged between 20 and 29 lived at home, with 37% of those in their early twenties and 11% of 25 to 29 year olds residing with their parents (ABS 2009). Reflecting the increased proportions remaining at home well into their twenties the median age of first leaving home, according to the ABS Family Characteristics and Transitions Survey, was 20.9 years among males and 19.8 for women aged 18 to 34 in 2006-07 (ABS 2008).

It has been suggested that young people are choosing to remain at home because there is no real driving force to move out. Seemingly, young people are not experiencing the major motivations to leave home and their needs for support, a reasonable amount of freedom and financial advantages are being obtained when living at home with their parents (Hartley 1993). While this would appear to be a reasonable explanation for the increasing numbers of young people staying in the parental home for extended periods, statistics also indicate many are still electing to move out (ABS 2009).

For some of these young adults, however, the shift to independent living is proving unsustainable. According to the Family Characteristics and Transitions Survey conducted in 2006-07 by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2008), the probability a young person, having left home for the first time, would return home at least once before the age of 35 was almost one in two (46%). The process of returning to the parental home requires further exploration. This paper will therefore review the available literature surrounding the living arrangements of young adults before outlining a study proposed to explore home returning in more detail. Given a young adult must first move out of the parental home in order to then be in a position to return, it is necessary to commence with a discussion of moving out.

Moving out

Moving out of home is typically measured as a discrete transitional event in the form of a residential shift from the parental home, with young adults typically required to be absent from home for spells of at least four months or more to constitute a separation (Mitchell 2006a). Yet, moving out is too complex and individualistic a behaviour to be conceptualised so definitively. Ideally, it should be considered a multi-dimensional behaviour that involves both physical and non-physical dimensions of separation and autonomy (Mitchell 2006a). For most young people, leaving home is a process occurring over time rather than an impulsive move, one that often involves a great deal of planning, imagining and fantasising before the step is finally taken (Hartley 1993). Young people leave home for a range of personal reasons, the most common among men and women aged 18 to 20 years being for independence and to study (ABS 2008). Among those over the age of 21, the main reasons for men and women to first leave were for independence and to live with a partner or get married, although women were more likely than their male counterparts to leave for the latter relationship formation (ABS 2008).
By this very nature, decisions about moving out are fundamentally family ones involving both the individual and their parents, influenced in part by cultural and social norms regarding the appropriate age and circumstances for leaving home (Cobb-Clark 2008). With economic, social and cultural circumstances continuing to evolve, the nature and timing of residential independence for young Australians has changed (Cobb-Clark 2008), with a range of societal, familial and individual factors implicated in the decision to leave the parental nest.

The influence of cultural background is particularly pronounced. Building on an early study into leaving home in Australia, which identified that young people whose mothers were of Southern-European decent left home, on average, at older ages than Anglo-Australians (Young 1987), the Australian Youth in Transition study found cultural background was one of only two factors to have a consistent influence on the likelihood a young person would leave home (Hillman & Marks 2002). Collecting data longitudinally from four nationally representative cohorts of young people born in 1961, 1965, 1970 and 1975, it was found that those aged 19 to 25 (age 24 in the case of those born in 1970) whose father, or mother where a father was absent, was born in a non-English speaking country were almost half as likely to leave home as those whose parents were Australian-born (Hillman & Marks 2002). A proportional hazards analysis conducted with data from the 2001 HILDA Survey supported these findings, identifying those born in non-main-English speaking countries had a lower relative risk of leaving home (Flatau et al. 2004).

Further to this, more recent statistics from the 2006 Census of Population and Housing indicated that young people of certain cultural backgrounds had a greater tendency to be living with their parents. Among those aged 20-34 years who were born in Australia but whose parents were both born overseas, those of Vietnamese, Chinese, Filipino, and to a lesser extent, Lebanese, Macedonian, Turkish, Greek and Serbian ancestries had a higher ratio of people living at home than all second generation Australians (ABS 2009). In contrast, the ratio of people living at home to those living away was lower among those of British and/or Irish, New Zealand, Maltese, Italian, Croatian and Polish ancestries (ABS 2009).

