

Separated families and child maintenance arrangements, Great Britain 2011

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Background

1. The separated family population is composed of all families where the parents/legal guardians do not live together and their children are either under 16, or under 20 and in full time non-tertiary education. This will include children who now live in households with a lone parent or where the parent has re-partnered.
2. Child maintenance is usually regular, reliable financial support that helps towards a child's everyday living costs. The parent who does not have main day-to-day care of the child, or non resident parent, pays child maintenance to the parent or person who does have main day-to-day care, the parent or person with care. The person with care can be a grandparent or guardian.
3. Child maintenance arrangements for the children from separated families can be made in a number of ways. An arrangement may be:
 - Family-based – these voluntary arrangements are made privately between the non-resident parent and the parent with care and may also include elements other than regular financial support;
 - Statutory – where it is arranged through the Child Support Agency (CSA);
 - Court arranged.
4. The analysis outlined in this paper estimates, for the overall separated family population, the number of families with each type of arrangement and of these how many are effective

Methodology

Data Sources

5. No single source provides definitive estimates of the number of separated families and the types of maintenance arrangements they have in place. A key issue with the available sources is inconsistencies between survey and administrative data. Consequently, information from across a number of data sources has been combined to provide a best estimate.

Labour Force Survey, April-June 2011

6. The Labour Force Survey is a sample survey of households, conducted quarterly. It provides information on activity within the UK labour market and includes characteristics of households including marital status, whether children live there and the relationship between household members. Data on a household basis is used.

Families and Children Study, 2008

7. A survey of families providing longitudinal cross-sectional information conducted between 1999 and 2008. The Families and Children Study provides information

on the type of child maintenance arrangements made by eligible families and whether maintenance is in payment.

CSA Administrative Data June 2011

8. Data extracts from the CSA administrative systems provide information on the Child Support Agency caseload. This includes breakdowns of cases by whether they have been assessed and whether payments are expected. Information from June 2011 data, summaries of which are published in the CSA Quarterly Summary of Statistics, is used to provide an estimate of the caseload aligned with the overall population estimate from the Labour Force Survey.

Estimating the separated family population

9. An estimate for the size of the separated family population is derived from the Labour Force Survey. All households are selected where there is either a lone parent or a couple where a step relationship between a parent and child is reported. Also derived is an estimate of the number of children within each household eligible for child maintenance. While the Labour Force Survey provides a robust estimate of the overall separated family population it does not provide any information on whether a child maintenance arrangement is in place and what type of arrangement it is.

Estimating types of child maintenance arrangements

10. The Families and Children Study 2008 provides the most up to date robust estimates for the types of child maintenance arrangements in place and whether those arrangements are effective.
11. While it is possible for parents to have multiple cases, with different arrangements for different children, such cases cannot be accurately identified from the Families and Children Study. Our analysis assumes that parents have only one type of arrangement in place according to the following hierarchy:
 - CSA - where a Child Support Agency arrangement is declared;
 - Court - where a Court arrangement is declared;
 - Family-based - where a voluntary or private arrangement is declared, but a Child Support Agency or Court arrangement is not.
12. The Families and Children Study derived proportions are applied to the overall separated family population identified by the Labour Force Survey – a survey based estimate.

Comparison of Survey based estimates to other sources

CSA arrangements

13. When compared to the CSA administrative data from June 2011 the derived survey based estimates show a significant undercount of total CSA arrangements of half a million cases.
14. There is also a significant difference in the proportion of people reporting that a payment is being made, with around a third of respondents to the Families and Children Study reporting that they receive either some or all of a CSA arranged payment usually or most of the time. This compares with almost 60% of CSA cases actually compliant according to the CSA Quarterly Summary of Statistics definition – where a case is counted as compliant if a payment has been received via the collection service in the previous quarter or a maintenance direct agreement is in place.
15. The Relationship Separation and Child Support Study 2008¹, a dedicated survey of separated families, shows 71% of CSA parents with care with a positive assessment reporting it to be in regular payment. Even accounting for the specific sample used in this study this outcome indicates underreporting of CSA arrangements in payment in the Families and Children Study.

