

# Understanding the lives of separating and separated parents in the UK: what evidence do we need?

Summary report

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## About this summary report

This report summarises the findings from a Nuffield-funded project to assess the adequacy of current and planned data relating to the lives of separating and separated families, and to make recommendations for the design of future data collection.

The full report is available to download from [www.nuffieldfoundation.org/separated-families](http://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/separated-families)

## About the Nuffield Foundation

The Nuffield Foundation is an endowed charitable trust that aims to improve social well-being in the widest sense. It funds research and innovation in education and social policy and also works to build capacity in education, science and social science research.

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## Foreword from the Nuffield Foundation

In 2014 we awarded a grant to the authors of this report to establish the evidence needs in relation to family separation in the UK, and to assess the adequacy of existing and forthcoming data sources in meeting those needs. The aim was to identify whether the data infrastructure was sufficient, and if not, to recommend options for filling the gap.

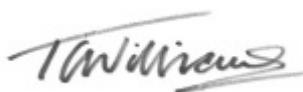
Families are of pivotal importance in our society and central to social policy, but research and policy has not kept up with the pace at which family structures have become increasingly diverse. Alongside this, we have seen a cessation of a number of key surveys – both before and during this project – and the narrowing of some administrative data sources as state services have become more rationed or targeted. These factors make a review of whether the evidence base is able to meet contemporary needs both important and timely.

Following an extensive consultation exercise with range of stakeholders in the policy, practice and research communities, and a thorough assessment of data sources, the authors conclude that the current infrastructure falls some way short of what we would hope for, and without improvement, policy makers will continue to be hindered by the limited evidence base.

Nonetheless, there are opportunities to develop the data infrastructure in relation to separated families. The authors identify that, theoretically, a number of the existing longitudinal surveys could be enhanced. In particular, some specific enhancements to *Understanding Society* would go a long way towards meeting some of the evidence gaps. While this would require balanced judgement, we believe the considerable potential is well worth exploring, and we hope that the ESRC's Longitudinal Studies Review will provide a framework in which innovative developments of the existing studies are encouraged.

The alternative proposal of developing a new bespoke longitudinal study of separated parents – while enticing – is fraught with challenges. As such, we encourage an approach that seeks to enhance existing studies in the first instance, before re-assessing the value and challenges of a new study. Both options would require a considerable amount of work to develop and test, as well as time, expertise, and funding. The Foundation will continue to develop its links with the relevant longitudinal study teams and research experts in the field of family separation to help facilitate the conduct of such work. We ignore deficits in the data infrastructure at our peril.

We would like to thank the team who conducted this study for their thorough assessment and well-considered recommendations, and for delivering a comprehensive and engaging account of the project findings. We would also like to thank all those stakeholders who contributed to this project for being generous with their time and insights.



**Teresa Williams**  
**Director of Social Research and Policy**

# 1. Introduction

This study was designed to address three broad questions:

1. What are the evidence – and data – needs around family separation in the UK?
2. How far are these needs met by administrative, survey and other research data that currently exist or are in the process of being developed?
3. What additional data are required, and how would these best be collected?

Our wide-ranging consultation and desk research highlight significant shortcomings in the UK evidence base on family separation. Administrative data include only a proportion of separated families. Bespoke, largely cross-sectional, studies provide depth on individual issues, but their specific policy lens limits the ability to look holistically at family separation over time. And the large-scale, multi-purpose longitudinal studies are restricted in the data they can reasonably collect on family separation.

In theory, more could be made of existing longitudinal studies to help build up the evidence base on separating and separated families, and this has the potential to be a cost-effective approach. However, current sample sizes and restrictions on adding interview content mean that these studies cannot feasibly be expected to address all the gaps. An alternative and potentially better option for delivering against the full range of evidence needs identified is a new bespoke study. However, there are methodological challenges in setting up and running such a study, and the current climate means securing funding for a new study will be difficult. The following areas would need further development both to inform a new study and to make better use of existing resources: identifying how best to boost samples with newly separated parents; improving the identification and retention of non-resident parents; and enhanced question modules to address key evidence gaps adequately.

This report is a summary of our findings. Our full report is available to download from [www.nuffieldfoundation.org/separated-families](http://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/separated-families)

## **2. Why we need data to understand families**

**Within our society, families provide – or are expected to provide – a bedrock on which we rely throughout the life course:**

**...Children’s upbringing and family relationships over the life course affect life chances and wellbeing**

There is a wealth of evidence on the importance of ‘family’ – or, more specifically, the relationships between parents and children – across the life course, which spans academic disciplines and policy areas. Research from both psychology and health makes clear the effects of parenting styles and parental attachment on many child outcomes that extend into adulthood (e.g. Dozier et al, 2008). The sociology and demography literatures highlight links between family structure, and the fluidity of those structures, and the life chances of both parents and children (e.g. Clarke-Stewart and Brentano, 2007).

