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Including non-resident fathers in cohort research: A scoping study

EMER SMYTH, MERIKE DARMODY AND HELEN RUSSELL

INCLUDING NON-RESIDENT FATHERS IN COHORT RESEARCH: A SCOPING STUDY

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ABBREVIATIONS

ALSPAC	Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children
BCS70	British Cohort Study 1970
CSO	Central Statistics Office
ELCFS	Early Life Cohort Feasibility Study (UK)
ECLS-B	Early Childhood Longitudinal Study – Birth Cohort of 2001 (US)
ELFE	Étude Longitudinale Française depuis l'Enfance
FFCW	Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing (US)
GUI	Growing Up in Ireland
GUNZ	Growing Up in New Zealand
GUS	Growing Up in Scotland
LSAC	Growing Up in Australia – the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children
MCS	Millennium Cohort Study (UK)
NCDS	National Child Development Study
NEPS	National Education Panel Study (Germany)
NLSCY	National Longitudinal Study of Children and Youth
MoBa	Norwegian Mother, Father and Child Cohort Study
OHP	Own Household Parents
PCG	Primary caregiver
PLE	Parents Living Elsewhere
SEEC	Study of Early Education and Development

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The aim of this report is to scope out the potential for including non-resident fathers[1] in future waves of data collection for the new Growing Up in Ireland (GUI) birth cohort. The study draws on the experiences of other cohort studies[2] internationally, through interviews with the Principal Investigators and other team members and published materials on the studies. Interviews were carried out with separated parents and NGOs working with parents in Ireland. The study also draws on new analysis of GUI data on households with non-resident fathers. We use the term non-resident to describe fathers who do not live with the child and child's mother, though the child may reside with the father for some part of the week.

INTERNATIONAL PRACTICE

Over time, cohort studies have evolved to involve resident fathers, reflecting greater recognition of their role in child development, though not all studies do so. Twenty of the 25 cohort studies examined included fathers in at least some of the survey waves. The inclusion of non-resident fathers is less common. Just over half of the studies investigated (13) included non-resident fathers in at least one wave.

While the coverage of non-resident fathers is sporadic, there was widespread agreement among researchers that excluding these fathers results in a significant gap in knowledge about children's lives. As the experience of living apart from a parent is socially structured, this lack of information is particularly relevant for children from more disadvantaged backgrounds, leading to gaps in our understanding of childhood poverty, among other issues. Both researchers and NGO stakeholders emphasised that shared parenting across households and blended families are an increasing feature of children's lives, a pattern that further strengthens the case for collecting information from parents not living full-time with their children.

While the importance of including non-resident parents was acknowledged, researchers in other countries also noted the funding constraints and practical difficulties encountered. Almost all of the studies accessed the non-resident father's contact details via the mother. The limitation of this approach was noted by multiple interviewees. Details were much less forthcoming where the relationship between parents was acrimonious. Only one of the studies approached fathers independently, the new Early Life Cohort Feasibility Study in the UK, which used fathers' contact details from the birth registry. The housing difficulties and consequent increased mobility of non-resident fathers added to

1 The terminology used to describe this group of fathers varies across studies, an issue that is discussed in Chapter 1.
2 Cohort studies follow a particular age cohort over time.

contact difficulties. Response rates for non-resident fathers were lower than for resident fathers.

Studies where relatively good response rates were achieved from non-resident fathers adopted a variety of strategies that enhanced participation. Financial incentives were used in a small number of studies, including the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study in the US (ECLS-B) which achieved a response rate of 50 per cent. Growing Up in Australia – the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children achieved a response rate of over 70 per cent in the early waves. They did not use incentives and the research team attributed these high response rates to the use of a telephone interview and to a focus on the importance of non-resident fathers in engagement materials, including information brochures, newsletters and calendars.

NON-RESIDENT FATHERS IN GUI COHORT '08

GUI Cohort '08 collected data from non-resident fathers at almost every wave but the data have only recently been made available due to small sample sizes.[3] Contact details for non-resident fathers were collected from the mothers. Around a third of mothers were willing to give permission for the father to be contacted when the child was 9 months and 3 years old, dropping to just over a quarter when the child was age 9. These details were less likely to be provided where the parents had never lived together, where father-child contact was less frequent and especially where the quality of relationship between the mother and father was poor (based on the mother's reports). Socio-demographic factors had little influence.

Among those who were contacted when the child was 3, 35 per cent completed the survey; this is on a par with the response rate for non-resident fathers in many comparable studies internationally. The response rate falls to 14 per cent by the age of 9. Fathers in more frequent contact with their child and formerly partnered with more highly educated mothers are more likely to complete the survey. The final sample of non-resident fathers is therefore selective on several dimensions.

Non-resident fathers are found to have frequent contact with their children, with half seeing babies and toddlers several times a week. Contact is somewhat less frequent as children make the transition to school, though around a third of 5- and 9-year-olds see their fathers at least a few times a week. Just over a quarter have little to no contact with their children.

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3 We are very grateful to the CSO for archiving two waves of these data, at least in part in response to this research, and thus providing an important evidence base for this study.

INTERVIEWS WITH NGOS AND LONE PARENTS

Interviews were carried out with four organisations working with separated parents or specifically with fathers. Additionally, interviews were conducted with five non-resident fathers and one lone mother living full-time with her child(ren). The interviews explored views on how best to incorporate information on fathers into the cohort study.

The reliance on proxy information from mothers, even for more quantitative factors such as level of contact and maintenance payments, was seen as potentially biased by the nature of the relationship between the two parents. The necessity of asking fathers directly about the quality of the relationship with the child was emphasised by multiple interviewees and deemed potentially more impactful for child outcomes. Interviewees suggested that greater efforts were needed to inform non-resident fathers about the study and the benefits of their participation to overcome suspicions some may hold. A lack of voice in their children's lives was a common thread and it was felt that many fathers would welcome the opportunity to talk about their relationship with their child.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Including non-resident fathers in child cohort studies, and indeed in cross-sectional studies of children, is important if a full picture of children's lives and the influences on their development is to be achieved. Changing demographic patterns mean that having a parent in a second household has become an increasingly common feature of children's lives. Around half of non-resident fathers of the GUI '08 cohort have very frequent contact with their children, especially when they are younger, and children themselves value their relationship with their father. Families with a non-resident father are more socio-economically disadvantaged in profile than other families so understanding the resources provided by these non-resident fathers is crucial in understanding child poverty.

For the age 3 survey of the new GUI birth cohort, approaching non-resident fathers directly via details recorded on the birth certificate is a promising option for contacting fathers not living with the mother at the time of the birth. Maintaining separate contact details for resident fathers (phone number/email) is important for contacting those that leave the household subsequently. Obtaining contact details from mothers is likely to remain a necessary component, for example, in relation to fathers that moved out between the birth and age 3 years.

On the basis of experience elsewhere, a number of factors could enhance research participation among non-resident fathers. These include: strong messaging to the resident mother as to why fathers are being included in the study; strong and

tailored messaging to all fathers, including those not living with their children, as to their centrality in their children's lives; limiting the scope to non-resident fathers that have at least some contact with their child; using interviewers as the first point of contact and follow-up, rather than relying on postal or online questionnaires; and demonstration of the value of the information collected through feedback of research findings to participants and the wider public.

CHAPTER 1
Introduction

1.1 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Research on children's lives has been criticised for not taking adequate account of the involvement of fathers, especially those who are not living (full-time) with their children (Goldman and Burgess, 2018). Birth and child cohort studies internationally have varied in the extent to which they include the perspectives of resident fathers, with even greater variation found in the inclusion of non-resident fathers. Studies have also differed in the terms they use to describe fathers who are not living full-time with their children. Terms have included non-resident father, own household father and parent living elsewhere. In this report, we use the term non-resident father except in discussing specific studies that use different terminology.

The Growing Up in Ireland (GUI) study has included all fathers, wherever resident, in almost all waves of data collection for Cohorts '98 and '08.[4] However, until recently, data collected on non-resident fathers were not archived and made available for research because of small case numbers.[5] This report is designed to scope out the potential for including non-resident fathers in future waves of data collection for the new GUI birth cohort. To do so, it draws on the international literature on non-resident fathers, interviews with the Principal Investigators and other team members involved in cohort studies internationally, new analysis of GUI data on households with non-resident fathers and the perspectives of these fathers, and interviews with separated parents and NGOs working with parents in Ireland.

1.2 THE PROFILE OF FAMILIES WITH NON-RESIDENT PARENTS IN IRELAND

Since 2014, legislation in Ireland requires that the father be named on birth certificates. In 2020 and 2021, information on the father was not recorded in 3.4 per cent and 2.5 per cent of cases respectively (CSO, personal communication). Birth records for 2022 and 2023 indicate that in 16 per cent of cases the father and mother were not living at the same address.[6] Growing Up in Ireland data for Cohort '08 provide further information on the extent of non-resident parenthood and the profile of the families involved. Table 1.1 indicates that a significant

4 The exceptions were where only one parent was surveyed for the Cohort '08 COVID-19 survey (at age 12) and Cohort '98 at 20 years of age and where only resident fathers were surveyed for the 13-year wave for Cohort '08.

5 We are very grateful to the CSO for access to non-resident father data for Cohort '08 at 3 and 9 years of age.

6 data.cso.ie, Table VS77. The CSO notes that this may be an upper bound estimate given that the figure may include cases where there were slight variations in how the addresses of both parents were recorded.

minority of children have parents who are not resident. Almost all of the non-resident parents are fathers, with the number of mothers too small to be reported separately. The proportion of children with non-resident parents is broadly stable at around 14 per cent between 9 months and 5 years, rising somewhat to 18 per cent by 9 years of age.[7] It is clear from Table 1.1 that the profile of families with a non-resident parent is quite different from that where both parents are present. In looking at these characteristics, we rely on information about the resident mother, as information is available for non-resident fathers only where they completed the non-resident parent questionnaire, which comprises the minority of this group (see Chapter 3 for further detail). This therefore provides a partial picture but nonetheless yields important insights into the family circumstances of children with a non-resident father. Families with a non-resident father tend to have much younger mothers, with lower levels of education and who live in urban areas. The pattern is less clear-cut by migrant status; at 9 months old, migrant mothers are under-represented among families with a non-resident parent but are over-represented among this group by the age of 9.