While this influence is particularly significant in a multicultural society such as Australia, other socio-demographic changes have been implicated in the timing of leaving home. Later ages of marriage and increased participation in tertiary education, as well as conditions related to housing costs, income and employment, all need to be considered in any discussion of home leaving (Flatau et al. 2003; Mitchell 2007). However, as Cobb-Clark (2008) points out, the empirical literature has only recently started to simultaneously model home leaving with decisions related to education and entering the labour market. Continuing research into the experiences of individual young adults is fundamental in order to identify the true influence of these broader changes on patterns of home leaving, particularly in light of the current uncertainty surrounding finances, employment and housing markets.

There are important housing-related influences on the decision to leave the family home. The expenses associated with living independently comparative to those of remaining in the parental home are important; if the costs outside the home increase, the individual is more likely to remain at home (Flatau et al. 2003). Specifically, higher housing prices have been shown to delay home leaving and promote returns to the parental home in Britain (Ermisch 1999). While a similar econometric analysis model had previously been employed by Bourassa, Haurin and Hendershott (1994) with data collected as part of the 1985 Australian Longitudinal Survey, returning had not been examined; findings only identified that increased housing prices reduced the probability that young Australians lived apart from their parents, while the availability of subsidised government housing increased independent living. A subsequent
analysis of this survey, using data collected in 1988, found similar effects for higher rental costs (Haurin et al. 1997).

Based on this, it is not surprising young adults are electing to delay leaving the parental home. While those aged 25 to 34 are considered the prime candidates for entry into home ownership, housing affordability appears to be a major impediment (Beer & Faulkner 2008, 2009). The ability to afford appropriate housing has declined over the last decade, with increases in the purchasing price and rental costs making it difficult for young adults to pay for accommodation and also save for a deposit (Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (DFHCSIA) 2009). Together with a decline in the availability of rental properties (DFHCSIA 2009), this has made independent housing inaccessible for the majority of young adults. This is unfortunate, as having access to affordable housing is fundamental to the wellbeing of individuals and their opportunity to gain access to and remain in employment and education (Ellis 1996).

Young adults’ living arrangements are closely linked to their decisions about education and employment (Cobb-Clark 2008). Commenting on data from the 2001 HILDA Survey, Flatau et al. (2003) suggested that increases in high school retention and tertiary education participation have contributed to the recent trend that sees people remaining longer at home with their parents. In terms of time spent in education, both males and females who remained at school longer were found to leave home later than those who left school at a young age (Young 1987, 1989). Young (1987, 1989) identified that those who were still studying when surveyed were less likely to have left home than those who were not, a finding supported in the recent 2006 Census (ABS 2009). Among those aged 20 to 34 years, both men and women were more likely to be full-time students if they were living in the parental home; this difference was more pronounced among women, with a higher proportion of women living with their parents studying on a full-time basis (ABS 2009).

Although this suggests post-compulsory education is a strong predictor of home leaving, the Australian Youth in Transition study produced inconsistent results in terms of the influence of educational level. While Hillman and Marks (2002) identified that post-secondary attainment (either TAFE or university qualifications) significantly increased the probability that a female born in 1961 or 1975 would leave home, this variable had an insignificant effect for females born in 1965 or 1970. In contrast, males born in 1965 and 1970 who held a TAFE or university degree were significantly more likely than those without such qualifications to make the transition to independent living (Hillman & Marks 2002).

The influence of education relates to its costs both in terms of the amount of time a young person is required to allocate to their study but also direct financial costs and foregone earnings (Hillman & Marks 2002). Albeit the cost of tertiary study can be financed through the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS), Cobb-Clark (2008) suggests that young adults still need to cover their living expenses and attempt to save for a deposit using their own earnings; this is difficult when, by virtue of their stage in the lifecycle, they typically earn lower incomes (Burke, Pinkney & Ewing 2002; Waulff & Baum 2002).

