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# 1 Introduction

One of the consequences of the changes taking place in family form is the production of non-resident fathers. In the past as today, fathers were more or less temporarily absent from their children as a result of active service in the armed forces, leaving home to find work, undertaking work that took them away from home, imprisonment or hospitalisation. However, today they emerge most commonly in one (or more) of three ways: non-marital births; the breakdown of the relationships of unmarried cohabiting couples with children; or the separation and divorce of married couples with children. Of course all these have been the cause of non-resident fathers in the past, but they are now much more common than they have been.

Non-resident fathers have been depicted in a mainly negative way.<sup>1</sup> In the US, non-resident fathers are frequently called Deadbeat Dads, and in the UK they have been presented as feckless ne'er-do-wells passing on their responsibilities to the taxpayer. Indeed, it was this firm non-resident father ideology that was responsible, to some extent, for the way the Child Support Act 1991 was launched. Margaret Thatcher set the tone of child support policy making in talking about fathers 'walking away from marriage . . . neither maintains nor shows any interest in the child. . . . No father should be able to escape his responsibility . . .' (National Children's Homes George Thomas Society Lecture, 17 January 1990). A few weeks following that lecture, Kenneth Baker, then Chairman of the Conservative Party, reinforced the point – 'Not only is it just that fathers should contribute to the upkeep of their children: it is also crucial that we begin to break the culture which views it as acceptable for a man to walk away from the consequences of his actions in this way. Ensuring that fathers help support the mothers of their children is one way of doing that' (quoted in Burghes, 1991: 6). Peter Lilley in one of his notorious doggerels to the Conservative Party Conference singled out 'Dads who won't support the kids of ladies . . . they have kissed' (7 October 1992).

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This negative discourse about non-resident fathers has been part of a wider popular debate about family change, which has vilified both lone mothers and non-resident fathers. In an analysis of ten national daily and ten Sunday newspapers in June 1994, Lloyd (1996) found more items relating to fathers and fatherhood than motherhood or parenting. In the stories, fathers were presented as archetypes – either heroes or monsters (this is similar to Furstenberg's (1988a) delineation of Good Dad/Bad Dad). By far the largest group of monster stories found by Lloyd described them as having either killed, abused or bullied those who were closest to them. He concluded, 'generally fathers are described as problematic. They do not take responsibility for the children they contribute in making, they have little to offer economically (and increasingly in terms of sperm), and they don't contribute to the running of the home or looking after the children and are too often sexually and physically abusive' (p. 4). Song and Edwards (1995) have also investigated the way that black fathers are portrayed in the media. Particularly, following the publication of Augustus' (1995) novel, there has been a good deal of coverage in *Voice*, one of Britain's best black newspapers, about the relationship between 'babymothers' (black women who have children with a number of male partners) and 'babyfathers' (black men who have children with several female partners).

These ideas are reflected not just in the political and media discourse. Academic work has sought to identify them as errant, causal agents for the demise of our social fabric, particularly blaming 'absent fathers' for being inadequate role models for their children, for the poverty of their children and for rising crime rates (Dench, 1994; Dennis and Erdos, 1992; Murray, 1990).

However, the research for this book was motivated by three rather different factors: the very rapid increase in the prevalence of non-resident fathers; the almost complete absence of knowledge about their circumstances; and the fact that they are becoming a focus of policy concerns. Bad policy has already been made (the Child Support Act 1991) and research should contribute to making better policy.

### **THE PREVALENCE OF NON-RESIDENT FATHERS**

The number of fathers who are non-resident has increased very rapidly in the 1980s, and especially the 1990s, and is still increasing. The numbers of non-marital births and relationship breakdowns are still increasing. Haskey (1998) estimates that the number of lone parent

families increased to 1.6 million in 1996 from 0.57 million in 1971. These lone parent families contain 2.8 million children. Around 8 per cent of these lone parent families are headed by men. Around 4 per cent of the lone mothers are widows. Some of their unmarried former partners will also have died. The rest all have children with non-resident biological fathers.

However, the prevalence of non-resident fathers is much higher than the number of lone mother families. Most lone mothers repartner and are no longer lone mothers (though they remain parents with care). Haskey (1989a) and Haskey and Kiernan (1989) estimate that two and a half years after divorce a third of women had remarried and another third were cohabiting. But the fathers of lone mothers' children remain non-resident fathers as long as their children are children.

One objective of this research was to produce an estimate of the prevalence of non-resident fathers. For each lone mother there are one or more non-resident fathers. More or less all fathers (and mothers) eventually become non-resident in that their children leave home. We chose an age cut-off in our survey, which is the one used traditionally to define a lone parent (child under 16 or 16–18 inclusive and in full-time education). This is also the one employed in social policy – child benefit is payable on that basis. Also under the Child Support Act 1991 parents are no longer required to pay child support when the youngest child is no longer under the age of 19 (i.e. including their eighteenth year). But it is arguable that in the context of older and later transitions from the parental home, 18 is far too early a cut-off. Certainly there are dependent children living with their (lone) mothers long after the age of 18, and they have non-resident fathers – who have not been covered in this study.