Some information on fathers themselves is available where they participated in an earlier wave of GUI but subsequently moved out of the household. The profile of these fathers was more disadvantaged, with lower educational levels, higher unemployment levels and greater financial difficulties (Smyth and Russell, 2021).

Lower levels of parental education, higher unemployment levels and much younger age at maternity are all indicators of broader socio-economic disadvantage. Understanding the circumstances of families with a non-resident parent will therefore yield important insights into the drivers and consequences of child poverty, for example. Chapter 3 draws on GUI survey data from resident mothers and, where possible, non-resident fathers to provide more insights into fathers' involvement in their children's lives and the potential for involving them in research about the children concerned.

7 It should be noted that the group is not necessarily static across waves due to partnership dissolution and, potentially, non-resident fathers joining the household.

TABLE 1.1 PROFILES OF FAMILIES WITH RESIDENT AND NON-RESIDENT PARENTS WHEN THE CHILD WAS 9 MONTHS, 3 YEARS, 5 YEARS AND 9 YEARS

	9 months		3 years		5 years		9 years	
	Both resident	Non-resident	Both resident	Non-resident	Both resident	Non-resident	Both resident	Non-resident
% of families	85.5	14.5	85.8	14.2	85.9	14.1	82.2	17.8
Maternal age:								
<25 years	9.1	50.1***	4.1	33.3***	11.3	45.1***	11.2	39.6***
26-30 years	23.4	23.8	14.7	28.3				
31 + years	67.5	26.2	81.2	38.4	25.1	21.9		
36 + years					63.7	33.1	27.4	25.1
41 + years							61.4	35.4
Maternal education:								
Lower secondary or less	13.5	39.3***	11.3	28.5***	9.2	20.1***	5.1	12.8***
Upper secondary	27.5	38.9	25.4	37.9	33.4	48.9	26.9	39.6
Post-secondary/tertiary	58.8	21.8	63.4	33.6	57.5	31.0	68.0	48.6
Migrant background	22.4	18.7***	20.6	19.1	19.5	19.5	19.9	25.5***
Urban area	43.1	58.6***	41.7	58.8***	39.3	52.0***	38.9	50.6***
N	9,395	1,599	8,319	1,374	7,357	1,207	6,845	1,041

Source: GUI Cohort '08, Waves 1 to 4.
Notes: Weights are employed. *** difference between both resident and non-resident statistically significant at p<.001 level.
Note that certain age categories are grouped.

1.3 INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH EVIDENCE ON THE ROLE OF NON-RESIDENT FATHERS

1.3.1 Giving voice to non-resident fathers

While most children live with both birth parents, a notable number have more complex family arrangements, usually after a separation or divorce. Much of the research to date has focussed on lone mothers. Yet, Bryson and McKay (2012) in the UK argue that non-resident fathers are an increasing demographic, and as such, too big a group to exclude from surveys. However, in many cases these fathers are largely absent from government databases (Poole et al., 2016; Violi et al., 2023) and information tends to be collected from just mothers (Bryson and McKay, 2012). 'Mother-centric' data collection may provide a skewed picture of the role of the non-resident father and his relationship with their child/children, with the parent who lives with the child likely to under-report and non-resident parent over-report the non-resident parent's involvement (Goldman et al., 2021; Bryson and McKay, 2012; Bryson and McKay, 2018). Collecting information directly from fathers enables a better understanding of parenting patterns and their influence on child development and outcomes (Poole et al., 2016; Bryson and McKay, 2012), but also allows for an exploration of the different relationship types that the non-resident father has and how this affects his relationship with his child or children (Violi et al., 2022), giving voice to these fathers.

Failure to collect data directly from non-resident fathers is likely to skew research findings on child outcomes and the subsequent implications for policy and practice that arise from analysis of data only collected from mothers (Goldman et al., 2019; Baxter et al., 2012). Research to date that draws information from non-resident fathers has remained limited, partially due to lack of good quality data where information is collected directly from non-resident fathers (Poole et al., 2016). The likelihood of participation is higher where non-resident fathers acknowledge the importance of the study and see direct benefits of participating in the study (e.g. incentives), as well as contact being made via trusted intermediaries (Raybould et al., 2023). On the other hand, their participation is less likely if participants are subject to time constraints, have a fractured relationship with the child's mother and are concerned about data privacy and confidentiality (ibid.).

1.3.2 How to address the gap in research about non-resident fathers?

In order to address the gap in research, international research has increasingly focussed on non-resident fathers – i.e. fathers who do not live with some, or all, of their biological children following separation/divorce or who have never lived with their children (Poole et al., 2016; Violi et al., 2023). The terminology used for this group of fathers is highly contested, with critics arguing that some terms can reinforce the stigma that is attached to this group. A number of child cohort studies

have aimed to sample and directly or indirectly recruit fathers who do not live full-time with their child. In general, population surveys are considered the best way to ensure a representative sample; while longitudinal studies can identify non-resident parents if families separate over time, such numbers tend to be small (Bryson and McKay, 2012). Some cohort studies such as Fragile Families in the US and the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (the LSAC – 'Growing Up in Australia') have been more successful in recruiting and retaining non-resident fathers, who are often perceived as a 'hard to reach group', compared to similar studies in other countries (Goldman et al., 2021). Furthermore, data on non-resident fathers are still collected just from mothers in some cases (e.g. the Growing Up in Scotland study (GUS)). In fact, it has been argued that to involve non-resident fathers in the study would necessitate a different research design (Scottish Government, 2009). More details on these longitudinal studies and their inclusion of non-resident fathers are provided in Chapter 2.

In order to improve data on non-resident fathers in cohort and longitudinal studies in the UK, Goldman et al. (2019) have explored the issues involved in recruitment and retention of this group, particularly focussing on identifying, contacting, recruiting and retaining these fathers of cohort members. In line with the Scottish Government (2009) recommendations, Goldman et al. (2019) suggest adopting a tailored approach to recruitment and retention of non-resident fathers (e.g. telephone or face-to-face data collection; keeping in touch/tracing activities; flexibility in participation and tailored communications), while taking into account the heterogeneity of this group based on the level of contact with, and care of, the study child. The authors acknowledge that it is easier to have buy-in to participate in a study from fathers who have regular and close contact with their child and who also have a good relationship with their ex-partner. The authors also argue that for research on children's outcomes, priority in data collection should be given to more 'involved' fathers and that such studies should recruit such fathers 'in their own right' (Goldman et al., 2019). It may be beneficial to undertake a qualitative study before any survey, the results of which could inform the approach to data collection (Goldman et al., 2019) and could provide insights into the topics that the respondents may find difficult to discuss (e.g. fertility history) (Stykes et al., 2013; Bryson and McCay, 2018; Rendall, et al., 1999). Participation of non-resident fathers could be further enhanced by using monetary incentives (Altenburger, 2022; Raybould et al., 2023) or setting up a fathers' advisory council (Altenburger, 2022). Overall, in order to encourage participation, non-resident fathers need to be provided with clear information on the benefits and value of the study for other fathers in a similar situation and be ensured of confidentiality of the data, particularly regarding sharing this with the child's mother. Other factors included the societal value of the study, financial incentives, and a clear message about the importance of hearing from a diverse range of families/parents.

1.3.3 What do we know about non-resident fathers?

The profile of non-resident fathers

While sharing some common denominators, existing international studies indicate that non-resident fathers are heterogeneous in terms of their involvement with their children, particularly regarding overnight care arrangements (Goldman et al., 2021; Poole et al., 2024).[8] Previous research enables a better understanding of the profile of non-resident fathers. Drawing on the large-scale UK household longitudinal study, Understanding Society, Poole et al. (2024) find that such fathers are more likely to be from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Due to separation or divorce, non-resident fathers often experience distress, lack of agency in decision-making, have fewer social and financial resources at their disposal and experience issues with mental health (Violi et al., 2023), which can have an impact on their relationship with their child/children and/or the mother. Being a non-resident father is also associated with ethnic background, with Black Caribbean and Black African fathers in the UK more likely to belong to this category, compared to Asian/Bangladeshi and Pakistani fathers who are more likely to be living in a married couple (Poole et al., 2024; Raybould et al., 2023). Religious background also seems to play a role, with 19 per cent of UK fathers with no religion having non-resident children compared with 14 per cent of Christian fathers, 7 per cent of Muslim fathers and 7 per cent of Sikh fathers (Poole et al., 2024). Furthermore, fathers who do not routinely reside with their children are more likely to have married or cohabited several times, not living with both parents themselves as a child (ibid.). In fact, research in the Australian context shows that compared to any other socio-demographic group, non-resident fathers are more likely to experience a variety of family types, after separating or divorcing (Violi et al., 2022). Separation or divorce can have a detrimental impact on fathers as many develop issues with their mental health after the event (ibid.; Rusten et al., 2019).

Non-resident fathers and child outcomes

Fathers play an important role in their child's development, including their socio-emotional wellbeing and cognitive development (see, for example, McMunn et al., 2017; Emmott and Mace, 2021). However, much less is known about the relationship between a non-resident father and his child/children. Furthermore, in a lot of cases information about such fathers and their interaction with the child is obtained from the ex-partner, and may not always be accurate (Violi et al., 2022) as the resident parent may under-estimate, and the non-resident parent may over-estimate, the level of contact with the child/children (Poole et al., 2024; Lader, 2008). Furthermore, the father-child relationship is often influenced by external factors, such as the role of police, legal and welfare services (Violi et al., 2022; Vestergaard et al., 2023). The relationship can vary considerably, in terms of the

[8] A distinction is made between 'minority overnight care', 'equal overnight care' or 'part-time resident' father.

quantity and quality of contact and care as well as the relationship dynamics with the ex-partner, and practical arrangements around finances and custody (Poole et al., 2016). Existing research has found that positive coparenting predicts greater involvement of non-resident fathers with their children (Schoppe-Sullivan and Fagan, 2020). The relationship dynamics can be influenced by a lack of access to mediation services, poor enforcement of access and maintenance arrangements, and a lack of emotional and mental health support for every family member (Vestergaard et al., 2023).