The financial interdependency of families, both within and across households, is a key focus of economists and those interested in the link between income and life chances (Duncan et al, 1998). Gerontologists articulate the role of the parent-child relationship in older age, with current debates focusing on both the support roles that older people play for their adult children (for instance, providing informal childcare (e.g. Bryson et al, 2012) and financial gift-giving) (Albertini et al, 2007) and the support that they themselves require (Bonsang, 2009).

**...Policies and services are designed with a presumption that individuals are part of a wider family structure**

Policy-making and service design are often based on implicit or explicit assumptions about the roles of families. Indeed, the current government’s ‘Family Test’ seeks to recognise the potential impact of any new policy on ‘the family’ (Abreu, 2017). The welfare, and to a lesser extent tax, systems assume a financial interdependency between household members. The law provides couples (although sometimes only married couples) with financial and decision-making rights. Parents, whether or not they live with their children, have responsibilities towards them. And among separated families, parents are legally required to support their children financially.

**...So, it is essential to have data on these families - and the effectiveness of policy and practice in supporting them – across the *range* of family structures that we have within the UK**

Given the centrality of the ‘family’ to the healthy functioning of our society and to the well-being of individuals within them, we need data to understand ‘families’, how they and the individuals within them are affected by policy and practice, and the outcomes for families and individuals who follow varying trajectories. To do this, our datasets – whether administrative or research-led – must capture ‘families’ in their broadest

forms and be unconstrained by increasingly anachronistic assumptions about family structures.

**...Yet, our current evidence base is much stronger on more 'traditional' family structures, and less strong in terms of those which emerge through family separation**

Although research studies increasingly recognise the need to reflect more diverse family structures than couples who are the biological parents of their children, data collected about other family types often remain limited. The focus continues to be on the household in which the children live, with non-resident parent families treated as 'secondary' (with data on them often collected by proxy from the resident parent).

Moreover, the 'separated family'<sup>1</sup> is too often regarded as being just the separated parents and their children, with insufficient regard for the step-relatives who contribute to how the families function and to the outcomes that result. Administrative data, in particular, have very limited ability to identify more complex family structures. All in all, in order to strengthen the evidence base on families we need to reflect on how we approach data collection on family separation. The case for this is developed in the following sections.

### **3. Why we need data to understand separating and separated families**

**Policy, practitioner and research communities need more robust and nuanced data on the experiences, trajectories and outcomes of separating and separated families with dependent children because:**

**...Family separation affects millions of families and children**

The absolute number – and proportion – of families and children who experience separation in the UK is substantial. One in six children are born into a family in which their birth parents do not live together (ONS, 2016) and one in three children experience the separation of their parents during their childhood (OECD, 2013). Around two per cent of families with dependent children separate each year (authors' analysis), resulting in 2.5 million separated families raising over four million children at any point in time (Punton-Li et al, 2012). Three million children are living in single parent households (25 per cent of children), and a further one million with step-parents (eight per cent of children) (ONS, 2015).

Most separated parents were previously married, but a decline in marriage rates and an increase in cohabitation (Perelli-Harris et al, 2010) mean that this balance is likely

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<sup>1</sup> By 'separation' we refer to families in which the child does not live with both their parents, with no assumption that they ever did so. Our focus is on situations where the child lives with one parent (for most of the time) or in an equal shared care arrangement. Situations where a child is living apart from their parents due to state intervention from social services are outside of the scope of our study.

to change, especially as cohabiting relationships (when they do not result in marriage) are, on average, more fragile than marriages (Kiernan and Mensah, 2010).

### **...Family separation can be associated with poorer outcomes for children**

Separation is a significant life event that carries an increased risk of negative consequences and poorer life chances for both parents and children (e.g. Amato, 2005; Mooney et al, 2009, Goisis et al, 2016). For many children, family break-up brings social and emotional instability coupled with financial disadvantage that can impact on all areas of their lives, from economic and material to deeply-felt social and emotional insecurity (Ridge, 2002).

There is a growing body of literature on the effect of more complex family structures (involving step- and half-relatives) on children's outcomes and their well-being, identifying the added strain in such cases on negotiating relationships and roles within and across households (e.g. parenting responsibilities, sibling relationships, ex- and new partner relationships) (e.g. Case et al, 2001; Brown and Manning, 2009; Stroud, 2015). Messages from the research evidence are complex but, overall, studies suggest that children of separated parents are at increased risk of behavioural problems, poorer educational achievement, health problems and risky health behaviours.