Another reason for not basing estimates of the prevalence of non-resident fathers on the prevalence of lone mothers is the fact that Bradshaw and Millar (1991) found that their sample of lone mothers contained a proportion of children derived from more than one partnership. In fact about 7 per cent of lone parents had had at least one child by a second child-bearing relationship; 1 per cent had a child from a third child-bearing relationship; and five lone parents had had at least one child from a fourth child-bearing relationship (no one in the sample had had more than four child-bearing relationships). Similarly, as we shall see, 11 per cent of fathers in this study admitted to having had children with more than one partner and 3 per cent had fathered children with three or more partners.

Then there is the really difficult problem in making an estimate of prevalence. There are undoubtedly fathers who do not know they are

the father of a child, fathers who think they are the father of a child but are not, and mothers who think wrongly that a certain man is the father of their child when he is not. Some insights into this are found in the experience of the Child Support Agency. At November 1995 there were 11,464 disputed paternity cases pending and a further 904 cases where tests had been completed (Hansard, 2 February 1996, cols. 991 and 993). This represents 2.5 per cent of all the 'live' cases of the agency at that time. The Network Against the Child Support Act (NACSA) (later to rename itself the National Association for Child Support Action) has estimated that some 14 per cent of the completed DNA tests have proved that the man is not the father of the child(ren) (NACSA *News*, March 1996); it is not clear, however, on what basis NACSA arrived at this estimate. Coleman (1996) reports that a review of false paternity data for the US gives a range of 2.1 to 11.8 per cent, but figures based on cystic fibrosis cases found only 1.4 per cent of false paternity cases for the UK. Clarke (1997) suggests from her analysis of the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) that under-reporting of male fertility runs between 10 and 15 per cent of births and up to 30 to 50 per cent of non-marital births.

Given these problems, it is difficult to produce reasonable estimates of the number of non-resident fathers in Britain. Certainly there are over two million and there could be as many as five million. Perhaps the best way to think about the scale of the experience of non-resident fathering is to note the fact that it is estimated that between a third and half of all children will experience a period of not living with both natural parents during their childhood. Each one of those children will have a non-resident parent and in most cases it will be the father.

### **Previous research**

Despite their prevalence, despite the plethora of research that is now available on lone parent families (for a recent review see Ford and Millar, 1998), despite the hugely expanding literature on fathering and fatherhood (for recent reviews see Burghes, Clarke and Cronin, 1997; Popay, Hearn and Edwards, 1998), up to now very little is known about the circumstances of non-resident fathers. Unlike lone mothers, as a group they are not particularly likely to be dependent on public services (at least as non-resident fathers). Partly for that reason they are difficult to identify. There is no register of them – birth registration records provide details of fathers only for births to married couples and jointly registered births outside marriage. Therefore very little basic information

about the fertility history of men has ever been collected, and there is practically no basic demographic information about non-resident fathers.

There have been two large-scale longitudinal studies in the United States that tried to obtain representative samples of non-resident fathers<sup>2</sup>, and recently published is a major new study (Garfinkel *et al.*, 1998). The issue of non-resident fathers in the United States is just as salient as it is in the UK. But the characteristics of non-resident fathers (and lone parents) in the US are very different to those in the UK and so is the context in which policy is made. So we cannot rely on US data for policy making in the UK.

In the UK there has been no previous attempt to study a representative sample of non-resident fathers. That does not mean that nothing is known about them. Studies of lone parents have asked questions of the lone mothers about the fathers of their children (Bradshaw and Millar, 1991; Ford, Marsh and Finlayson, 1998; Ford, Marsh and McKay, 1995; McKay and Marsh, 1994; Marsh and McKay, 1993) and some of this information will be referred to later. Burgoyne and Millar (1994) undertook a follow-up study of a small sample of fathers identified in the Bradshaw and Millar (1991) lone parents survey. When the Department of Social Security (DSS) came to design the Child Support Act they discovered that practically nothing was known about 'absent fathers'. The White Paper (UK, Cmnd 1264, 1990) drew extensively on drafts of Bradshaw and Millar (1991) and also undertook a sample survey of maintenance cases settled in the courts.

Prior to the start of the research reported here, there had been only one other British source of information on non-resident fathers. At the request of the DSS, Marsh (1993) undertook some secondary analysis of non-resident parents in the 1991 survey of the National Child Development Survey (NCDS) when the 1958 birth cohort were 33 years old.<sup>3</sup> He found that nearly 6 per cent of parents and 8 per cent of men admitted to having a child living in another household. The survey covered only 70 per cent of the original sample of 16,500 children and Marsh took the view that about a third of non-resident fathers were missed by the survey, partly due to bias in attrition.