Research from the US shows that non-resident fathers tend to be close to their children, with eight-in-ten of such fathers (81 per cent) claiming to have a very or quite close relationship, with just 11 per cent reporting having no close relationship (Sariscsany et al., 2019). These authors also note that the relationship tends to be closer the more frequent contact there is (ibid.). In the UK, recent research shows that non-resident fathers spend a considerable amount of time with their child/children, with nearly half of the fathers in the study noting that their children often stay with them at weekends or school holidays (Poole et al., 2024). However, some research shows that non-resident fathers' contact with children decreases over time (Poole et al., 2016). When children in Ireland were asked about contact with their non-resident father in a qualitative study, the majority of them did not report close contact with him, but, rather, felt distant from their father (Nixon et al., 2012). At the same time, non-resident fathers tend to be dissatisfied with the level of contact with their children (Vestergaard et al., 2023) and many children would like to spend more time with their fathers (Qu and Weston, 2014). Elsewhere, Fahey et al. (2012), drawing on GUI data for 9-year-olds, suggest that children in Ireland who do not live with their father full-time tend to experience less authoritative parenting styles from him. The relationship between the father and the child may often be complex, characterised by a fractured relationship between ex-partners on the one hand, and shared affection for the child on the other (Vestergaard et al., 2023). Father-child contact can be problematic for some fathers who are renting accommodation, especially if the accommodation is not suitable for an overnight stay for the child (Clarke and Muir, 2017). Contact with the child is also more likely if they are engaged in financial provision for their child, do not live far from the child, have no new partner/other children living with him, are in stable employment, are from a higher socio-economic group and have higher qualifications (Poole et al., 2024). Children who see their fathers more frequently in infancy and early childhood report more positive relationships with them at the age of 9 (Fagan, 2024). The existing research shows that while both parents want to be involved in the upbringing of their child/children, much of this responsibility still falls on the mother, whereas many non-resident fathers feel that they are discriminated against by the current legal system that tends to prioritise mothers (Vestergaard et al., 2023). The perspectives of non-resident fathers and their experiences in the face of structural challenges are often overlooked (Violi et al., 2024).

In addition to exploring the relationship of non-resident fathers with their children, some studies have focussed on the outcomes of children whose father is living elsewhere. Unpacking this influence can be difficult, however, as families with a non-resident father often share other characteristics – such as ethnicity group, low socio-economic status, or low levels of educational attainment – that impact on child development (Baxter, 2015). In Ireland, differences in self-concept and health outcomes between children in lone-parent and two-parent households were found to be due to selection (i.e. greater levels of disadvantage), but differences in educational outcomes remained (Hannan and Halpin, 2014). However, some authors argue that the outcomes of the children who live in a one-parent family tend to be more negative compared to those who consistently live in two-parent households (Culpin et al., 2022). There is some research to date that has considered the association between non-resident father's involvement and child outcomes (Adamsons and Johnson, 2013). Looking at adolescent wellbeing, existing research has indicated that the quality of the mother-child relationship has a strong effect on adolescent wellbeing, whereas non-resident father-child relationship quality and responsive fathering are modestly associated with fewer externalising (antisocial or aggressive behaviour) and internalising (depression and other symptoms of distress) problems among adolescents (King and Sobolewski, 2006). Greater contact with a non-resident father has been found to be associated with children's improved adjustment measured by items such as their willingness to try new things, feelings of happiness, cheerfulness, sadness or depression, and whether or not they get along with other children, but only if mothers are satisfied with the non-resident fathers' level of involvement (King and Heard, 1999). Greater father-child involvement has also been associated with lesser likelihood of dropping out of school early (Menning, 2006). However, non-resident father-child involvement is also influenced by maternal parenting practices, maternal depressive symptoms and maternal parenting stress (Coates and Phares, 2019). The authors note that as the child spends most of his/her time with the resident parent, this environment is likely to have the strongest impact on child development. Furthermore, the non-resident father can assist the mother of the child to cope with parenting and provide (direct and indirect) financial support (Choi and Jackson, 2012; Dermott, 2016; Nepomnyaschy et al., 2022).

1.4 METHODOLOGY

This report is designed to scope out the potential for including non-resident fathers in future waves of data collection for the new GUI birth cohort, exploring the rationale for doing so and potential challenges in securing participation. The study has involved a number of strands. Firstly, a review of the international literature was conducted to glean insights into the involvement of non-resident fathers in the lives of their children (see Section 1.3). Secondly, a review of international

cohort studies was undertaken. The criteria for including studies in the review were that:

- The study was longitudinal or had the potential to be (that is, where one wave of data had been collected and further waves were planned);
- The study included younger children (age 5 or younger) so to be of relevance to the new GUI birth cohort study; thus, this excluded several prominent studies which focused on older young people, such as Next Steps (formerly the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England) and the US National Longitudinal Study of Youth;
- The study was representative of the population of a country or large area;
- The study involved collecting data from children and their families rather than using register data, for example.

The initial steps involved reviewing technical reports and other published material from the selected studies. Where some details were unclear (for example, whether the term 'fathers' referred to both resident and non-resident fathers), emails were sent to the study Principal Investigators (PIs) or other contact point given on the study website; this process involved ten studies. Ten studies, similar in nature to GUI, were selected for more detailed scrutiny. The study PIs or other contact points were emailed and asked to take part in an online interview. All agreed to take part; in some cases, researchers other than the PI were identified as the best informant as personnel had sometimes changed since the original design of the study. The interviews (and written responses) provided richer insights into the rationale for including, or not including, non-resident parents, and the challenges and opportunities in involving this group. All of those interviewed were given the opportunity to review the quotes used but only two teams availed of this opportunity.

Thirdly, analyses were undertaken of GUI data to look at the likelihood of the resident mother agreeing to provide contact details for the non-resident father and the pattern of response rates for those fathers. GUI data were also used to look at the level of involvement of the non-resident father in their child's life from the perspective of the mother and, where possible, the father himself. Finally, interviews were conducted with separated parents and NGOs working with parents to look at the value of, and potential for, involving non-resident fathers in research on children.

NGOs working with separated parents were identified and approached to take part in interviews. Six representative individuals agreed to take part. The interviews with NGOs were conducted online during November 2024. They were recorded and the transcript used for analyses of the key themes. The interviews lasted

approximately one hour and covered the issues of how best to collect information on non-resident parents, the benefits and limitations of different approaches, and the type of information that should be collected. The interviewees were asked if they would be willing to contact non-resident parents to participate in further interviews or focus groups on the same topics covered with the NGOs. All four organisations said they would be willing to send on an invitation to participate in the research to some of their clients, although we only drew on the networks of two organisations with the largest and more diverse client groups. There were some challenges in obtaining interviewees, despite the support of the NGOs, and interviews were conducted with five fathers who were not living full-time with their children and one mother who was separated from the father of her children.

Taken together, the strands of the study provide insights which can inform the future development of the GUI birth cohort and other cohort studies internationally as well as being of relevance to cross-sectional studies of children and young people that seek to understand the context within which they live. It is not intended to provide a cost-benefit analysis of the inclusion of non-resident fathers in research but many of those interviewed did point to the benefits and challenges, including resources, of aiming to include this group of fathers.

1.5 OUTLINE OF THE REPORT

Chapter 2 presents information on international cohort studies, looking at the extent to which they include fathers, resident and non-resident, and their experiences in seeking to maximise response rates from these groups. Chapter 3 draws on GUI data to look the extent to which permission is given by resident mothers to contact non-resident fathers and how likely those fathers are to take part in the survey. Information is also presented on the degree of contact between these fathers and their children. Chapter 4 draws on interviews with lone parents and NGOs to look at the potential for including non-resident parents in research and the rationale for so doing. Chapter 5 summarises the study findings and highlights issues to be considered for future waves of the new GUI birth cohort.

CHAPTER 2

Fathers in international cohort studies

2.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents an overview of the inclusion of fathers, resident and/or non-resident, in international cohort studies, drawing on published research and technical reports along with interviews with Principal Investigators or other key staff from these studies. Because of the large number of studies of children and young people internationally, the review is limited to birth or child cohort studies which are longitudinal in nature or intended to be longitudinal (see Chapter 1). The review does not cover large-scale cross-sectional studies (such as PISA or HBSC) or follow-up studies that cover a span of age groups.[9]

2.2 THE INCLUSION OF RESIDENT FATHERS IN INTERNATIONAL COHORT STUDIES

A variety of terms have been used in international cohort studies regarding parents, with most collecting the bulk of the information from the 'main parent', 'person most knowledgeable about the child' or 'primary caregiver'. In the vast majority of cases, these informants have been the child's mother (or mother figure) so the remainder of this chapter uses the term mothers as a shorthand for main informants. Early longitudinal studies, such as the National Child Development Study (NCDS) and the British Cohort Study 1970 (BCS70), collected information only from mothers and children, an approach that reflected the then actual and/or assumed gendered division of labour in families.

> *Hard though it is to believe, this [the Millennium Cohort Study] would be the first national cohort to survey fathers, as well as mothers, from the start. (Pearson, 2016, p. 255)*

Later studies have tended to include resident fathers, father figures and/or the partners of the mothers in the sample (Table 2.1). However, this is by no means universal. For the Kids in Taiwan Study (KIT), 'the parent questionnaire is administered and answered by one parent, most often the mother' (written communication). In addition, the Southampton Women's Study did not include fathers, given the focus of the study on 'fetal growth' and 'how maternal and intrauterine factors interact with the offspring's genes and postnatal environment' (Inskip et al., 2006).[10] The Study of Early Education and Development (SEED) in

[9] For example, the German Health Interview and Examination Survey for Children and Adolescents (KiGGS) covered children and young people aged 0 to 17 years in 2003-2006 and followed them for a further wave.