This is in part due to the deregulation of the labour market. According to Pusey (2007), young adults are more likely than in the past to hold part-time, casual or otherwise insecure jobs that could see them unemployed. They are thus not only in a financially insecure position to service loans but the deregulation has, in his view, fuelled an inflation of house prices and rents, increased the levels of economic risk and put home ownership beyond the reach of young people (Pusey 2007).
Consequently, young adults are increasingly dependent on their parents for longer periods, often relying on them for the provision of free or cheap accommodation and income support (Ellis 1996). The resources of parents have therefore become important determinants of individuals’ home leaving decisions (Ermisch & Di Salvo 1997; Holdsworth 2000; Mulder, Clark & Wagner 2002; Whittington & Peters 1996). While increased levels of non-transferable resources, such as cooking, cleaning and washing, family care and rent-free accommodation, encourage young adults to remain in the parental home, greater levels of transferable resources, such as cash payments, can actually make it easier for them to leave (De Jong Gierveld, Liefbroer & Beekink 1991; Holdsworth 2000).

While higher family income has been shown to increase the likelihood young adults will leave home internationally (Avery, Goldscheider & Speare 1992; Goldscheider & DaVanzo 1989), it has been suggested in the Australian context to have the reverse effect, actually encouraging the prolonged dependency of children on their parents; youth and family policies increasingly use parental income as a means of determining whether young adults should receive government support (Smyth 2000). Furthermore, as Australian social commentator Bernard Salt (2006) suggests, parents, confronted with the prospect that nature has dispensed with their services, allow their children to be ‘kippers’ (Kids in Parents’ Pockets Eroding Retirement Savings). They use their income to turn the family home into a swish 5-star hotel to encourage their adult children to remain at home; as long as they have children around they can continue as practising parents and feel needed (Salt 2006). Despite common perceptions, parents enjoy having their family together and, provided disagreements are infrequent, are highly satisfied with the presence of their adult children at home (Aquilino 1996; Aquilino & Supple 1991; Mitchell 1998; Mitchell & Gee 1996).


In addition to stepfamilies, other non-intact family structures also lead to earlier home leaving. Aquilino (1991), using multinomial logit models to estimate the effects of family structure on pathways out of the home, found that for American men and women, those who had lived in single-parent households, adoptive families or separate residences to both parents were likely to leave home earlier than those in intact families. Similar findings were obtained in the earlier Australian analysis, with Young (1987) acknowledging that, among young people aged 20 to 24 with more than one mother or father as a result of a broken family, higher proportions had left home compared to others in this same age group.

Several studies have also examined the influence of family size on the home leaving process. In Australia, both Haurin et al. (1997) and Flatau et al. (2004) found that the number of siblings increased the risk of exit from the parental home. This supported earlier work in Canada by Zhao, Rajulton and Ravanera (1995), who examined the effect of family size on the timing of home leaving in their analysis of the 1990 General Social Survey. Applying the proportional hazards model to data from parents of all children aged 15 and over, they found that a child with two or more siblings had a significantly higher relative risk than a lone child, indicating that the presence of three or more children in a family was more conducive to early home leaving (Zhao, Rajulton & Ravanera 1995). It is thought that children with more siblings have added incentives to leave home early, as they
experience a greater competition for family resources, including privacy, time, emotional nurturing and material goods and services (Zhao, Rajulton & Ravanera 1995).

Whether influenced by a need to escape competition with siblings or conflict with parents, obtain independence or accommodate changes in education or employment, the majority of young people will eventually leave home. They choose a range of living arrangements, typically moving into share households with friends, couple households or to live alone (ABS 2008; Beer, Faulkner & Gabriel 2006). Specifically, among those over the age of 21, the most common living arrangement of both men and women when they first left home involved moving in with a partner or spouse, with moving into a group household the next most popular housing arrangement (ABS 2008). However, with a greater proportion of women aged 21 or over moving in with their partners, men were more likely to live in group households and live alone than their female counterparts (ABS 2008).

