Guidance

Background information and methodology: Estimates of the separated family population

Updated 29 March 2022

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1. Context of the statistics

The Department for Work and Pensions' (DWP) Group Operational Plan commitment to "Improve child maintenance policy and operations to support helping separated parents agree effective child maintenance arrangements. A fair, low cost, simple and effective child maintenance system supporting the most vulnerable children and families" refers to:

These statistics provide estimates of the following for each year from 2014/15 to 2018/19:

- the total number of separated families in Great Britain
- the number of children in these families
- the proportion of separated families with child maintenance arrangements of various types (the effectiveness of child maintenance arrangements is reported the scope of these statistics)

The latest release also provides the following estimates for the first time:

- the total amount of child maintenance payments received by custodial parents by arrangement type in 2018/19
- the impact of child maintenance payments on the number of children in low income households in 2018/19
- breakdowns of the resident parent population by age and gender for the year 2018/19 to 2019/20

Child maintenance arrangements

It should be noted that there is no requirement for all separated families to have an arrangement and some families may not want an arrangement.

If parents do want an arrangement they may be able to agree this themselves. Alternatively they can use the services of the Child Support Agency (CSA) or a private family maintenance arrangement. Such arrangements could include:

- voluntary financial arrangements which involve direct monetary payment between parents where the CSA has not been involved
- court orders specifying the amount of child maintenance to be paid
- other types of arrangements including payment in kind or in-direct payments
- court orders requiring parents to make financial payments.

Where parents agree on a maintenance arrangement, the Child Support Maintenance Options and the CSA can provide support. Child Maintenance Options provides a range of services to help parents who want to make their own family arrangements work, including advice on setting up child maintenance arrangements. 83% of people who contacted Child Maintenance Options in 2019 to 2020 said they were satisfied with the service they received and 90% said it helped them to make a child maintenance arrangement.

If further support is required, parents can use the CPS to calculate the amount of maintenance to be paid and to set up a non-statutory arrangement. Alternatively, parents can use the services of the CSA to set up a statutory child maintenance arrangement and the CPS can take enforcement action to ensure payments are made.

Figure 1: An illustrative example showing how separated families might speak to child maintenance arrangements

During the period covered by these statistics, statutory child maintenance moved from the CSA to the CPS. CSA cases began closing in June 2014 and the CPS began taking on new applications in October 2014. Information about the accounts transferred from the CSA to the CPS and the current status of these accounts can be found in the CPS quarterly statistics. Information about payments to have an arrangement, first at CSA cases were expected to transfer to CPS.

CSA cases were closed in groups and cases closed first were the simpler cases, such as those where both parents had agreed to end the case. Later closure groups, such as those where the paying parent was not in regular employment, 2016, and the CSA cases with on-going liabilities were closed, and parents who had not agreed to closure were transferred to the Child Support Agency (Transition) Options for information on how to set up a non-statutory child maintenance arrangement or also a statutory arrangement with the CPS.

2. Purpose of the statistics

These statistics are used by various stakeholders within the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to inform policy development and to inform the DWP also uses the statistics for Parliamentary Questions and Freedom of Information Act.

Figures from these statistics are included in the DWP Annual Report and Accounts and are also used to update a key indicator in the DWP Group Operational Plan on the number of children in separated families with a maintenance arrangement.

These statistics are also intended for use by other interested parties in the public, private and voluntary sectors, and by members of the public.

3. Definitions and terminology within the statistics

The key definitions and terminology used within these statistics are explained below.

Separated family

A separated family is defined as one resident parent, one non-resident parent and any biological or adopted children they have between them who are either dependent, or under 20 years old and living in Great Britain.

Resident parent

The resident parent is the parent who has care of any relevant children and who may potentially be eligible to receive child maintenance. Resident parents might be associated with more than one separated family.

Non-resident parent

The parent who does not have day-to-day care of any relevant children and who may potentially be eligible to pay child maintenance.

Child maintenance arrangement

There are two main types of child maintenance arrangement: statutory arrangements and non-statutory or private arrangements (see below). Separated families may have more than one type of arrangement.