[10] A number of other studies that focus on the effects of intrauterine and environmental factors on child health outcomes are not discussed here, including the Danish National Birth Cohort and the Japan Environment and Children's Study.

England has focused on 'the impact of childcare on children throughout their childhood'[11] and respondents have comprised the primary caregiver, early years staff and school teachers.

The inclusion of (resident) fathers in cohort studies reflects a shift in recognition of the influence of fathers on child outcomes as well as changes over time in the level of active paternal engagement, with some studies not including fathers at all waves indicating that they may be obtaining a partial picture of children's lives.

> *The role of fathers in the family … and the responsibilities for children and changes in the workplace and a greater balance of employee rights between women and men, that has allowed more men to spend more time at home potentially and develop different types of relationships with their kids. … I think having some data about that from fathers themselves and allowing them to reflect on things would probably improve our understanding of that. … There are certainly some things about maybe the father's relationship with the child or the father's relationship with the mother, the father's perceptions of their role in the family, that we can't get very accurately from asking the mother or asking the young person. We're kind of getting stuff by proxy which might misrepresent some of the relationships and situations that we've got. (Growing Up in Scotland, interview)*

> *It gave another perspective in the household on the child … on the relationship between that other parent and the child, which of course is very, very important to have that kind of whole family perspective. (Millennium Cohort Study, interview)*

Several studies have surveyed both parents[12] at each wave of data collection (for example, Growing Up in Québec, the Millennium Cohort Study and the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth in Canada), though typically fathers are seen as the 'secondary' or 'additional' informant, an approach that has been critiqued by some commentators (see, for example, Goldman and Burgess, 2018).

However, a number of studies have not surveyed resident fathers at all waves of the study. This decision is attributed by researchers to two sets of factors. Firstly, studies often see the primary focus as the child and their mother:

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11 https://natcen.ac.uk/publications/study-early-education-and-development-seed.

12 In practice, studies vary in how they define the second informant, with some focusing on 'fathers' while others target the spouse or partner of the mother.

> *The data collection for our research is mainly based on mothers' responses, as the interviews start from the antenatal period and the sample is drawn from the antenatal care system. (Growing Up in Hungary, written communication)*

Secondly, the decision not to include both parents in all waves is often based on funding constraints, particularly if the survey mode involves face-to-face interviews:

> *We have always consider[ed] to include/interview also the partners of our respondent. Unfortunately, we couldn't fund this interview (as the six cohort[s] of the NEPS were run in parallel). In Wave 11, we had the unique opportunity to include an interview with the partners. This was a pilot for our planned new birth cohort to test the response rate of the partners. We therefore contacted only the partner who lived with the respondent. (NEPS, written communication)*

> *I'm sure fathers as informants were considered, but I think probably for budget reasons, more so than anything else, they were ruled out at that point [Wave 1]. And they did get included in the second sweep of data collection. But there was no additional informant after Sweep 2 until Sweep 9 and that again was … because there wasn't sufficient budget to do much beyond the main carer. (Growing Up in Scotland, interview)*

Similarly, ALSPAC initially focused on the pregnant mother and her child because of funding constraints:

> *The decision was made that there was only funding available to recruit pregnant women and focus on the pregnant women and follow them through initially. (ALSPAC, interview)*

However, short questionnaires were sent to the partners of the mothers in the course of the study. Later funding was secured to hold an in-person clinic for fathers in 2012 at which biological data were collected. This was open to fathers, regardless of residence, but information is not available on the breakdown in numbers. Researchers reported challenges in involving fathers in general in the study:

> *ALSPAC has always felt like a very female study, it always felt like that the focus is very much on the mothers and I think we've suffered as a result of that. I think lots of longitudinal cohort studies struggle with that, because over time they often become very female. (ALSPAC, interview)*

Incentives were seen as an important factor for this group, especially given the time involved in attending in-person clinics.

> *We provide an incentive for our participants and that was definitely something that was really important to this group of men. And I remember having lots of conversations about things like I'm self-employed, if I come to your clinic for three hours, you're going to have to reimburse me for that. And I can't do it on a Monday to Friday, nine to five. You're going to have to do it at different times. So it … forced us to really think about what we were doing and change slightly what we were doing. And even then, it was really hard. It was noticeably harder than recruiting women, definitely. (ALSPAC, interview)*

Similarly, the Origins project in Perth pointed to the value of the 'health check' session in involving fathers:

> *They do tend to like even that feedback on … lifestyle behaviours in terms of their physical activity, their alcohol consumption and their weight, how that fits within our kind of national normative data, so where they sat. (Origins project, interview)*

For Growing Up in New Zealand, funding constraints meant that resident fathers were included in the antenatal, 6-week, 9-month and two-year waves but not at other waves. An adjunct study of all fathers, resident and non-resident, was carried out when cohort children were aged around 5 or 6 years (see Section 2.3). The Wirral Child Development Study included fathers only at some waves in order not to overburden them:

> *Some waves were intensive subsample only and in this we only included mothers by design. In the first year of life we took the view that fathers may be overburdened if we contact them too frequently so we opted for follow-up at 12 months only. (Wirral Child Development Study, written communication)*

Challenges in securing good response rates from fathers were also mentioned as a constraint on their inclusion:

> *Although the role of fathers is very important, their access is very difficult. In the father study, we asked the mothers for contact details of the fathers, but in each case we had to obtain a separate consent from the fathers. The response rate was around 40 per cent compared to mothers and there was a very strong participation bias (based on fathers' motivation). (Growing Up in Hungary, written communication)*

TABLE 2.1 INCLUSION OF FATHERS (RESIDENT AND/OR NON-RESIDENT) IN INTERNATIONAL COHORT STUDIES

Cohort study	Country	Year cohort born (or started)	Inclusion of resident fathers or father figures	Inclusion of non-resident fathers	How non-resident fathers are contacted
Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (ALSPAC)*	Avon, England	1991/1992 Generation 1; Generation 2 – open recruitment	Yes, some waves	Yes, regardless of residence; no response breakdown	Contacted through mother
Born in Bradford	Bradford, England	2007/2010	Yes, some waves	Yes, regardless of residence; no response breakdown	Contacted through mother
British Cohort Study 1970 (BCS 70)	UK (NI only in birth sweep)	1970	No	No	
Children of the 2020s*	England	2021	Yes	Yes	Contacted through mother
Early Life Cohort Feasibility Study*	UK	2022 (England, Wales, Scotland); 2023 (Northern Ireland)	Yes, one wave to date	Yes, one wave to date	Contacted independently; in some cases through the mother
Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (ECLS-B)*	US	2001	Yes, almost all waves	Yes, some waves	Contacted through mother
Étude Longitudinale Française depuis l'Enfance (ELFE)	France	2011	Yes, almost all waves (except the pregnancy wave)	Yes	Contacted through mother
Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (now The Future of Families and Child Wellbeing Study)*	20 cities, US	1998/2000	Yes, almost all waves	Yes	Contacted through mother; but some direct contact at hospital after birth
From Five to Twelve*	England	Aged 5/6 in 2023	Yes, one wave to date	Yes, one wave to date	Contacted through mother
Growing Up in Australia (LSAC)*	Australia	Aged 0/1 in 2003/2004; 4/5 years in 2003/2004	Yes, all waves	Yes, all waves	Contacted through mother
Growing Up in Hungary	Hungary	28-31 weeks pregnant in 2018	Yes, one wave to date	No, but hope to in the future	
Growing Up in Québec	Québec, Canada	2020/2021	Yes, all waves	Yes, but only those who left the household after Wave 1	Contact details from Wave 1

TABLE 2.1 CONTINUED

Cohort study	Country	Year cohort born (or started)	Inclusion of resident fathers or father figures	Inclusion of non-resident fathers	How non-resident fathers are contacted
Growing Up in New Zealand (GUNZ)*	New Zealand	Pregnancy in 2009/2010	Yes, a subset of waves	Yes, at one wave only	Contacted through mother
Growing Up in Scotland (GUS)*	Scotland	2005/2006	Yes, a subset of waves	No	
Kids in Taiwan (KIT)	Taiwan	2017	No	No	
Millennium Cohort Study*	UK	2000	Yes	No	
National Child Development Study (NCDS)	Britain	1958	No	No	
National Education Panel Study (NEPS)	Germany	2012 (Starting Cohort 1)	Yes, one wave to date	No	
National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY)	Canada	Several cohorts of 0/1 year olds: 1996/1997, 1998/1999, 2000/2001, 2002, 2004	Yes, all waves to 17 years	No	
Norwegian Mother, Father and Child Cohort Study (MoBa)	Norway	Pregnancy 1998-2000	Yes, a subset of waves	Yes, at one wave only; no response breakdown	Initially contacted through mother; later sent directly to father
Origins Project*	Perth, Australia	Pregnancy 2017-2023	Yes, a subset of fathers at almost all waves	No	
Panel Study on Korean Children	Korea	2008	Yes, all waves	No	
Southampton Women's Survey	Southampton, England	Various years; recruited mothers aged 20-34 in 1998/2002	No	No	
Study of Early Education and Development (SEED)	England	Age 2 in 2013/2014	No	No	
Wirral Child Development Study	Wirral, England	20 weeks gestation in 2006	Yes, some waves	Yes, regardless of residence; no response breakdown	Contacted through mother and contact details at Wave 1

Source: Design and other reports; interviews with research teams.
Note: * The PI or other team member was interviewed for this study.