Although identifying the drivers of these increased risks is difficult, key factors are resultant living conditions (lower incomes and poorer quality housing), post-separation parental relationships or parenting approaches (e.g. Wade and Smart, 2002; MacLean, 2004; Teubert and Pinquart, 2010), and post-separation relationships between children and non-resident parents (e.g. Hawthorne et al, 2013; Goisis et al, 2016). Understanding why, even after controlling for these factors, some children are more negatively affected by separation than others is a key research question that could ultimately lead to targeted support for those most vulnerable to negative outcomes of a particular type.

### **...Separated parenting is different from parenting when parents live together**

The experiences of growing up – or parenting – in a separated household are different in a number of key respects from the experiences within families where both parents live together. When families are separated, it is not sufficient (as many studies do) to focus solely (or largely) on the resident parent<sup>2</sup> and their household. Nor is it sufficient (again as many studies do) to assume any resident parent's partner plays a primary 'father figure' (or other parent) role, regardless of their actual relationship to the child.

The data we need on the experiences of living in separated families must take account (at least) of: co-parenting while not living in a parent-couple relationship;

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<sup>2</sup> We use the terms 'resident' and 'non-resident' parents because of their common use in the literature and for want of more nuanced, but recognisable, terminology. However, we recognise the inaccuracies of these terms, given the varied nature of children's living arrangements when parents do not live together, and the growing proportion of children living across both households.

step-families; children spending time (or sometimes living equally or near equally) in two separate households; children's relationships – or lack of relationship – with a non-resident parent; and the need for two parents' income to cover (and to some extent to be shared across) two households rather than one. There needs to be a better understanding of how families navigate through more complex family structures including step- and half-relatives, and children's experiences of living (or staying) within more than one household.

### **...There is a strong call for evidence**

Our consultation work highlighted many (often unanswered) questions about the experiences and implications of family separation. These questions are wide-ranging in topic, require in-depth information, and were asked from several different perspectives. Firstly, government departments have different needs:

- The Department for Work and Pensions has evidence needs related to its responsibility for welfare provision for single parent households, couple and post-separation relationship support and the statutory child maintenance system.
- The Ministry of Justice has a focus on families entering the legal system (including mediation) in England and Wales in relation to post-separation negotiations around divorce, financial settlements and child arrangements.
- Departments such as Education and Communities and Local Government also have responsibility for policies in which family separation is a factor.

Secondly, research questions from policy and practitioner interest groups span a wide range of foci including child poverty, child welfare, single and non-resident parenthood, family law and family justice, and mental health (both adult and child) as well as relationship support. And, lastly, those working on research related to family separation approach it from a range of substantive research disciplines (including economics, law and socio-legal studies, sociology, demography, social policy, health and psychology).

Data on family separation are needed to augment the substantive knowledge base available for analysis in the short- to longer-term. At the simplest level, we need to be able to describe and document how our society is changing over time in terms of family structures - and how families function within different family arrangements. But beyond this, we need to understand the ways in which family structures affect parent and child trajectories and outcomes in order to inform the development of policy and practice that will maximise their well-being and future life chances. In particular, data are needed to measure the impact and effectiveness of interventions designed to provide separating and separated families with services and support.

The evidence needs we identified can be broadly categorised as:

- An understanding of the factors that lead to separation, and how families' pre-separation lives influence their post-separation lives.

- The implications of separation for parent and child outcomes (sometimes relative to pre-separation and intact family outcomes).
- An understanding of the trajectories that families take post-separation, and the implications of these for parent and child outcomes.
- An understanding of the ways in which policy (changes) and the provision of support affect:
  - Outcomes for separated families, irrespective of time since separation.
  - Outcomes for newly separated families.
- Families' decisions around separation and propensity to separate, and factors which may influence decisions to separate or not.

And these evidence needs relate to one or more of the following set of broad (inter-related) issues:

- Relationship breakdown and the process of separating.
- Divorce and legal issues relating to separation from marriage and cohabitation.
- Pre- and post-separation relationships and parenting.
- Children's living arrangements post-separation.
- Pre- and post-separation income and finances, and child maintenance post-separation.
- Pre- and post-separation use of services and support needs around relationships, parenting and arrangements post-separation.