Returning home

While young adults are moving out into a range of housing arrangements, the shift out of the parental home seems to be proving unsustainable. Among young adults living with their parents, whilst there are those who have never left, many have returned to the parental home after previously moving out (Coles, Rugg & Seavers 1999; Mitchell 2006a; Young 1996). ‘Returners’, or ‘boomerang kids’ (Mitchell 1998, 2006a, 2006b, 2007; Mitchell & Gee 1996; Tytel 2007), are typically considered those who have returned for at least four months after living away for at least four months (Mitchell 2006a; Mitchell 2006b). Yet, they are not easily distinguished (Heath & Cleaver 2003). With the primary data source, the Census, unable to differentiate returners from their non-leaving counterparts (Health & Cleaver 2003), the key sources of information on the proportion returning home in Australia are the analyses of past surveys conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS).

The analysis of the 1982 AIFS Family Survey, while now more than two decades old, is the most often cited when reference is made to home returning in Australia. Demographer Young (1987, 1989), analysing data from the Survey as part of a larger study into the ages of leaving home among young adults, identified what she considered a new phenomenon- “the widespread practice of young adults returning home after initially leaving” (Young 1989, p. 168). Through the use of survival analysis, a technique similar to life-table analysis except that instead of a death the decrement is a return home, the cumulative proportions of leavers who had never returned home could be derived; it was subsequently found that half of all men and 40% of women aged 18-34 who had left home had returned to live with their parents at least once (Young 1987, 1989).

Two later Australian surveys used different age groups and sample sizes. Albeit not comparable because of these differences, the 1990 Becoming Adult study, conducted with 138 young adults aged 23, found that around half had already returned home at least once; of these returners, nearly half the males and one-third of the females had come back on at least two different occasions, with one in six females returning more than twice (Hartley 1993). The Young Adults’ Aspirations Survey, conducted in 1998, also found that around half (53%) of respondents, aged between 20 and 29 years, who had left home had returned (Kilmartin 2000). However, unlike previous analyses by Young (1987, 1989) and Hartley (1993) which distinguished returners by gender, Kilmartin (2000) used age as a point of comparison. Of those surveyed, two thirds of those in their late twenties had returned home after living away (Kilmartin 2000).

The more recent Household, Income and Labour Dynamics (HILDA) Survey, analysed by Flatau et al. (2007), indicated around seven per cent of those aged 20-24 at the time of the survey in 2001 had
returned to live in the parental home. However, there may actually have been a large presence of home returners than this figure indicated, with Flatau et al. (2007) proposing that some respondents who had returned may have misinterpreted the question on patterns of home leaving. They may have focused exclusively on the part which asked if they still lived at home to the detriment of whether they had left the parental home and at what age and therefore wrongly supplied a never left home response (Flatau et al. 2007). As a result, the statistics were not an entirely accurate representation of home returning.

More recent data suggests this was the case. According to the Family Characteristics and Transitions Survey conducted in 2006-07, 31% of people aged 20-34 years had left and later returned to live with their parents, with 26% of those aged between 20 to 24 years and over half (53%) of those aged 25-29 subsequently returning to the parental home (ABS 2008). Of the young adults who return home, one-third of returners are anticipated to move back home after one to two years, with seven out of 10 returners expected home within three years of their departure (ABS 2008).

Returning, as with moving out, is a multi-faceted behaviour, with ‘boomerang kids’ coming home reluctantly or willingly. ‘Reluctant returners’ are those who have moved out of the parental home for a range of reasons but have had to return, often because of a failure to sustain an independent tenancy (Coles, Rugg & Seavers 1999). Issues related to difficulties maintaining independent living have been cited by young Australian adults in past surveys (Hartley 1993; Young 1987). In the case of the analysis of Young (1987), the most often cited reason for returning among all young people over the age of 26 related to convenience. However, among males, other subsequent reasons (in order of significance) were end of a job, finances, completion of travel and illness of self. In contrast, females’ reasons were illness, finances, end of travel, requests from their parents and the break-up of their marriage (Young 1987).