2.3 THE INCLUSION OF NON-RESIDENT FATHERS IN INTERNATIONAL COHORT STUDIES

2.3.1 Rationale for including or not including non-resident fathers

There has been much greater variation between studies in the inclusion of non-resident fathers in cohort studies as well as in the terminology used, such as 'own household father' and 'parent living elsewhere'. Several studies, including Growing Up in Scotland, the Millennium Cohort and NLSCY, have not included non-resident fathers in data collection. The reasons given generally centred on budgetary constraints coupled with the challenges involved in contacting and securing the participation of this group of fathers:

> *We undertook a bit of a brief scoping study … and basically concluded at that time, based on the evidence from other studies who had attempted to do it, that the data we would likely get wasn't worth the cost and effort it would take us to collect it. And that we may spend a lot of time and effort doing something to produce data that really we wouldn't be able to use. (Growing Up in Scotland, interview)*

In particular, the reliance on the resident mother as a 'gatekeeper' to obtain contact details for the non-resident father was seen as a constraint on securing participation and as potentially leading to a more selective sample of fathers:

> *The only way that we could see that we could do it at that time stage … was to collect contact details of own household fathers or non-resident fathers via the responding parent and we just figured that well one, not all of them would give us those details. Two, we would likely get details of non-resident fathers who had a particularly good relationship with the responding parent, and so the data you're getting is going to be biased, and then for a bunch of the rest of them, yeah, maybe the data, the contact details wouldn't be up to date. (Growing Up in Scotland, interview)*

Non-resident fathers had been included in the pilot for the Millennium Cohort Study but not in the main study because of some negative response by mothers to providing contact details for the father and challenges around the selectivity involved:

> *It was just felt it wasn't going down well basically with a lot of the mums that were in this feasibility study. So it was decided not to pursue that. … We would have had a very select sample, a low proportion were agreeing to it and of those who were agreeing, it was probably those who did have a good relationship or were still in*

> *contact in some way or other. So for all of those reasons, it wasn't pursued at that time. (MCS, interview)*

Other studies have included only fathers who had left the household since the first wave of the study and not those already living outside the household at study initiation:

> *Fathers (and mothers) who left the household after the first wave are no longer interviewed but they still receive a self-administered questionnaire. Fathers (and mothers) who were not living in the household at the time of the first interview are not contacted as they are not covered by the consent form signed by the main respondent before every interview. (Growing Up in Québec, written communication)*

Despite deciding not to include non-resident fathers in the study, researchers did highlight the potential value of having such information, given the rich insights it would provide into all aspects of the child's life.

> *Whatever relationships exist for the child and the father's household are just as significant as the relationships and situations in the mother's household. Yet we're not collecting very good data about that other part of the child's life that may explain lots of things that are happening to the child. (Growing Up in Scotland, interview)*

One study did indicate plans to include non-resident fathers in future waves of the study:

> *If our research continues, we plan to collect father data at the age of 8 years in the future, and here we would specifically focus on separated fathers. (Growing Up in Hungary, written communication)*

Even where non-resident fathers themselves were not surveyed, studies often collected information from the resident mother on the nature of the relationship (e.g. if they had ever lived together, when they separated and the quality of the relationship) and on the degree, and nature, of father-child contact. Examples include Growing Up in Scotland and the Millennium Cohort Study.

> *We do ask some questions about them, … we ask things like how often they see their non-resident parents. … If they still have a relationship, if they regularly stay over with them. We do ask questions about that. If they receive any sort of financial support, so there are questions about that kind of to try to get a little bit of those things while it's not being too intrusive. (MCS, interview)*

One interviewee pointed to a mismatch between the information provided by both parents, though relatively few studies have directly compared these responses:

> *I would strongly encourage when you do talk to fathers right to think about their other children and their other families, and to make sure to get information from them and to the degree possible. If you can't get fathers, then to ask the mothers of the focal child as much as you can about what's happening with those fathers. (FFCW, interview)*

One interviewee pointed to the challenges in ensuring that this proxy information captured the circumstances accurately:

> *The questionnaire design and testing parts of that [scoping] study prove that actually you've got to really think carefully about the questions you ask about that contact and lots of the data that we've collected probably didn't reflect a lot of the situations and relationships that were there. … If we were doing it again, then we'd be really thinking about our questionnaire design and making sure that … even though it's proxy, at least it's good quality proxy and we're collecting the most relevant or asking the right questions basically. (Growing Up in Scotland, interview)*

2.3.2 Studies that include non-resident fathers

The inclusion of non-resident fathers is seen by researchers as providing richer insights into the broad array of influences on child and youth development:

> *There are many ways in which the fathers influence their child, not least by their genetic endowments. And you know, if they're not in contact, they might be supporting them financially. If they're not in contact now, right at the beginning, … it's reasonably likely that quite a lot of them will get in touch later on. … We wanted to be very inclusive of all dads. (ELCFS, interview)*

> *To fully understand children's development, it was very important to have information from both parents since both have a vital role in their children's lives. Also, as the number of PLEs [Parents Living Elsewhere] is likely to increase throughout the life of the study, obtaining information from these parents will be increasingly important. (LSAC, interview)*

> *We kind of convinced ourselves, I guess, that of the evidence around fathers having an impact and that not always being clear in some*

> *studies. So yeah, we just wanted to have a go at it. (From Five to Twelve, interview)*

> *It's just a huge piece of what's going on in children's lives from the perspective of economic security and … what's happening in the homes with regards to material hardship and poverty and what the mother has access to in terms of resources. … But equally important is what the relationship is with the father and child and how the father's contributing in various other ways to the child's development. (FFCW, interview)*

The complexity of care arrangements can also make it difficult to determine the 'main' caregiver:

> *Some PLEs [Parents Living Elsewhere] actually considered themselves to be a primary carer. So it was 50-50 shared responsibility, but they don't happen to be the main person living with the young person. … So in those instances, I think that would be a rich source of information that you'd be missing if you didn't include that PLE. (LSAC, interview)*

> *Parents' reports, mothers and fathers of where the child lives, … there's just so much disagreement there, right? Because the whole question of where does the child live is not so easy. If the father has the child three days a week or whatever, he might think the child lives with him. (FFCW, interview)*

Some studies included all fathers or partners of the mother regardless of residence in at least some waves of data collection but have not provided separate information on the response rates from, or profile of, these fathers. These include Born in Bradford and the Norwegian Mother, Father and Child Cohort Study (MoBa).

Growing Up in New Zealand had not initially included non-resident fathers because of budgetary constraints. However, funding was obtained for a one-off adjunct study which collected information from fathers, resident and non-resident, when the child was aged around 5 or 6. Contact details were obtained from the resident mothers and text messaging was used to contact fathers. The response rate overall was 72 per cent. The study reported challenges in reaching some groups of fathers:

> *The ones who were non-resident are the hardest to reach. Ultimately you know, it's … the ones who've had least contact with the child over that period of time, … maybe see the child once a month or even less … Although the general feedback was kind of that the dads were really*

> *pleased that we were reaching out to them. They wanted to be involved. (Growing Up in New Zealand, interview)*

Like other studies, the Wirral Child Development Study relied on resident mothers for contact details for fathers or for earlier consent to follow up where fathers had subsequently moved out of the household.

> *We gathered consent to follow-up in future at most phases from both fathers and mothers but were reliant on mothers to pass on questionnaires to some fathers or give us their changed contact details where parents separated. We did attempt to keep biological fathers in the study if they were still in contact with the child. Where there was domestic violence and mothers asked us not to send further questionnaires to the father, we honoured her wishes as it was most important to us to keep the mother in the study. (Wirral Child Development Study, written communication)*

Some studies have used filtering criteria to ensure that they only seek to contact fathers who are in ongoing contact with the child and do not get in touch with respondents who may not be aware that they are fathers.

> *If the study child hadn't had contact with the PLE [parent living elsewhere] in the last year, we wouldn't pursue the PLE details. There was also a reasonable number of parents who just refused to answer questions about the PLE at all. (LSAC, interview)*

There has been a good deal of variation in the response rates achieved with non-resident fathers. Relatively good levels of response, at least in early waves, have been achieved by the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (ECLS-B) in the US, Growing Up in Australia – the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) and the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing (FFCW) Study in the US (now called The Future of Families and Child Wellbeing Study). For this reason, a more detailed account of these studies is presented here to identify the potential factors associated with better response rates.

Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Birth Cohort of 2001 (ECLS-B)

ECLS-B in the US started in 2001 with 9-month-old infants, sampled on the basis of birth certificate data; there were follow-up interviews with families at 2 years, pre-school (approximately 4 years) and at kindergarten entry. Non-resident fathers were included in the study through self-administered questionnaires at 9 months and 2 years. The total group included all non-resident fathers identified through the surveys of mothers. Only fathers who met at least one of the following criteria were included in the survey: having seen the child at least once in the past month;

having seen the child on at least seven days in the past three months; being in touch with the resident mother at least once a month in the last three months. The research team indicated that this excluded about a fifth of the total group (ECLS-B, written communication).

> *In all of these cases contact was defined as either an in-person visit or a telephone call. … These were basically criteria set up to make sure that we were going to be … talking to a population of fathers that would provide us reliable information on the constructs we were including. So we were going to be asking them questions about caregiving, questions about involvement activities, and we just wanted to make sure they had a frequency of contact with that child. (ECLS-B, interview)*

Mothers were required to give permission for the non-resident father to be contacted, which excluded a further fifth of the total group. Fathers were contacted by telephone in the first instance and then sent a questionnaire for postal return; where the mother was going to see the non-resident father in the next week, a packet with the questionnaire was left with them. Those who did not respond within two weeks were followed up by telephone 'either to try to do the survey on the phone or offer to send them another questionnaire in the mail' (ECLS-B, interview). A US$20 incentive was provided for questionnaire completion. Of those fathers who were contacted, half completed the non-resident father questionnaire. This compares to a response rate of 76 per cent for resident fathers. No information is available on the difference in profile between participating fathers and all others. The residence status of fathers was identified again in the next wave of data collection when the child was 2 years, so fathers who had been living in the household when the child was 9 months but subsequently left were included. For this wave, response rates were 60 per cent for non-resident fathers and approximately 80 per cent for resident fathers. The relative success in involving a relatively large proportion of the group was attributed to proactive contact and follow-up of the fathers. However, non-resident fathers were not included in subsequent waves of the study:

> *We had to stop the component because we were seeing these declining response rates and because of budgetary constraints. We had to make some tough decisions about what pieces of the study to keep. (ECLS-B interview)*

ECLS-B data, including that on non-resident fathers, have been archived for use by other researchers, with some frequencies openly available on the Department of Education DataLab.