**...For a number of reasons, the need for data on separated families has increasingly come to the fore**

The structure and fluidity of family formation has changed a great deal in the last few decades, with rising numbers of families who never live together, who separate, and who are in traditionally 'less stable' relationships. So, the need for these data is certainly not new. However, there are several reasons why this issue has become more pressing, and why putting in place a robust data infrastructure now would be invaluable in addressing short- and longer-term questions on family separation:

- There is an increasing recognition of the importance of effective co-parenting among separated families. Measuring the 'involvement' of non-resident parents in terms of financial support and 'contact' has to some extent been superseded by a desire to understand how families function post-separation, and what support might facilitate better co-parenting, including a recognition of the role and/or effects of step-parents and step- and half-siblings. This has resulted in calls for nuanced data on the relevant issues from across the policy, practitioner and research sectors.
- There is a need to evaluate – immediately and into the longer-term – several key policy changes affecting separating and separated families. These include measures to encourage families to make their own post-separation arrangements, rather than use statutory services and the courts; investment

in relationship support services; and welfare changes affecting single parents and other low-income families.

#### **4. Why the data we have are insufficient**

**However, the data we have – and currently plan to collect – fall short of what is required:**

##### **...Recent changes to the data infrastructure are likely to exacerbate the unmet need**

The reduction in the number of families in contact with statutory and legal services following policy changes encouraging family-based arrangements means a depletion in government administrative data available for understanding the circumstances, and tracking the outcomes, of separating and separated families. As a result, these administrative sources (even in combination) provide nothing like a census of separated families. Rather, the coverage of these sources will necessarily be biased towards those who continue to use statutory and legal services despite the various discouragements to do so, such as higher conflict families and those with continued free access to services, for example due to domestic violence. Currently, evidence about families outside of the legal and statutory systems can only be filled by data collected directly from families, either from surveys or other research.

Moreover, the funding available to many government departments has been reduced, which has affected the availability of funding for primary research. The policy and research communities will therefore be more reliant on data collected in the large, longer-term (largely grant-funded) studies, rather than bespoke research. It is important that these studies collect the data required to meet this need. But a silver lining of the need to rely more on multi-focus studies is that this provides an opportunity to work outside of the silos of particular government departments and academic/research disciplines, to ensure that we gather the kinds of holistic evidence required to understand families' lives and the *combined* impact of the various policies which affect them.

Over recent decades, the large-scale, multi-purpose, longitudinal studies have been the cornerstone of the evidence base on family separation. The cancellation of Life Study (the planned next birth cohort study) will mean a substantial gap in these data for children growing up within the contemporary social and political context.

##### **...Existing 'family' studies often pay insufficient attention to separated families**

Despite the high proportion of children living in separated families, the survey data about their lives are often inferior to those for families in which parents live together. The added complexity of family life in separated families tends to be insufficiently reflected in the questions asked and/or who is interviewed as part of the study. There is often a primary focus (in terms of questions and respondents) on the household in which the child is living, with far fewer data collected on, for instance, the parenting

roles of the non-resident parent. Very few data are collected about the ways in which family life and relationships are negotiated in separated families (e.g. the dynamics of step-family relationships, how separated parents navigate co-parenting, and so on), or about the lives of non-resident parents and their households. What data there are tend to come from the reports of resident parents, and are not collected directly from non-resident parents, step-relatives or the children and young people themselves. Where studies do attempt to interview non-resident parents and their households, difficulties in achieving representative samples reduce the credibility of the available evidence.

**...There is some good cross-sectional evidence on particular issues or sub-groups, but much more limited holistic longitudinal data**

Government-funded evaluations and surveys, and qualitative studies, can separately provide depth and breadth. However, they tend to address very specific questions with specific groups, usually those involved in the statutory (e.g. child maintenance) or legal system, or users of particular government, private or third sector support services. So, whilst fit for purpose in terms of their particular aims, they provide only piecemeal evidence for the wider base, and provide limited opportunities to take a more holistic view of separation. They are mostly one-off cross-sectional studies, which mean they provide a snapshot of families at a particular point in time. This restricts our ability to use these data to understand the dynamics of separation and causal pathways.

In particular, families outside the legal or statutory systems often remain invisible to these studies. This will be an increasing issue: with policy and legal changes meaning that fewer separated families will come into contact with 'the system', it is more important than ever that we understand what is happening to those outside it.

Moreover, as these studies are often conducted with a particular policy question in mind, the timing of the data collection can affect the usefulness of the data for future research. Key changes to the welfare, statutory support and legal systems in recent years diminish the value of data collected earlier, and further highlight the need for ensuring a data infrastructure which captures the experiences and outcomes of families within the current regime.

**....The existing longitudinal studies tend to provide breadth not depth of information, and have methodological constraints**

The best holistic data on separated families are provided by the UK's large-scale longitudinal studies. Moreover, as they track families over time (including sometimes prior to separation) they provide the necessary data to look at the trajectories of families and their resultant outcomes. However, in terms of how far they can reasonably be expected to cater for the full range of evidence needs on family separation, they are limited in three key respects:

- Their multi-purpose nature constrains the amount of data they can reasonably collect specifically related to family separation.