Since this project began, some useful additional sources of information on non-resident fathers have been produced. Simpson, McCarthy and Walker (1995) have published their study of the experiences of ninety-one fathers who were in the process of divorce, having followed them for five years. Maclean and Eekelaar (1997) published their investigation into the views of 250 parents, identified by using methods similar to those used in this study. But only fifty-five of their sample were non-resident parents and only forty-nine of them were men. Burghes,



Clarke and Cronin (1997) undertook an analysis of the BHPS 1992 and found that 15.2 per cent of all fathers aged 16–64 had children under 18 living in another household. Because 35.2 per cent of men aged 16–64 are fathers, they estimate that 5.4 per cent of men aged 16–64 have at least one child under 18 in another household (4.6 to 6.1 are the 95 per cent confidence limits). Finally, McKay, using the Family and Working Lives Survey (FWLS) to trace family change, found 268 cases, 5.6 per cent of the men aged 16–69, who had non-resident children.<sup>4</sup> (Also 2.8 per cent of women could be described as non-resident mothers.) McKay undertook some analysis of the characteristics of these fathers and these are used to compare with our sample in the next chapter.

### **Policy concerns**

Non-resident fathers have increasingly become the focus of policy concerns in the 1980s and 1990s, particularly in relation to family law and child support. Social policy has been slow to come to terms with and respond to the changes that have taken place in family form in the past three decades. Policy has been motivated by a variety of sometimes conflicting concerns. In relation to non-resident fathers they have included:

- the high proportion of lone mothers dependent on Income Support and other benefits and the increasing cost;
- evidence of the bleak state of the living standards of lone mothers and their children, and that after relationship breakdown, on average, lone mothers end up poorer than non-resident fathers;
- evidence that many fathers are not providing any financial support for their children (and former partners) and others are only providing small amounts, often episodically;
- evidence that fathers are losing contact with their children after relationship breakdown and anxiety that this is not in the best interest of the child, the father or the taxpayer;
- knowledge that no arrangements are in place for recognising the father of a child born outside marriage (paternity can only be recognised if the child is jointly registered in the names of the father and the mother, and this can only be done with the mother's agreement). Unmarried fathers still do not have the same rights as married fathers, and neither do their children; and
- the law governing the dissolution of married partnerships does not cover the dissolution of cohabiting partnerships; and anyway it is not geared to produce agreed outcomes covering property, child support, contact, pensions and other matters.

Some of these issues have been tackled in legislation in recent years, including the Family Law Reform Act 1987, the Children Act 1989, the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 1990, the Family Law Act 1997, the 1991 and 1995 Child Support Acts, and further legislation is planned covering pension rights on divorce, child support and the rights of unmarried fathers.

However, there remains a good deal of confusion about what should be appropriate policy responses to the increase in non-resident fathers. These are familiar dilemmas in social policy – about the appropriate balance between private and public responsibilities, whether and how public policy should seek to structure or influence private behaviour, and the balance between the rights and responsibilities of parents, children and the public. However, clear thought and sensible policy have been hampered by a lack of knowledge.

### **This study**

The objectives of this study are to contribute to knowledge about the circumstances of non-resident fathers in Britain. We also hope to contribute to the understanding of the nature of fathering in modern Britain and to inform policy making on maintenance, conciliation and social security and thereby produce a companion baseline survey to that provided by *Lone Parent Families in the UK* (Bradshaw and Millar, 1991).

The material collected was obtained using a sample survey of non-resident fathers in Britain, and in-depth interviews with fathers in two subsamples from the main survey, one focusing on the issue of contact and the other on financial support. Chapter 2 describes the methods employed in these studies in more detail. Chapter 3 uses the data from the survey to explore the backgrounds of the men and the processes that led them to become non-resident fathers and examines their present family and household circumstances, drawing on both the survey and some of the qualitative material. The next two chapters are based on the survey and cover the non-resident fathers' employment and income (Chapter 4), and housing (Chapter 5). The next two chapters concentrate on the contact that the fathers have with their children using the quantitative material (Chapter 6) and the qualitative material (Chapter 7). The next five chapters focus on financial support: Chapter 8 uses the survey to establish who pays child support and Chapter 9 analyses the level of child support paid, and the level of informal support. Chapter 10 uses both the survey and the qualitative study to examine the fathers' experiences of the Child Support Agency. Chapters 11 and 12 draw entirely on the qualitative data to examine, in depth, the



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fathers' feelings about their financial obligations and what determines them. Chapter 13 concludes the study. In the tables in which our findings are summarised, figures for percentages are rounded off to whole numbers, with the occasional result that the total may appear to be slightly above or below 100 per cent.