Growing Up in Australia – the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC)

LSAC participating families were sampled on the basis of the child being age zero to 1 year in 2003/2004. The approach to involving non-resident fathers, termed 'parents living elsewhere', changed over the course of the LSAC study. In the pilot for Wave 1, contact details and written consent to contact PLEs were sought from Parent 1 (P1, the main caregiver). They were sent postal questionnaires, with low response rates obtained. As a result, PLEs were not included in the main wave. This decision was revisited for Wave 2 and a different approach was taken:

> *Step one which was new for P1s, the interview explained the importance of involving both parents in the study. So I guess that step is to make sure that you're getting kind of the P1 on board and trying to understand why it's important that we contact the PLE. So that was a new step. Step two, the contact number for the PLE was requested but not explicit consent for the PLE to be contacted about the study. … Rather than just sending the PLE a questionnaire in the mail and hoping for the best, the interviewer actually called the PLE and had a chat to them about the study, gave a bit of a rationale for why we're including them, and then sent the questionnaire. The other thing that we did was with the questionnaire that we mailed out to the PLE, we redesigned it to be more friendly and positive, as we stated in the ethics application, with more information relating to what the parent and child do when they're together. (LSAC, interview)*

Contact details were given by 69 per cent of parents and 35 per cent of those sent a questionnaire responded so 'it was somewhat successful, but probably not as successful as we wanted' (LSAC, interview). As a result, a telephone interview for PLEs was introduced in Wave 3 which 'was much more successful in getting the PLEs on board' (LSAC, interview). For Wave 3, 18 per cent of parents refused to provide or did not have contact details for the PLE. For those for whom details were provided, there was a response rate of 77 per cent in Wave 3, with rates for Waves 4 to 6 between 71 and 86 per cent, dropping somewhat for Waves 7 and 8, and more markedly for Wave 9 (Mohal et al., 2023). The research team attributed these high response rates to the use of a telephone interview and to a focus on the importance of PLEs in engagement materials, including information brochures, newsletters and calendars. Unlike some other studies, LSAC did not provide financial incentives to study participants. The LSAC data, including the data on PLEs, have been archived through the Australian Data Archive with a general release, and a more restricted release for more sensitive information.

Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing (FFCW) Study

The US FFCW study differs from many of the other cohort studies in sampling respondents from 20 cities, with a particular focus on oversampling non-marital births.

> *To understand how families where there's non-marital births are faring, how the parents are doing together and how the children then do as they develop. (FFCW, interview)*

Recruitment at birth took place between 1998 and 2000, with follow-up at 1, 3, 5, 9 and 15 years of age. Non-resident fathers were included from the start of the study, with the team trying to interview the father at the hospital or within a week of the child's birth by phone, with in-person interviewer follow-up for those did not respond.

> *One of the most surprising things that happened … when they came to the hospitals to survey the mothers, the fathers were all there, not all obviously, but a very large proportion of them, much more so than had been anticipated. And so that was a great way to get them immediately into the study and then that's why they were able to have them and then continue in the study as we went further. (FFCW, interview)*

Mothers and fathers were each offered US$20 for participation in the study. In the initial birth sweep, 61 per cent of non-resident fathers completed the survey, a pattern attributed to the emphasis on early involvement of this group. Response rates at Waves 2 to 4 were 50-60 per cent for fathers who had not been living with the mother at the initial wave. At Wave 5, when the child was 9 years of age, response rates for fathers, resident and non-resident, dropped to 55 per cent. As a result, a decision was made not to continue with father interviews at the 15-year sweep. Response rates were lower among:

> *the fathers that were less connected to the mothers and … as the relationship became more conflictual, those fathers are more and more likely to drop out of being interviewed (FFCW, interview).*

Data from the FFCW study, including information on non-resident fathers, can be downloaded from two national data archives; frequencies for the variables are available online and in codebooks for the study.

In contrast, other studies have experienced some challenges in involving non-resident fathers in the study. Two English cohort studies, Children of the 2020s and From Five to Twelve, included non-resident parents on the same basis as the

second resident parent. For Children of the 2020s, primary caregivers were asked for consent to contact the other parent and were asked for contact details for them; consent was given in 70 per cent of resident parent households and 50 per cent for non-resident parent households (IPSOS, 2023). The survey was online as opposed to face-to-face interviews with the primary caregiver. Response rates were 36 per cent for resident parents and 18 per cent for non-resident parents (for those for whom permission and contact details were given). From Five to Twelve sampled children aged 5 or 6 in 2023. Eligibility for non-resident fathers to be included related to being in contact with the child. They were contacted through the resident parent and sent a web survey, on the same basis as resident fathers. As mentioned by other studies, there were some challenges in obtaining contact details.

> *What we were doing was asking if they [the resident parent] had contact information they were willing to pass over during that [face-to-face] interview. … Often they didn't want to do that … it's increasingly common, I think, for people to find it odd to be asked for someone else's contact information they feel they should ask permission. (From Five to Twelve, interview)*

In these cases, interviewers sent the resident parent an email to pass on to the own household father. Response rates were 16 per cent for own household fathers (as a proportion of all eligible fathers, not just those for whom details were provided) and 57 per cent for resident second parents. Telephone follow-up is planned for the next wave of the study. It is planned to archive these data for use by researchers.

An important challenge has been the reliance on the willingness, and ability, of the resident parent to provide contact details for the non-resident parent, with almost all studies using the mother as a 'gatekeeper' for access. One exception is a recent UK study which contacted non-resident parents in their own right.

The Early Life Cohort Feasibility Study (ELCFS)

The Early Life Cohort Feasibility Study (ELCFS) was a scoping study for a new birth cohort study in the UK. A central concern was the desire to represent less often heard or hard-to-reach groups, including parents not living (full-time) with their children, termed 'own household parents' (OHPs), and responding to concerns raised by the Fatherhood Institute about the lack of inclusion of all fathers in cohort studies[13] (Goldman and Burgess, 2018):

[13] Non-resident fathers had been included in the pilot study for the (later abandoned) Life Study in the UK, although very few were identified because of the selective nature of the group of resident mothers who opted into the pilot (Kiernan, 2016).

> *There was sort of a focus on like less often heard kind of groups or like hard-to-reach groups and I guess so we're defining … own household fathers as a sort of less often heard group in cohort studies. (ELCFS, interview)*

As part of the study, qualitative interviews were conducted with own household parents and separately with low income and minority ethnic groups to explore how best to include these groups in the research (Raybould et al., 2023). A particularly innovative aspect of ELCFS was the use of birth registration data as a sampling frame, which recorded all but 5 per cent of fathers and enabled the research team to contact non-resident parents independently.[14] The incentives provided for participation were the same for OHPs and resident parents. They were varied across the sample in order to test the effects of incentives on response rates: beforehand, parents received an unconditional incentive of either Stg£5 or nothing; those who took part in the survey received either Stg£10 or Stg£20. The resident parent was informed that the team was contacting the OHP but they were not asked for permission to do so:

> *Our approach for all families was to send letters to both parents on the sample frame, regardless of whether they were at the same address or not. And then if they didn't opt out, an interviewer visited them at the address listed on the birth registration. And they would establish at that first doorstep visit using a screener interview whether this was the child's main household or second household, where they either spent some time or no time, and that was how we evaluated whether the second address was the OHP household or not. (ELCFS, interview)*

Circumstances for some households had changed between the time of birth registration and the survey fieldwork (when the babies were around 9 months old). In these cases, 'new' OHPs were identified and the resident parent was asked for contact details for the OHP. In addition, where interviewers found that the OHP had moved, the resident parent was asked for contact details or to pass on an information pack. Unlike some other studies, the inclusion of OHPs was not filtered on criteria such as contact with the child:

> *If we had their details either through the birth registration or through the other parent's interview, they were eligible to take part. … We asked them [the primary informant, PI] at the start about the level of involvement the other parent has and if there was no involvement, but they did know about the child, we continued to ask about them. But if there was no involvement and either the PI didn't know who the parent*

[14] It was not possible to access birth registration data in Northern Ireland so resident parents there were asked to share contact details for or information with the non-resident parent.

was or that parent didn't know about the baby, then we didn't pursue it at all. (ELCFS, interview)

The response rate was 'lower than we'd hoped' at 16 per cent compared to a response rate of 76 per cent for additional resident informants, usually fathers. It was noted that the response rate may also be affected by the fact that the sample had boosted numbers of ethnic minority and low-income families. Preliminary analysis suggests that OHPs who were in a relationship with the child's mother were more likely to respond but there were no differences by age group. Northern Ireland, where the team was reliant on the resident parent to contact the OHP, had a much lower response rate, at 7 per cent, than the rest of the UK, suggesting that independent contact did help response rates.

It seems like having their details and being able to approach them directly did help massively. (ECLFS, interview)

Non-response was predominantly driven by difficulties in tracing up-to-date addresses for, and securing contact with, the OHPs rather than by them refusing to take part when contacted.

2.3.3 Challenges and opportunities in including non-resident fathers

Research teams from studies that included non-resident fathers were quick to recommend this approach to other international cohort studies. Not including them was seen as creating a gap in an understanding of children's lives, especially in the context of the increasing complexity of family arrangements.

Families are really complex and where … you've got those families that have kind of separated early, particularly where you've got parents that are, you know, equal or close to equally engaged with the child, you miss out on a whole piece of information. … If you're not [including them], you're missing really important data from those different kind of family environments. … 20 years on, families are going to be different. … It might be that the PLE is more important potentially now. (LSAC, interview)

Although emphasising the value of their involvement, researchers have highlighted a number of challenges around involving non-resident fathers. In particular, access is generally secured through the mother by asking her to pass on information about the study and/or provide contact details for the father. In many cases, mothers are unable or unwilling to provide such contact details so the group of fathers who are potentially contactable are selective in nature, being more likely to have a fairly good relationship with the child's mother and more actively involved in the life of the child.

> *This is not an unbiased sample. This is not a random group of people who are not giving us contact information. … It's the group who are invested and wanting to be involved still. (From Five to Twelve, interview)*

A further challenge relates to housing mobility among this group of fathers, with research teams and interviewers experiencing difficulties in finding their correct address. This involved interviewers spending more time trying to contact the fathers.