- With the most recent national birth cohort (the Millennium Birth Cohort) in their teens, there are no contemporaneous cohort data on which to draw.
- Sample sizes and attrition among separated families reduce the analytical potential.

The UK's longitudinal data infrastructure includes studies of households (notably the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) followed by the UK Household Longitudinal Study (UKHLS)), as well as smaller panel studies of families such as the former Families and Children Study (FACS)). It also includes a number of birth cohort studies, tracking children and their families from birth. Whilst some are nationwide (e.g. 1946, 1958, 1970 and Millennium Birth cohorts), there are also several regional (e.g. Avon Longitudinal Panel Study of Parents and Children (ALSPAC) and Born in Bradford) and country-specific studies (e.g. Growing Up in Scotland, Longitudinal Study of Young People in England 'Next Steps'). The earlier birth cohorts (1946, 1958 and 1970) provide valuable data on the experiences of family separation during their childhood, but within the context of quite different societal structures and norms, as well as policies. Necessarily they are more limited in their usefulness today (except for exploring the consequences of separation into adulthood, albeit given the then policies). So, the most valuable studies for looking at separation within a (relatively) current context are the UKHLS and the MCS (and, more recently, Next Steps). Each of these studies provides different evidence, which could be usefully triangulated.

Overall, the UKHLS currently provides the most comprehensive longitudinal data on a representative group of UK families with dependent children, providing information on both intact families and those who live separately. It has several attributes which make it a strong dataset for studying family separation: a reasonable sample size of currently separated families; a good range of data on family life pre- and post-separation; and, crucially, the attempted continued collection of data from parents and partners who leave the original household. However, several issues constrain how far the study can be used to address the full range of research questions on family relationships post-separation:

- First, although the study includes a good selection of questions useful for the study of family separation, its multipurpose nature means that it lacks the depth and granularity required – particularly in terms of the experiences of co-parenting, process of separating, transition periods and outcomes. It is not realistic to expect a multi-purpose study of this nature to be able to provide all the evidence required on family separation.
- Secondly, despite its large overall sample size, the number of families who separate each year and at least one parent remains in the study is small (around 100), limiting short-term analysis which relies on pre-separation as well as post-separation data, or analysis of the effects of particular policy changes. Most analyses require data aggregated across multiple years. These small sample sizes are exacerbated by a suspected differential level of drop-out among families who separate.

- Finally, the proportion of non-resident parents who remain in the study post-separation is low, resulting in very small numbers and potential bias among this group.

In contrast, the MCS is arguably the most comprehensive (relatively) up-to-date dataset for studying the outcomes of children experiencing separation during childhood. The study has followed a birth cohort of children born between late 2000 and early 2002, with its primary aim to track their outcomes throughout their lives. As such, it makes a rich dataset for understanding the pathways and outcomes of children who experience separation – with a wide range of outcomes and explanatory variables – with reasonable sample sizes of children experiencing separation at different ages. However, like the UKHLS, a number of issues constrain how far the MCS can be used to address the full range of research questions on family relationships in separating and separated families:

- First, by dint of the birth cohort design, the children are all growing up within the same policy timeframe and the same period of change (e.g. recession, education changes, etc.), making it impossible to disentangle the timings of the separation from other changes over that time. For instance, were we to look at the effect of the recent child maintenance changes on separating families using MCS data, we would be looking at the effect on families with children in their early teens (which may be different from the effect on families with younger or older children).
- Secondly, the MCS does not collect any data from parents who do not live in the child's household. If parents separate, no data are collected from the non-resident parent: all data on the separation and post-separation period come from the resident parent (and, as children get older, the children themselves).
- Thirdly, in general, the data collected on post-separation parenting are limited, restricted largely to questions around contact with minimal information on the quality of relationships and co-parenting.
- Lastly, the children are now in their teens so, for recent or future policy changes, the MCS cannot provide data on their effects on younger children.

## **5. Barriers to improving the evidence base**

**However, there is no easy solution to improving the evidence base on separating and separated families:**

**...Research budgets are tight**

Research budgets are tight, with competing priorities for government and grant-funders, particularly for longitudinal studies, which require long-term investment.

Government is more likely to concentrate its resources on studies to address immediate policy or intervention questions, rather than investing in new longitudinal data collection. The ESRC is currently evaluating its longitudinal data infrastructure in order to inform its future funding. It is due to report in mid-2018. However, again, it is clear that there are many competing priorities for grant-funders.