Similar findings were obtained in the 1990 Becoming Adult Study, with financial problems, reasons to do with job or education decisions, housing problems and broken relationships predominant reasons for returning (Hartley 1993). While the fact these reasons were self-defined meant they could have included a wide range of circumstances, young adults seemingly returned for practical, emotional and financial reasons (Hartley 1993). However, in discussing this, Hartley (1993) suggested that it was not surprising many of the young people surveyed had in fact returned, particularly as their comments indicated their leaving home was borne more out of a sense of wanting to try and see what it was like living away from their parents rather than an urge to be independent and self-sufficient.

Reasons for leaving are associated with returning home. Young (1987, 1989) found that a smaller proportion of those who left to marry returned home within ten years compared with a significantly larger proportion of those who left for other reasons. Specifically, males who left because of conflict or to travel had a higher probability of ever returning compared to those who left home for employment, to study, to be independent or reside with partner; in contrast, women who left home to be independent or to travel were more likely to return home than those who moved out for work, to study, to escape conflict or to cohabit (Young 1987, 1989).

Similarly, an analysis of Canadian data by Mitchell, Wister and Gee (2000) also identified that independence was associated with an increased likelihood of returning home. Yet, in contrast to Young (1987, 1989), leaving home to cohabit/marry or for occupation-related reasons was actually associated with an increased likelihood of returning. While the results of Young (1987, 1989) may not have been entirely accurate, with the presence of ‘censored cases’ (respondents who had not experienced home leaving or returning) affecting the average leaving age upon which the distribution of reasons for leaving depended, Mitchell, Wister and Gee (2000) had their own measurement error.
The authors suggested that, in merging marriage and cohabitation in the one question, the different consequences these two reasons for leaving had on returning may in fact have cancelled each other out (Mitchell, Wister & Gee 2000).

While there are obviously those who return out of necessity, having failed in their own eyes as adults due to job loss or relationship break up, others return because home is a comfortable retreat from adulthood and its responsibilities (Hartung & Sweeney 1991). Among these ‘willing returners’, Jones (1995) recognises those whose leaving was always intended to be temporary and those whose ‘problematic’ reasons for leaving had been resolved. Often young people who leave because of difficulties return when their parents have asked them to do so, suggesting the family holds emotional values young adults take into account when deciding where to live (Jones 1995).

The quality of family relations is therefore one of several important factors influencing the decision to return home. Young (1987, 1989) identified that a higher proportion of those with positive relationships with their parents, measured by increased psychological closeness and engagement in activities mostly with parents during the teenage years, had returned home. However, different results were obtained in an analysis of the 1995 General Social Survey in Canada. Using proportional hazards analysis, a type of event history analysis that models the risk of an event occurring (home returning) using cross-sectional data with time-embedded information, Mitchell, Wister and Gee (2000) found the emotional closeness variables (individuals’ closeness to their mother and father and their childhood happiness) to be statistically insignificant. This was unexpected, as the authors had reasoned that young adults would, all things being equal, be more likely to return to a family with close-knit bonds (Mitchell, Wister & Gee 2000).

Given these results, Mitchell, Wister and Gee (2000) hypothesised that reduced closeness in step-families and increased monitoring within lone parent households would deter young adults from returning. However, it was identified that family structure, whether a two-parent adopted, two-parent biological, step-parent or single-parent family, was not significant in the propensity to return home (Mitchell, Wister & Gee 2000).

Mitchell, Wister and Gee (2000) were surprised at this non-significant finding given the previous association between family structure and leaving home, suggesting that it demonstrated how home leaving and home returning were qualitatively different types of transition behaviour. While these differences could not be explained because the cross-sectional nature of the data used makes it difficult to identify causal processes (Mitchell, Wister & Gee 2000), the authors proposed that discrepancies between their finding and those of previous studies may have been due to measurement error (Mitchell, Wister & Gee 2000). Individuals’ family structure was based on the men and women who raised them while growing up, not those at home at the time of return; changes in family structure between childhood and the time of the survey may have affected the propensity to return home (Mitchell, Wister & Gee 2000).