Non-statutory arrangements

16. The Relationship Separation and Child Support study, 2008 and Study of Child Maintenance Arrangements, 2010² report a broadly similar distribution of arrangements to the Families and Children Study.
17. While these sources are generally not as robust as the Families and Children Study for child maintenance estimates owing to smaller sample sizes and methodological differences, they do give further support to the findings of the Families and Children Study with regard to family-based and court arrangements.
18. Consequently, there is no clear evidence to suggest that the derived survey based estimates of family-based and court arrangements are either significantly misreported or underreported. Nor is there any evidence to indicate the most appropriate way to alter the survey based estimates with confidence for these types of arrangements if there were misreporting or underreporting.

Adjusting for underreporting of CSA arrangements

19. To account for the underreporting of CSA arrangements the survey based estimates are adjusted so that they are in line with the CSA administrative data. A number of assumptions are made in calibrating the estimates:
 - the overall separated family population is a robust estimate given it comes from the Labour Force Survey which is the largest household survey in the UK³;

¹ <http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/rports2007-2008/rrep503.pdf>

² <http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/WP75.pdf>

- CSA administrative data provides a reliable estimate of the CSA caseload as the data is taken from CSA payment systems and is an actual count of CSA cases;
- neither court nor family-based arrangements are misreported or underreported in the Families and Children Study;
- respondents are underreporting whether a CSA arrangement is in place or whether a CSA arrangement is in payment.

20. These assumptions lead to the conclusion that:

- the total number of CSA arrangements in place should be increased in line with CSA administrative data while reducing the number with no arrangement in place to maintain the size of the overall separated family population;
- for those with a CSA arrangement the proportion in payment should be increased in line with the CSA administrative data.

Estimate of separated families

21. Final estimates are presented at the separated family level, with a separated family defined as consisting of a parent with care, a non-resident parent and their qualifying children. This differs to the number of households with a child or children eligible for child maintenance as reported in the Families and Children Study. This is because in some households the parent with care will have children by more than one non resident parent.

22. CSA administrative data show that for every 1,000 parents with care there are 1,050 child maintenance cases. A factor of 1.050 derived from this information is used to convert the FACS estimates from a household to a separated family basis.

Estimate of children from separated families

23. An estimate of the overall number of children from separated families is derived from the Labour Force Survey. This estimate shows that there are around 1.7 relevant children in each household identified as having a child maintenance interest, similar to the overall 1.8 children estimated from the Families and Children Study for lone parent households only.

24. However, CSA administrative data show 1.4 children per case (or separated family), lower than the survey based estimates. To provide an estimate by type of arrangement CSA administrative data is used to provide the number of children with CSA based arrangements, with the remainder allocated evenly across the other groups.

³ Further information relating to the Labour Force Survey is available here:
<http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/surveys/list-of-surveys/survey.html?survey=Labour+Force+Survey>

Results

Estimate of separated family population by type of arrangement, Q2 2011

Total Population	CSA (positive liability)	Court	Family-based	None
Number of Separated Families				
2.5 million	1.1 million (0.9 million)	0.1 million	0.6 million	0.6 million
Of which, percentage with effective arrangement				
52%	59% (78%)	72%	87%	-
Number of Children from child maintenance families				
4.1 million	1.6 million (1.2 million)	0.2 million	1.2 million	1.1 million
Of which, percentage with effective arrangement				
50%	56% (74%)	72%	87%	-

Notes:

1. Estimates are rounded to the nearest 0.1 million and may not sum due to rounding.
2. These estimates should be treated as indicative of the relative number of types of arrangement given the use of a number of sources in their derivation.
3. The estimates of the total separated families population and children from separated families shown each have a 95% confidence interval of +/- 0.1 million. We would expect this to be relatively wider when split by type of arrangement or whether an arrangement is effective.