### **...Administrative sources neither provide the depth of data nor capture more than a subset of separated families**

Few administrative data sources identify separated parents and those that do focus on specific sub-groups of the population (e.g. single parents within the welfare system; users of the Child Maintenance Service; court users). Moreover, they provide little more than a basic profile of the resident or non-resident parent family along with a small number of objective outcomes around benefit receipt, child maintenance payment/receipt and arrangements made in court. So, while, in the future, it may be possible to link these datasets, this complex and costly task would provide very partial coverage and limited data, largely ruling out their use as stand-alone resources for research into separation. At most, they can valuably supplement survey data collected directly from families.

### **...The methodological challenges of surveying separated families are substantial**

The methodological challenges to collecting robust survey data from separating and separated families are substantial, including:

- There are no available sampling frames by which to identify resident and non-resident parents without large-scale screening. This is both costly and prone to bias: previous attempts to do so resulted in samples which under-represent separated parents, particularly non-resident parents. Only around half the number of non-resident parents self-identify in screening exercises compared to resident parents (e.g. Peacey and Hunt, 2008; UKHLS own analysis).<sup>3</sup>
- Where research questions require data on families pre- and post-separation, the low prevalence of separation (up to two per cent of families with dependent children each year) makes it very difficult to build up an adequate sample size.
- A differentially high attrition rate among separating and separated families in longitudinal studies makes it challenging to retain a representative sample of separated families over time. In particular, it is very hard to retain non-resident parents in studies after separation.

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<sup>3</sup> There are a number of added complications here. Firstly, for families in which children spent substantial – or even equal – amounts of time living with each parent, defining (for survey question purposes) one parent as ‘resident’ and the other as ‘non-resident’ can be problematic – and does not necessarily reflect the reality of some shared care arrangements. Secondly, we should not assume that ‘family separation’ only relates to the separation of natural or adoptive parents. Rather, in some cases, the separation from a social parent (e.g. step-parent) should be a criterion for inclusion in a study on family separation. Thirdly, we recognise that ‘separation’ is not always a distinct event, and that families can move in and out of being intact or separated, or that ‘separating’ happens over a period of time.

- Capturing new forms of families/parenting requires a substantial amount of new survey question design and piloting. We need to think beyond traditional measures of parenting in stable, two-parent families to how to capture parenting across households, potentially involving step-relatives and other forms of blended families. This is likely to be easier to achieve in a bespoke study which focuses on family relationships.

## **6. Potential ways of improving the evidence base**

**In a world of unrestricted budgets, the optimal solution would be to launch a longitudinal study of families with dependent children:**

**...We need longitudinal data, including data on families before they separate**

Understanding families' circumstances prior to, and trajectories towards, separation is essential for a range of research questions around the causes and effects of separation. This requires data from families prior to separation (best collected in real time rather than retrospectively). This would be achieved by starting with a cross-section of all families with dependent children and tracking them over time.<sup>4</sup>

There are different sampling models which could be adopted: one would be a nationally representative sample; another would be a series of local area-based studies, which may be valuable in terms of recruitment and retention, as well as providing the ability to 'boost' particular sub-groups of interest through local recruitment. Under either approach, all the families in the study would be tracked over time. Those families intact at baseline that subsequently separate would – crucially – yield data on both their pre- and post-separation circumstances and outcomes. Those already separated at baseline would yield data over time on post-separation circumstances and outcomes.

**... Methodologically and substantively, we need a study which is set up specifically to collect data on parenting and family life and its wider effects**

A longitudinal study with a specific focus on families could devote all of its interview time on relevant data collection, and facilitate 'offshoot' studies (qualitative or quantitative) to look at particular groups or issues.

We might expect that recruiting parents into a study when the family is intact, and retaining them in the study post-separation, would be more successful than recruiting both parents into a study at a time after they have already separated. However, this has not been tested within the context of a study promoted as being about family

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<sup>4</sup> An alternative model would be a cohort study with perhaps three cohorts of children starting at different ages (e.g. birth, age 5 and age 9).

relationships.<sup>5</sup> It can also be designed to focus on issues around step-families and other forms of complex blended families.

**...However, the costs of such a study would be high if the primary focus of the study were family separation**

Given a separation rate of around two per cent per year, the data collection costs per separated family would be very high relative to the number of families for which pre- and post-separation data would be collected. In our view, the costs would be unlikely to be justifiable unless there were a strong call for the additional data on both two-parent as well as one-parent families included in the study. That is, there would need to be a call for a longitudinal study of families above and beyond what is provided by the existing longitudinal studies.

