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Guidance

Child maintenance arrangements made after speaking to CM Options: background information and methodology

Updated 6 November 2019

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Information on the quarterly surveys and the annual longitudinal survey of child maintenance outcomes for parents that have spoken to Child Maintenance (CM) Options.

Future releases

This statistical series includes the results of 2 surveys, the:

- annual longitudinal survey
- quarterly survey results

The [final release of the annual longitudinal survey results](#) was published on 6 November 2019.

Due to recent changes to the CM Options service, an increasing number of interactions are taking place online. This means that a survey based on telephone contacts will no longer provide a valid measure of outcomes from the service.

Therefore, the release of the 2019 quarter 2 CM Options statistics (expected to be published in Spring 2020) will be the final publication in this statistical series.

Context

Child maintenance is support between separated parents to help with the everyday costs of looking after children.

CM Options is a free service that provides impartial information and support to help separated parents make decisions about their child maintenance arrangements.

If they agree, separated parents can arrange child maintenance themselves. This is called a 'family-based arrangement' and is a private way to sort out child maintenance. Parents arrange everything themselves and no-one else has to be involved. Family-based arrangements can be regular financial payments or flexible arrangements which may include a financial element or transactions in kind.

The Child Maintenance Service, which replaced the Child Support Agency (CSA), is for when parents can't agree a family-based arrangement.

Parents wishing to use the Child Maintenance Service must first speak to CM Options who can refer them to the Child Maintenance Service.

Purpose

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) monitors the number and type of child maintenance arrangements set up by parents who contact CM Options. This provides an indication of how well the child maintenance reforms made in 2012 have been working.

The figures are used for analysis by CM Options and DWP to help identify issues and improve services. They also help support DWP's obligation to answer parliamentary questions and respond to Freedom of Information requests.

The quarterly statistics allow people to see the types of arrangements parents are trying at least 2 months after contacting CM Options. They also show the number of children who are on these arrangements.

The annual publication shows what arrangements these parents have up to 10 months after they contacted CM Options. It gives an indication of the number of

family-based arrangements that have been created during the year and the number that are in place at the end of the year.

Source

The data for the quarterly publications are collected through telephone surveys throughout the year (see Table 1).

Parents who have called CM Options are called back after at least 2 months and asked about their child maintenance arrangements.

The 2 month waiting period is to allow parents time to decide what arrangement they want and to set it up.

In March, a sample of parents who contacted CM Options between February and October and had previously been surveyed are re-contacted to see if their child maintenance arrangements are still in place or if they had changed. These surveys are added to the survey results from parents who contacted CM Options in quarter 4 to estimate the number of arrangements in place at the end of the year.

Table 1: Survey coverage, contact month and survey month

Survey coverage	Contact month	Survey month
Quarter 1	February to April	June
Quarter 2	May to July	September
Quarter 3	August to October	December
Quarter 4	November to January	March
Annual	February to January	March

Parents are selected for contact using a stratified sampling method. This is where DWP makes sure that the sample includes the right proportions of:

- callers for each month
- customer type (those who have previously had a case with the CSA and those who have not)
- call type (inbound or outbound)

Weighting

The results of the quarterly surveys are weighted so that the proportion of callers surveyed from each month, customer type and call type matches the proportion of these callers in the overall population of people who called CM Options.

For example, if 10% of callers had no previous CSA case and made an inbound call to CM Options in a given month, the quarterly survey results would include the same proportion of these callers.

The results from the longitudinal survey are weighted so that the proportion of callers who had each arrangement type is the same as the proportion of these callers in the quarterly surveys.

For example, if 25% of callers reported having a family-based arrangement in the quarterly surveys, the longitudinal survey results would be weighted to contain the same proportion of callers who reported having a family-based arrangement in the quarterly surveys.

Limitations

There are 3 main limitations to the results:

- a large proportion of parents who contact CM Options refuse to take part in the survey – therefore non-response bias in the results is a concern
- CM Options agents are provided with interviewer training by DWP but they are not classed as professional survey interviewers
- certain parents are removed from the survey sample for practical reasons, these are:
 - non-English speakers
 - parents who have not given permission to use their survey results
 - parents who have not declared any type of child maintenance arrangement
 - parents who have not declared the number of children the arrangement applies to

Definitions and terminology

Other child maintenance arrangements – these are arrangements made before contact with CM Options that do not change after contact with CM Options.

Functioning – a child maintenance arrangement consisting of regular financial payments is counted as functioning if all or some of the agreed money is being

paid. An arrangement that doesn't consist of regular payments is considered to be functioning if the parent surveyed believes it is working fairly well or very well.

Children on arrangements – this means the number of children who a paying parent has a child maintenance arrangement for.

Effective – a child maintenance arrangement is effective if at least some of the amount due is paid, payments are at least usually on time and the parent surveyed thinks it works well. A family-based arrangement that doesn't consist of regular payments is considered effective if the parent surveyed thinks it works well.

Revisions to the statistics

Previous publications of the statistics included a figure for the overall number of children benefitting from family-based arrangements since CM Options began. This figure is not included in the current publication due to issues with the previous methodology. The previous figures used a decay rate to estimate how many arrangements broke down each year. We do not believe the decay rate to be accurate and are currently working on a new approach and will publish the results at a future date once this has been developed.

Status of the statistics

Experimental statistics

The statistics have been labelled as experimental while they undergo evaluation. Read a [guide to experimental statistics](#) on the Office for National Statistics website.

Quality statement

These statistics have been developed using guidelines set out by the UK Statistics Authority and are new official statistics. Users are invited to comment on the development and relevance of these statistics.

Feedback

We welcome feedback. DWP would like to hear your views on our statistical publications. If you use any of our statistics publications, we would be interested in hearing what you use them for and how well they meet your requirements. Email: cm.analysis.research@dwp.gsi.gov.uk.

Further information

Statistics on [child maintenance arrangements made after speaking to the Child Maintenance \(CM\) Options service](#).

Statistics on the [performance of the Child Maintenance Service](#).

Statistics on the [Child Support Agency's 1993 and 2003 statutory child maintenance schemes and CSA case closures](#).

Read about DWP's [plans for evaluating changes to the child maintenance system](#).

Find further information about the work of the CM Options service on the [Child Maintenance Options website](#).

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