Statutory arrangement

Child maintenance arrangements that have been arranged with the Child Maintenance Service (CMS) or its predecessor, the Child Support Agency (CSA).

Non-statutory arrangement

Non-statutory arrangements do not involve the CPS or CSA and include:

- voluntary financial arrangements which involve direct monetary payment between parents where the CPS or CSA have not been involved
- court orders specifying the amount of child maintenance to be paid
- other types of arrangement including direct cash or in-direct payments
- court orders requiring parents to make financial payments.

Collect and Pay arrangement

Collect and Pay arrangement (CPS) collects and manages maintenance payments from the non-resident parent (NRP) and pays the resident parent (RP) on a regular "Recurring Payment". If required, the CPS will take enforcement action.

Direct Pay arrangement

An arrangement where the CPS calculates the amount of maintenance to be paid, and parents agree to make payments between themselves.

Low Income

A household is said to be in relative low income if their equivalised income is below 60% of the median household income, while they are said to be in absolute low income if their equivalised income is below 60% of the median household income adjusted for inflation. Both relative and absolute low income are calculated before and after taking housing costs into account for comparison.

Financial years

The financial year begins on 1 April and ends on 31 March.

4. Source of the statistics

These statistics are estimates derived from a combination of survey data and administrative data.

The estimates are based primarily on data from the Family Resources Survey

The Family Resources Survey (FRS) is a continuous survey based on a representative sample of around 19,000 households in private households in the United Kingdom. The FRS data is information on the income, characteristics and circumstances of families and individuals living in private households. Information is collected from all adults in the household, including children.

FRS respondents are assumed to be resident parents in a separated family if they have dependent children who are living in another household and if the child who lives in their household is their biological or adoptive child or adoptive parents in the household.

The appropriate non-response weight is applied to the survey responses to obtain population level estimates of the number of resident parents and children in separated families.

FRS responses regarding child maintenance arrangements are checked for consistency with the Child Maintenance Service administrative data to ensure the best possible estimates

If a resident parent respondent indicates that they have no statutory maintenance arrangement, they are asked a follow-up question to confirm that they have a voluntary arrangement. Responses to this follow-up question are validated accordingly. This helps to correct for the under-reporting of statutory arrangements. Some of the remaining responses to the survey question on child maintenance arrangements are also adjusted to improve consistency. Where the adjustment is not large, as it only leads to respondents with a complete calculation arrangement being moved to a direct pay arrangement.

Estimates relating to resident parents are converted into estimates relating to separated families

This is done based on the assumption that all resident parents with child maintenance arrangements are resident parent obtained from CPS and CSA administrative data.

Estimates of the total amount of child maintenance payments received by custodial parents are adjusted to account for under-reporting

Estimates of the total amount of maintenance received by resident parents with a statutory arrangement are adjusted to account for under-reporting of payments. Estimates of the total amount of maintenance received by resident parents with a non-statutory arrangement are not adjusted for under-reporting.

Estimates of the impact of child maintenance payments on the number of children in low income households are calculated using the Department for Work and Pensions' Income Dynamics (DIME) methodology to simulated HM RCs

The impact of child maintenance payments on the number of children in low income households is calculated using the Department for Work and Pensions' Income Dynamics (DIME) methodology to simulate HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) tax and benefit payments and to make the income estimates comparable. This means it is possible to compare the number of children in low income households before and after the household and whether or not the household is in receipt of child maintenance payments. This means it is possible to observe the impact of child maintenance payments have on the number of children in low income households.

5. Limitations of the statistics

These statistics are estimates and are subject to sampling error. Estimates with low sample sizes are described separately below.

The Family Resources Survey (FRS) is subject to sampling error

All survey estimates have a sampling error attributed to them, calculated from the variance of the sample. The sampling error for the FRS is low for the main estimates presented in the report. However, the sampling error can be large for changes observed in survey estimates when statistically significant and are subject to revision in future years. The sampling error for the FRS data is also subject to further adjustment to account for under-reporting. As described above, we are unable to assess whether year-to-year changes in the estimates are due to sampling error, or due to changes in the under-reporting of child maintenance arrangements.