The two main features of the design that would drive the costs are:

1. *Sample size.* Our view is that a longitudinal survey dedicated to separation would need to start with an achieved sample size of around 28,000 families of whom around 20,000 will be intact at Wave 1.<sup>6</sup> A sample of this size would yield (if parents could be retained within the study) around 300 to 400 separations per year, which would be large enough for reasonable analysis of this group year on year, but would crucially allow for detailed analysis with just a small number of years of accumulated data.
2. *Interview mode.* It is probable that much of the interviewing for the study, including all the interviews with intact families, would need to be carried out face-to-face. The need to identify which families in the study had separated wave on wave might make the use of cheaper modes (such as postal, online and telephone) problematic as such modes might increase non-response amongst those that had recently separated.<sup>7</sup>

In such a study we estimate that in Wave 1 around 98 per cent of the data collection (and hence around 98 per cent of the costs) would be with families who were either intact (70 per cent) or had separated earlier than a year ago (28 per cent). Just two per cent would be with newly separated families. Assuming an 80 per cent response rate at each wave post baseline, by Year 5 a starting sample of 20,000 intact families would have generated at least one year of data on around 1,300 separating families.

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<sup>5</sup> The retention strategies in the UKHLS for separated parents mirrors all 'household leavers', rather than focusing specifically on the importance of retaining parents in a study on family life. The UKHLS has struggled to retain non-resident parents in the waves post-separation. Most child- or family-focused longitudinal studies in the UK have not attempted to interview parents once they leave the child's household (e.g. Families and Children Study, MCS).

<sup>6</sup> A family is defined as one in which there is one or more biological, adoptive or step-parent or one or more dependent-aged child.

<sup>7</sup> Alternative (cheaper) modes may be possible for separated families, once their commitment to the study post-separation is established.

**A more realistic – but still valuable – solution would be to bolster existing studies as much as possible *and* launch a longitudinal study of separating and separated families:**

**...A longitudinal study which tracks families post-separation can provide a wealth of data**

A considerably less expensive option would be to set up a longitudinal study that starts, at baseline, with a sample of *currently separated* families (irrespective of when they separated), plus a boost sample of the newly separated (who would otherwise be only a small percentage of the whole baseline sample). Such a study would provide very useful data on a cross-sectional sample of separated families, and would address a large number of the evidence gaps. Over time, the study would generate data on trajectories and outcomes for separated families. The boost of the newly separated would enable tracking of trajectories from soon after the separation. A comparison sample of intact families would allow for differences between separated and intact families to be studied.

**...There would be methodological challenges in setting up and sustaining a longitudinal study of separated families**

Setting up a study that starts with samples of currently and newly separated families is not straightforward, but it is feasible. The currently separated families could, in principle, be recruited via a doorstep screen of a random sample of addresses, but asking about separation on the doorstep is likely to be difficult. A better option might be to recruit a sample via another large-scale, and high quality, household survey, such as the ONS Annual Population Survey or the Crime Survey for England and Wales.

Identifying a reasonably sized sample of the newly separated is potentially more difficult. To generate a sample of newly separated resident parents would require some means of screening a sample of the general population of households – with the expectation that only around 0.6 per cent of all households<sup>8</sup> would be screened in as eligible. One option would be to recruit via a *very* large population survey, such as the ONS Annual Population Survey (which interviews 170,000 households per year).<sup>9</sup> Failing this, it might prove necessary to recruit via a large-scale omnibus survey. The larger versions of the latter surveys are not based on probability samples,<sup>10</sup> but they do have the advantage of very large numbers.

To gain buy-in to the study, a face-to-face interview would likely be needed, and the longer interview allowed via this mode would also give the opportunity to ask detailed questions about the family history. After the first interview, it might prove possible to

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<sup>8</sup> Allowing for the fact that under a third of all households are families with dependent children, and less than three per cent of these will have recently separated.

<sup>9</sup> The largest component of the APS is the Labour Force Survey, which has a one-year longitudinal element for addresses. This might be a help in identifying the newly separated.

<sup>10</sup> The sampling is based on filling quotas rather than being strict random sampling and there is an associated higher risk of bias.

move to cheaper data collection modes as long as high response rates could be maintained.

As with the first design, ideally the study would aim to interview both the resident and non-resident parents within the recruited families. Different methods for recruiting parents would need to be trialled, including recruiting both engaging representative samples of resident and non-resident parents into the study and attempting to recruit the other parent via the recruited one. Again, this is largely uncharted territory, in the context of a large-scale survey. We might expect it to be more difficult to recruit non-resident parents in this way than to recruit them whilst the family is intact.

### **...We would continue to rely on existing longitudinal studies for analysis requiring data collected prior to separation**

This design would not allow the collection of 'real-time' data on families prior to the separation, so the relationship between pre-and post-separation circumstances would not be captured, beyond any information that could be collected from parents retrospectively. Questions that rely on (non-retrospective) pre- and post-separation data would need to be addressed, as now, using the UKHLS or MCS. For this reason, we believe that if this design were to be funded, the option of including a few extra questions to the UKHLS would also need to be pursued.