Changes in the sizes of families may also be influential in the decision to return home. In an analysis of childhood family size on leaving and returning home using data from the 1987-1988 NSFH, the presence of siblings was the strongest deterrent of returning home among American young people aged 15 to 25 (Goldscheider & Goldscheider 1998). A subsequent Canadian analysis found that for each sibling, individuals were three per cent less likely to return (Mitchell, Wister & Gee 2000). Again, this is likely because of limits to, and competition over, parental resources or due to household crowding (Mitchell 2006a). While young adults’ family situations may have an important influence on
whether they leave and return home, the decision is also likely to depend on who each young adult is as an individual.

Despite the fact individual variance in the decision to return home cannot be explored in detail within surveys, the analysis of data has identified several personal characteristics that are implicated in home returning. While Young (1987) and others (Buck & Scott 1993; DaVanzo & Goldscheider 1990) have consistently found women were less likely to return than their male counterparts, recent Australian data suggests that a higher proportion of young women (24%) than men (20%) identified themselves as having returned home before moving out again (ABS 2008). These differences could be accounted for both by the fact a greater percentage of males have never left home and also that women tend to leave home at a younger age (ABS 2009); the probability a young adult will return is strongly associated with the age at which they first left home (Young 1987). Although restricted to the group in which the majority had left home in those aged 26 or older, instead of the entire sample of 18 to 34 year olds, Young (1987, 1989) found that young adults who left home at earlier ages were more likely to return home.

In Australia, returning home was also shown to increase with age amongst those young adults who had not yet been in a relationship (Kilmartin 2000). Overall, higher proportions of those surveyed in 1998 who had never been married or formed a de facto relationship had returned home compared with those who had experienced a relationship (Kilmartin 2000). Breakups have been found to contribute to the greater numbers of young adults returning to the parental home, with higher proportions of home leavers who had experienced relationship dissolution returning home (Kilmartin 2000).

Similarly, around three quarters of those who had left home and who considered themselves in an economically insecure position had returned home at some stage, compared with half of those who had left home and who did not perceive themselves to be economically insecure (Kilmartin 2000). Young (1987, 1989) identified that the unemployed were more likely to return than those who had never been unemployed. In the US, DaVanzo and Goldscheider (1990) identified that those with higher incomes were less likely to return home. Supporting the earlier work in Australia by Young (1987, 1989), they found young adults who were dependent on their parents financially and living semi-autonomously during their absence were more likely to return to home than those who were financially independent. They concluded overall that those experiencing a need for resources, whether as a consequence of reduced income, job loss, divorce, marriage, parenthood or a return to school, were more likely to return to the parental home (DaVanzo & Goldscheider 1990).

DaVanzo and Goldscheider (1990), along with Young (1987, 1989) and others, have identified who among young people are more likely to return to the parental home. However, in order to predict the factors that condition the return home, this research has for the most part relied on quantitative methods to analyse data (Sassler, Ciambrone & Benway 2008). While these studies have proven informative, they are questionable in terms of their relevance to current day patterns of returning home, particularly given the significant changes that have occurred since the 1980s and 1990s when the data upon which they were based was collected. Furthermore, in relying on cross-sectional censuses and one-time surveys, they are typically unable to encapsulate changes in living arrangements across the lives of individuals (Thornton, Young-DeMarco & Goldscheider 1993).

This is, in itself, particularly problematic given young adults today are residentially mobile (Thornton, Young-DeMarco & Goldscheider 1993). However, the variable nature of home leaving and returning means that studies are also affected by the age of those considered, the time and place in which the individuals live, who answers the questions (parents may define the situation differently) and even the
definition of leaving home itself (Goldscheider & Goldscheider 1999). In their discussion of previous research, Goldscheider and Goldscheider (1999) asserted that significant variance in the way studies defined these fundamental issues meant there was no accurate way to piece together the results, either to compare countries or time periods, in order to ascertain how many young adults had returned or whether this phenomenon had actually increased.

Even where data exists on the proportions of young adults who have returned, statistics do not necessarily provide all the answers. It is acknowledged that numerical data generally fails to represent the true complexities of young adults’ housing decisions (Coles, Rugg & Seavers 1999), suggesting that there is a real need for qualitative studies to explore returning home from the perspectives of those who have actually done so. The proposed study recognises this, adopting a qualitative approach to explore how young Australian adults experience returning home to live with their parents. In doing so, it seeks to identify the reasons why young adults are unable to sustain their move from the parental home.