There are some limitations regarding the way FRS questions are asked.

In 2009/10 changes were made to the FRS questionnaire to improve the quality of data relating to child maintenance. Prior to this there was no routing between the questions on the receipt of child maintenance payments and the child maintenance questions. The revised FRS questionnaire ensures that parents who potentially eligible for a child maintenance arrangement were subsequently asked about such an arrangement. This change in questionnaire design has led to the more detailed questions. The change in questionnaire design has resulted in our reporting of the number and type of arrangements prior to 2009/10 not being comparable with later years.

There are some limitations regarding the survey data.

The general approach taken is to assume that responses relating to family maintenance arrangements are accurate. Some responses to the survey data are not particularly consistent with administrative data held by the Department for DWP, CPS and CSA administrative datasets (see above). However, if respondents report receipt of a child maintenance payment, it is assumed that they are in receipt of such a payment. Some of the child maintenance payments reported in the survey are found in the administrative data. Adjustments have also been made to correct for the occurrence where the survey data underestimates the number of cases.

It is not possible to link all FRS respondents to DWP administrative data.

Not all respondents consented to their data being matched to DWP data or did not be respondent of those who did consent. It is therefore not possible to check or correct the survey data for these cases. The analysis presented in this report is assumed that the survey data for these cases is accurate. However, it is possible that some of the survey data for these cases may be inaccurate. It is also assumed that the proportion of respondents who gave permission to be linked to administrative data is similar to those who did not. This is a reasonable assumption. It is also assumed that all separated families are headed by a non-resident parent and covered by the same type(s) of child maintenance arrangement(s).

There is limited information regarding the amount of child maintenance payments made by non-resident parents.

Estimates of the total amount of maintenance received by custodial parents with a Direct Pay arrangement are derived from CPS administrative data. However, there is no data on the amount of maintenance paid by non-resident parents who arranged a Direct Pay and not through the CPS. Estimates are made for assumption for transferred cases based on the proportion of arrangements that are Direct Pay. Estimates are also made for the proportion of transferred cases that are expected to be Direct Pay.

Estimates of the impact of child maintenance payments on the number of children in low income households are based on simulated child maintenance impacts into account.

The impact of child maintenance is a basic analysis of the impact of reported maintenance payments on household income. It does not take into account:

In line with current HMRC methodology, estimates of the impact of child maintenance payments on the number of children in low income households do not take some types of child maintenance payment into account.

The proportion of child maintenance payments that are not included in the analysis is relatively small and we aim to improve the methodology to capture child maintenance payments in future years. Further details on the limitations relating to these estimates will be clearly indicated and explained in the relevant publication (see below).

6. Comparisons between the statistics

These statistics are not comparable with those in the previous Estimates of the separated family population statistics published by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). The definition of the separated family population in these publications are based on administrative data from the Child Support Agency (CSA) and Child Support Agency (CSA) (Transition) Options. The definition of the separated family population in these publications are based on administrative data from the Child Support Agency (CSA) and Child Support Agency (CSA) (Transition) Options. The publications mentioned above provide quarterly caseload figures, which these statistics are based on some reasons and are not comparable.

7. Revisions to the statistics

These statistics are estimates derived using an experimental methodology which will continue to be reviewed and updated. Any significant changes to the survey revisions will be clearly indicated and explained in the relevant publication.

Estimates are based primarily on survey data. Survey estimates are subject to revision. Where feasible and appropriate, the FRS data has been checked for consistency with the CPS and CSA administrative data and adjustments made to the data. The CPS and CSA caseload statistics are not subject to revision.