### **...There may be potential to make quite modest changes to the UKHLS**

If it were possible to add a small number of key questions on post-separation parenting to the UKHLS, it would significantly improve the capacity to address research questions that require pre-separation data when used in conjunction with (the somewhat richer) pre-separation data already collected as part of study. Although there is only very limited potential for adding questions, due to the competing calls on the UKHLS interview time, the UKHLS team is considering the benefits of doing so.

There would also be benefit in exploiting the UKHLS's ability to identify major life events or transitions between waves, notably the point of separation. This would provide an opportunity to ask families an additional module of questions (perhaps as an additional interview supported through the UKHLS Associated Studies scheme) that captured recent or real-time data on these life changes, which are rarely if ever captured in surveys.

...So, in summary, our key options for enhancing the data on family separation are

| Options   | Advantages  | Disadvantages   |
|---|---|---|
| <b>Enhancing the UKHLS</b>  | Makes optimal use of existing longitudinal studies; less expensive than setting up a new longitudinal study.  | Limited space to add new questions; small number of separations per year.   |
| <b>New longitudinal study of families with dependent children</b> | The ideal vehicle for tracking families pre- and post- separation; a larger sample size of families than the UKHLS would increase the number of separations per year; new strategies for reducing attrition after separation could be trialled. | Extremely expensive model; considerable methodological issues to overcome before success of recruitment and retention post-separation could be guaranteed.  |
| <b>New longitudinal study of separated families</b>               | Would allow for outcomes post-separation to be tracked using a bespoke questionnaire.   | Expensive to set up and maintain; considerable methodological issues to overcome before success of recruitment and retention could be guaranteed; not clear how non-resident parents would be identified and recruited. |

## 7. Recommended next steps

**Our recommendation, as a first step, is to see how far it is possible to overcome the difficulties inherent in the post-separation study design by conducting a substantial two-wave feasibility and pilot study. This would also fulfil several short-term evidence needs:**

**...Methodological testing is required before we can justify the cost of a new longitudinal survey**

For both of the designs described above (a longitudinal survey of all families or a longitudinal survey of separated families), there are several methodological issues that would make committing to one or the other a high-risk strategy. First and foremost, both of the designs would ideally include non-resident parents in the sample, yet no survey to date has successfully identified and recruited a representative sample of this group. Secondly, a particular concern for a longitudinal

survey about separation is that families who separate are thought to be some of the hardest families to retain over time. This is partly because separation, and re-partnering, can trigger a house move as well as changes to phone numbers (both landlines and mobiles) and email addresses, and changes to surnames; but also because the experience of separation may itself make parents less likely to find the time to participate in research. For a longitudinal survey of the currently separated, the primary issue would be retention after the separation; for a broader longitudinal survey of families with children, the primary issue would be retention both during and after a separation.

Given the costs of a new longitudinal study, coupled with the methodological issues and risks, our belief is that the best *first step* would be to set up a modest-scale survey of currently separated families (with a boost of newly separated families) with commitment to *one* wave of follow-up. That is, each family would be interviewed twice – although consent for future follow-ups would be collected. In terms of sample size, we suggest that it would be adequate to undertake a two-wave study that starts with around 500 currently separated families and 250 recently separated. There is a rationale for also including a comparison group of, say, around 250 intact families to explore differences between separated and intact families.

**....Such a study would provide valuable detailed data on the experiences and short-term trajectories of separated families**

This initial pilot study would have two key aims:

1. To test the feasibility of recruiting (to wave 1) and retaining (in wave 2) separated families, particularly non-resident parents, thereby adding to the body of methodological evidence in this area.
2. To provide data to address (and be publicly available for analysis) a number of current information needs on separated families, which can be addressed using cross-sectional data. The one-year follow-up would provide some data on short-term changes in family circumstances, with the primary interest being those who were newly separated at baseline.

The study would recruit *separate* samples of resident and non-resident parents, employing methods to maximise the representativeness of these two (unrelated) samples. It would then be possible to test the feasibility of recruiting the other parent into the study, via the first parent, in order to provide the matched data required to provide a holistic picture of the experiences and outcomes of separated families.

Such a study would be extremely valuable to the policy, practitioner, and research worlds. Within a relatively short timeframe, it would provide very valuable, up-to-date nuanced data on the profile, circumstances and experiences of separating and separated families, reflecting a number of recent policy changes. And, if successful, it would provide a tested design (in terms of sampling, recruitment and survey questions) for a larger-scale, longitudinal study which would become the bedrock of the future data infrastructure on family separation.

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