> *It was quite hard to find the OHPs. They were often not at the address listed on the birth registration. (ELCFS, interview)*

An additional issue related to the diversity of the non-resident father group and, in some cases, the blurred boundaries around paternal residence and, even more so, around identifying the child's 'main' residence in circumstances of shared parenting.

> *Anecdotally, interviewers were telling us often they were in the mother's house but [the respondents] were being a bit cagey about how much they lived there or not. (ELCFS, interview)*

> *Actually, the OHP sometimes is just not really the OHP, it's actually just the other home that that child lives there. (From Five to Twelve, interview)*

> *It was really challenging because this group is so diverse, some are really involved with their child and really want that recognised and you know your role as dad is really important … Whereas there are some that don't see themselves as part of the family at all, where using language like families off-putting and they don't see themselves in that language. (ELCFS, interview)*

In two studies, Fragile Families and ELCFS, a significant group of non-resident fathers were still in a relationship with the child's mother, challenging the assumption that non-resident parenthood is solely driven by relationship dissolution.

The need for the number of responses to be sufficient for analysis was also mentioned, with a trade-off between the time invested by respondents and the use of those data.

> *I'm slightly worried, I suppose, that what we'll end up with is people who've invested their time and we only end up with, you know, 3 or 400 cases which you know, what will we do with that data. So there is a slight ethical question about can we use it, what's the value of it? And you know how reliable is it? (From Five to Twelve, interview)*

In addition, the issue of which parent(s) should give consent was not unproblematic in all cases.

> *What if Mum says yes and Dad says no, or vice versa? And what if you're actually creating more tension in a home that's already fraught? (Growing Up in New Zealand, interview)*

Challenges in involving this group of fathers in cohort studies were also evident in household surveys in general, especially where non-resident fathers were more socio-economically disadvantaged.

> *Many of those non-resident fathers are not in household surveys. They're very difficult to find because they're loosely connected to households. … They're either living with a partner, … they're living with their mother or sister. … And in the US we have this incarceration problem. … So of our sample of non-resident fathers, … something like 62 per cent of them have had incarceration histories. (FFCW, interview)*

The specific situation of 'parents living apart' has been given increasing attention in the UK household longitudinal study, Understanding Society, 'including separated parents, non co-resident parents, parents who were never in a union, and parents with children from another relationship living elsewhere' (Reeve and Benezal, 2024, p.5). To better capture this group, changes have been made to the last two waves of the study and the team are assessing whether some measures, such as those on parenting styles and perceptions of child development, currently asked of resident parents, could also be asked of parents living elsewhere.

The researchers interviewed emphasised the value of including or continuing to include non-resident fathers in cohort studies, as a way of capturing their influence on child development:

> *Partly because from a sort of principled inclusivity position … if you want to genuinely be a study that is inclusive and is generally trying to treat … two parents equally … and be inclusive of all different family types. And then there's a sort of principled reason for including all parents, all fathers, regardless of whether they're with living with the baby or not. (ELCFS, interview)*

> *There's children without their biological fathers in the homes. And those fathers play a very important role. And I would say, yes, absolutely, it is very important to have them. (FFCW, interview)*

The importance of the resource input of non-resident fathers and the potential impact on child poverty was also emphasised:

> *The fathers are giving a lot of stuff to the mother directly, right? … I think that's incredibly important to measure because in all of our work, certainly mine and my colleagues, we find that that kind of money and whether it's money or stuff, whatever it is, is much actually more beneficial for child wellbeing than stuff that's coming from the formal system… he's providing diapers, he's providing clothes, food, whatever. (FFCW, interview)*

The interviewees put forward a number of suggestions for further enhancing response rates among non-resident fathers. One suggestion centred on father-specific mailing or messaging; terminology is also seen as important:

> *They [the Fatherhood Institute] were quite keen for us to use the language like mums and dads as well because … they've got evidence that the term parents …, fathers don't interpret that as being inclusive of them always, and also interviewers potentially as well. (ELCFS, interview)*

> *I would have a look very carefully at the communications we were sending out about it and all the way along the line I would mention men. … I think it's definitely about pointing to really important research that's happened about how important men are in their children's lives, and I think we don't do enough of that. … I think sometimes we just need to kind of be much more clearer about where we've had [impact] or what we're trying to do, so people can kind of go, oh, OK, right. I get it. So it's about parental leave or it's about something that actually impacts me right now. (ALSPAC, interview)*

> *They want to be the healthiest they can be for their children. So those kind of messages were really important. And I think what the dads are saying too, from some focus groups that they want to be not just that secondary person to the mum, actually be seen as equal and involved in their child's upbringing. I think framing it so it respects their role as a parent and it's an equal parent to the mother, whereas so much of the healthcare around pregnancy and traditional cohort studies even*

> *like us is targeted towards the mum. But I think really getting them involved from the beginning around that. (Origins project, interview)*

Flexibility in timing and mode was seen by some as crucial in involving fathers in general, with ALSPAC, for example, using an online booking system for participants to schedule interviews:

> *You need to do it online so I can do it on my phone. I can stop and start and I can come back to it. And you need to tell me regularly, remind me to keep doing it. (ALSPAC, interview)*

Incentives were also seen as a potential way of encouraging fathers in general and non-resident parents in particular to participate:

> *This whole issue about reimbursement comes up time and time and time again with men. … Obviously reimbursement doesn't have to be financial and there was definitely conversations around … if you tell me why you want me to do this and what I'm contributing and what difference it's going to make, that is going to be of interest to me. But more times than not, it was about OK, well, if you pay me for my time and the more you can pay me, the more likely I will be to take part in the research. (ALSPAC, interview)*

However, other researchers expressed caution about having differential incentives within families. Staggering the fieldwork so that interviewers could make a concerted effort to trace non-resident fathers after the main informant fieldwork had ended was also suggested. A greater emphasis on follow-up was also mentioned ('a stronger chasing process', From Five to Twelve, interview).

Many of the studies had started before the widespread diffusion of digital technology, with researchers highlighting the need to investigate the preferred mode for the specific population:

> *Our studies in ECLS used to be phone interviews as our primary mode with parents. And then in our most recent kindergarten cohort study … we moved to a web survey as the primary mode with telephone follow up or in-person follow up. So I would suggest looking into kind of initial work on what is the preferred mode for your particular population. … With this population, if they're going to be using a mobile device to really focus on optimising for the mobile device. (ECLS-B, interview)*

2.4 CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has provided an overview of international cohort studies drawing on interviews with, and written communication from, the research teams as well as design and other reports. Over time, cohort studies have evolved to involve resident fathers, reflecting greater recognition of their role in child development, though not all studies do so. Further, fathers are not necessarily included in all waves of data collection, largely because of funding constraints.

Fewer studies consistently include fathers not currently living with their children and response rates have varied markedly among such studies.[15] Three studies, the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (ECLS-B) in the US, Growing Up in Australia – the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) and the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing (FFCW) Study in the US, have had higher response rates, at least in their early waves. Common features for their success appear to centre on the inclusion of fathers from the beginning or at least early on, messaging around the importance of capturing fathers' perspectives, and proactive interviewer contact and follow-up with this group of fathers. The data collected on non-resident fathers have generally been archived for use by researchers. It is not possible to estimate how frequently these data have been used but a number of articles and reports have been published on non-resident fathers using these data (see, for example, based on FFCW, Nepomnyaschy and Garfinkel, 2007; 2011; Wildfeuer and Fagan, 2022; based on LSAC, McIntosh et al., 2011; 2013; Qu and Weston, 2014; based on ECLS-B, Manlove et al., 2010; Paulson et al., 2011; Sulak et al., 2012).

Researchers have experienced a number of challenges in involving non-resident fathers in cohort studies. Almost all such studies rely on the willingness of resident mothers to provide contact details for the other parent. The numbers doing so have varied across studies, with permission to contact more likely in the case of better parental relationships and greater father-child contact. The exception to this approach is the Early Life Cohort Feasibility Study that used birth registration data to contact non-resident fathers directly. This did not seem to be sufficient to ensure high response rates, however, though response was higher in Scotland, Wales and England (where access to birth registration data was obtained) than in Northern Ireland (where contact was via the resident mother). A significant challenge relates to the housing mobility of this group of fathers, with difficulties in securing up-to-date contact details for the group even over a relatively short period of time.

Despite the challenges, research teams pointed to the value of including all fathers in order to provide a more complete picture of the influences on children's

[15] It should be noted that response rates also vary markedly for resident fathers.

development, especially in a context where more complex living and parenting arrangements are increasingly evident. Recommendations for enhancing their involvement centre on persuading resident mothers of the value of involving non-resident fathers, messaging about the importance of fathers in their children's lives, a focus on positive aspects of parenting in the survey, and proactive contact and follow-up by interviewers.