**Study design**

Data will be collected from face-to-face semi-structured interviews with young adults in Melbourne. Criteria for selecting participants requires individuals to have returned to live in their parental home after previously living out of home for a period of at least four months for reasons other than travel. This recognises that those who spend less time out of home are more likely to have left temporarily; their reasons for returning could be very different from those of individuals who have returned after more definite transitions out of home (Mitchell 2006a).

Participation will be open to tertiary-educated males and females between the ages of 20 and 30 years. This age range is considered the period when most young adults are likely to return (ABS 2008). It also takes into account the fact that home returning peaks between one and two years after leaving (Young 1987, 1989); considering the propensity for young adults to remain at home into their twenties, this range will include those who may have left home at later ages and then returned.

Participants will initially be recruited through tertiary institutions, with advertisements posted on local campuses and in affiliated newsletters. With ethical approval obtained from the Deakin University, Faculty of Health, Medicine, Nursing and Behavioural Sciences Human Ethics Advisory Group (HEAG-H), the recruitment of participants is currently underway and, depending on the response, may be supplemented with snowball sampling. In preparation for the impending data collection process, the interview schedule has been developed to focus on a list of issues that are central to the research questions. Themes to be explored will include reasons for moving out and the experiences of independent living, as well as the circumstances that led to the decision to return home and its implications for wellbeing. Interviews, which will be conducted at a time and place convenient to the respondent, will last between one and two hours and will be digitally recorded and transcribed.

The data will then be coded. When all the interviews have undergone the coding process, the researcher will examine the range of codes, grouping those that are similar and collapsing them together to develop a series of themes (Creswell 2009).

The analysis of the data will be informed by an ecological theoretical perspective. The value of this framework lies both in its consideration of broader factors that impact on behaviour and outcomes and the emphasis it places on the influence of the family, both in terms of proximity to the individual and the magnitude of time one spends there (Townsend & Mahoney 2004). Consequently, this framework
constitutes a practical way of examining how intra-familial practices, such as the process of moving out and then returning home, are influenced by external environments (Bubolz & Sontag 1993; White & Klein 2002). Researchers of home returning to date, in focusing on the analysis of statistical data, have focused more so on the individual and therefore not yet recognised the possible application of the ecological framework to their studies. However, given the perceived influence of wider economic and societal changes on young adults and their living arrangements, it is likely to offer this study a useful outline in which to examine the factors identified as impacting on the decision to return to the parental home.

**Conclusion**

This research will contribute to the body of knowledge surrounding the living arrangements of young adults in Australia. In focusing on home leaving, independent living and returning to the parental home, it will traverse the common living arrangements experienced during this lifespan stage, demonstrating that the transition out of home is no longer as sustainable as it has been for previous generations.

More specifically, exploring home returning is anticipated to improve both the acknowledgement and understanding of this phenomenon. With past literature predominantly reliant on statistical data, either to highlight the proportions of young adults returning home or ascertain the probability an individual of certain characteristics will leave and then return, the current state of knowledge is somewhat incomplete. There is no doubt merit in understanding who among young adults are deciding to return. However, with much of this understanding based on data collected in the 1980s and 1990s, its relevance to the young adults of today is highly questionable.

Although more recent surveys have attempted to collect data on returning home, the continuing focus on the proportions of young adults who are moving back in with their parents has resulted in a somewhat one-dimensional understanding of the phenomenon. In order to fully comprehend returning home, it is necessary to not only identify who is involved but also explore why young adults are deciding to return and how they actually experience living with their parents after time spent living on their own.

Such an exploration of home returning is important, as it is considered partly responsible for the rising proportions of young adults remaining longer in the parental home and also indicative of the increasing challenges in maintaining independent living. It is also a distinct behaviour, contributing its own unique demographic, economic and sociological implications and reflecting broader changes in modern society.
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