Revisions for the methodology for the March 2020 publication

A number of methodological changes have been made for the latest publication. These include:

- revise retrospectively to the approach used to identify FRS respondents who are potentially eligible for a child maintenance arrangement and to correct for missing responses
- improvements to the approach used to identify relevant statutory arrangements in the FRS data to correct for under-reporting of such arrangements
- improvements to the approach used to identify cases where both parents have been linked to DWP administrative data and have closed-in-error cases
- using a constant scaling factor to correct for under-reporting of non-resident parents into estimates relating to separated families (previously separate scaling factors were used for statutory and non-statutory arrangements, this approach effectively ignored the impact of statutory arrangements on the number of children, as opposed to changes in the average number of separated families per non-resident parent)
- correcting an error which was found in the calculation of relevant statutory arrangements relating to FY 2015 2016 respondents had not been identified as being in receipt of a child maintenance payment.

The revised impact of these changes on the estimates of the separated family for 2014/15 to 2017/18 have been revised accordingly.

- the total number of separated families in Great Britain (Downward revisions range from 6.5%)
- the number of children in those families (downward revisions range from 6 to 8%)

The revised impact of these changes on the estimates of the separated family for 2018/19 have been revised accordingly.

- the total number of separated families in Great Britain (Downward revisions range from 6.5%)
- the number of children in those families (downward revisions range from 6 to 8%)

The revised impact of these changes on the estimates of the separated family for 2019/20 have been revised accordingly.

- the total number of separated families in Great Britain (Downward revisions range from 6.5%)
- the number of children in those families (downward revisions range from 6 to 8%)

Where appropriate, the FRS data has been checked for accuracy against the Department for Work and Pensions' (DWP) and CPS and CSA administrative data and adjusted accordingly (see above). Information about the reliability of FRS data is provided in the Child Support Agency Quarterly Summary Statistics Resources Quality Report.

8. Data confidentiality and rounding

There is no risk of deducing a person's identity from these statistics. There are no confidentiality issues. The data used to produce these statistics are from administrative datasets on the number of children in low income households which are rounded to the nearest £100. Monetary amounts are rounded to the nearest £100 and counts are rounded to the nearest 100. Percentages are given to one decimal place. Totals and sub-totals are rounded to the nearest 100. Totals may not add due to rounding.

9. Status of the statistics

These statistics have been developed using guidelines set out by the UK Statistics Authority in the Code of Practice for Official Statistics. Information about the Code of Practice for Official Statistics is available on GOV.UK. Where to publish these statistics on an annual basis and will continue to explore ways in which the quality of the statistics can be improved. Further information can be obtained. Users are invited to provide feedback on the statistics and relevance of these statistics at this stage and can send feedback to: child.maintenance.statistics@dwp.gov.uk.

10. Quality statement

These statistics are estimates based on an experimental methodology. The methodology and the statistics have been explained above. While developing the methodology, findings were compared against other data sources where possible to confirm their validity. Comparisons with DWP administrative datasets to confirm their validity.

The estimates are based primarily on data from the Family Resources Survey. Information about the quality of the survey can be found in the FRS Quality Report and Technical Report.

Where appropriate, the FRS data has been checked for accuracy against the Department for Work and Pensions' (DWP) and CPS and CSA administrative datasets and adjusted accordingly (see above). Information about the reliability of FRS data is provided in the Child Support Agency Quarterly Summary Statistics Resources Quality Report.

Information about the reliability of CSA administrative data is provided in the Child Support Agency Quarterly Summary Statistics Resources Quality Report.

11. Feedback

We welcome feedback.

You can provide feedback on these statistics by emailing child.maintenance.statistics@dwp.gov.uk.

12. Useful links

Statistical releases and data tables for these statistics

Statistics on the child maintenance arrangements made by parents who contacted Child Maintenance Options

Experimental statistics on the statutory child maintenance arrangements made by parents who contacted the Child Support Agency

Experimental statistics on the Child Support Agency (CSA) and CSA (2003 calculation) child maintenance schemes, and Child Support Agency case closure reasons

More information about the Child Maintenance Service and Child Support Agency schemes

More information about the Family Resources Survey

More information about the Household Below Average Income methodology

The Child Poverty Dashboard Pack includes an indicator based on these statistics, the number of separated families with a child maintenance arrangement.

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