CHAPTER 3

Non-resident fathers in the Growing Up in Ireland study

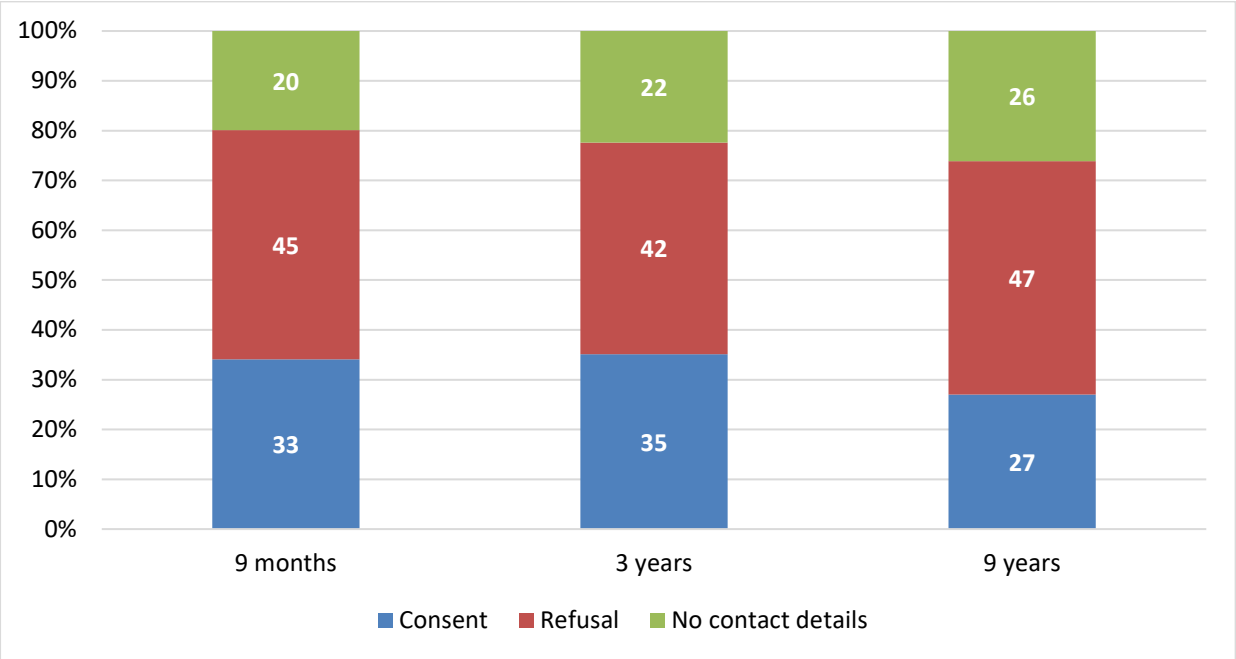
3.1 INTRODUCTION

As indicated in Chapter 1, the GUI study has included all fathers, wherever resident, in almost all waves of data collection for Cohorts '98 and '08. Until recently, data collected on non-resident fathers were not archived because of small case numbers. Data collected from non-resident fathers for Cohort '08 at 3 and 9 years of age have since been archived. This chapter draws on these newly available data as well as information collected from resident mothers on non-resident fathers. Section 3.2 examines the factors associated with mothers giving permission to contact non-resident fathers and with the likelihood of those fathers completing the survey. Section 3.3 looks at the extent of contact between non-resident fathers and their children, while Section 3.4 concludes.

3.2 ACCESS AND RESPONSE RATES

As part of the GUI study, resident mothers were asked a set of questions about the non-resident fathers, and the interviewer requested permission to contact them for the purposes of the study. Thus, in GUI as in many other studies internationally (see Chapter 2), the mother was a gatekeeper for access to the non-resident father. Figure 3.1 presents information on the responses when the child was 9 months, 3 years and 9 years of age. Mothers could give permission, refuse permission or indicate that they did not have contact details for the father. Across the three waves, the most common pattern was refusal of permission, with over four-in-ten fitting into this category. At 9 months, a fifth of mothers reported having no contact details for the father, with this figure rising to just over a quarter by the time the child was age 9. Overall, a minority of mothers are willing to consent to the inclusion of the non-resident father: around a third at 9 months and 3 years, dropping to 27 per cent by 9 years.

FIGURE 3.1 WILLINGNESS OF RESIDENT MOTHERS TO PROVIDE CONTACT DETAILS FOR THE NON-RESIDENT FATHER, WHEN THE CHILD WAS 9 MONTHS TO 9 YEARS OF AGE



Source: GUI Cohort '08.

A key issue is whether the group of mothers providing permission differ systematically from those refusing permission or not having contact details. Marked differences between the groups would mean that the group of non-resident fathers contacted for the study is selective in some way. Tables 3.1 to 3.3 present a series of multinomial logit models examining the factors associated with willingness to consent. The results are presented in terms of relative risk ratios, with coefficients below 1 indicating a factor is associated with a lower likelihood of, say, giving permission to contact, and coefficients above 1 indicating a higher likelihood. As discussed in Chapter 1, the factors examined are based on mother reports.

In the first wave of the study, when the child was 9 months old, socio-demographic factors were not strongly related to consent to contact. Older mothers were less likely to give permission but consent rates did not differ by maternal education, migrant status or location (Table 3.1). Mothers with a migrant background[16] and those living in urban areas were less likely to have contact details for the father. The nature of father-child contact and the quality of the parental relationship make more of a difference (Table 3.1). Mothers were much more likely to give consent if the fathers were in daily contact with the child. For ease of interpretation, the predicted percentages for consent by level of contact are given in Figure 3.2.

[16] This difference became non-significant when level of contact with the child was included in the model. This presumably reflects migrant-origin mothers not having contact details for fathers living in another country.

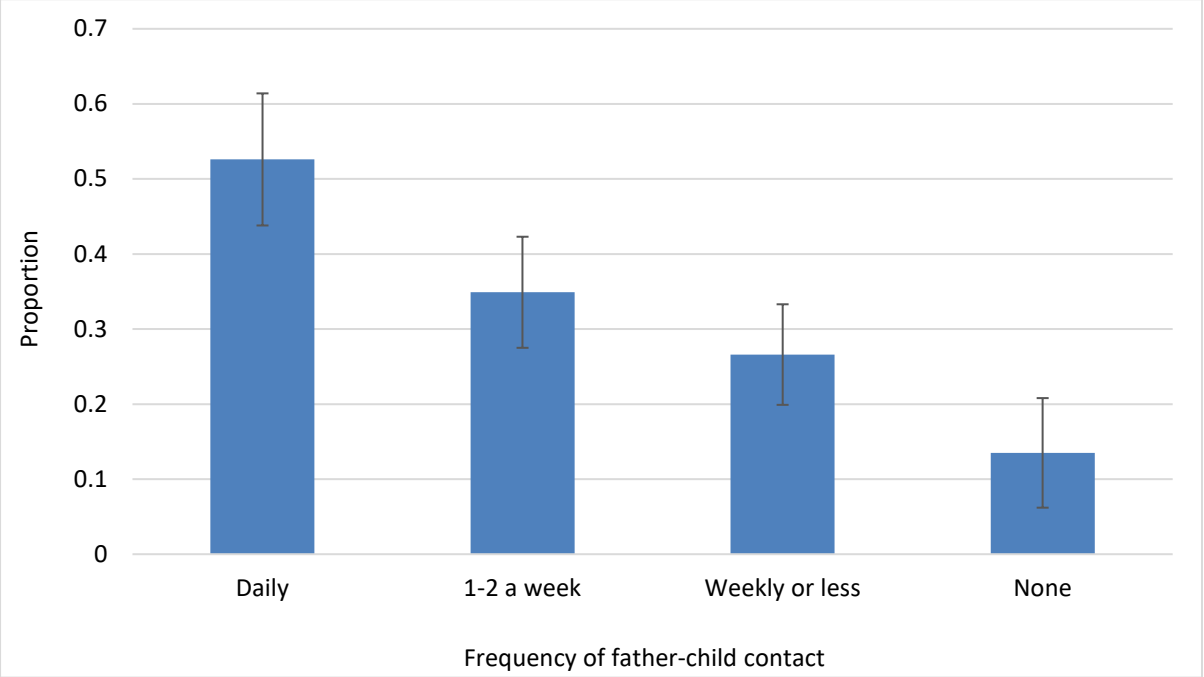
Consent levels were also much lower where the parental relationship was poorer in quality. Perhaps not surprisingly, mothers were less likely to have contact details for fathers who were not in contact with their children.

TABLE 3.1 MULTINOMIAL LOGIT MODEL OF THE FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH MOTHERS GIVING PERMISSION TO CONTACT NON-RESIDENT FATHERS WHEN THE CHILD WAS 9 MONTHS OLD, RELATIVE RISK RATIOS (BASE CATEGORY: REFUSAL)

	Consented	No contact details
Mother's age:		
22-25 years	0.712	1.086
26-30 years	0.516*	0.994
31 + years	0.492**	0.842
(Ref.: 21 or less)		
Mother's education:		
Upper secondary	1.305	1.103
Post-secondary/tertiary	0.812	0.911
(Ref.: Lower secondary or less)		
Migrant background of mother	1.132	1.043
Urban area	1.002	1.576*
Timing of separation:		
Never lived together	0.858	1.391
Child <6 months	1.266	1.137
Child 6-9 months	0.196	0.514
(Ref.: Pre-birth)		
Custody arrangement:		
Formal	1.608	1.641
Informal	1.412	0.871
(Ref.: None)		
Payment arrangement:		
Regular	1.262	0.534
Ad hoc	1.254	0.317*
(Ref.: None)		
Father-child contact:		
Daily	3.964**	0.116***
1-2 times a week	1.848	0.088***
Weekly or less	1.350	0.174***
(Ref.: Never)		
Poorer quality of parental relationship	0.726***	0.977
Pseudo R^2	0.218	
N	1,262	

Source: GUI Cohort '08, Wave 1.
Note: *** significant at p<.001; ** p<.01; * p<.05; ± p<.10.

FIGURE 3.2 RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LEVEL OF FATHER-CHILD CONTACT AND WILLINGNESS OF RESIDENT MOTHERS TO PROVIDE CONTACT DETAILS FOR THE NON-RESIDENT FATHER, WHEN THE CHILD WAS 9 MONTHS OLD (PREDICTIVE MARGINS)



Source: GUI Cohort '08; derived from coefficients in Table 3.1.

In contrast to the position at 9 months, willingness to consent to contact did not vary significantly by maternal age when the child was 3 years old (Table 3.2). Among the socio-demographic factors examined, only migrant status made a difference, with migrant-origin mothers less likely to give permission to contact the father, largely because of differences in levels of father-child contact. Consent levels differed markedly by aspects of the relationship with the father and degree of contact with the child (Table 3.2). Rates of consent were much lower if the parents had never lived together or had separated before the birth of the child and where no custody arrangement was in place. [17] As at 9 months old, consent was more likely where the father was in frequent contact with the child (at least once or twice a week) and where there was a better-quality relationship between the parents. Mothers were less likely to have contact details for the father in migrant-origin families, where the father had no contact with the child and where the parental relationship was poor.

17 Information on living arrangements were collected from the primary caregiver at Wave 1. The PCG was also asked if they had a formal or informal custody arrangement with the other biological parent regarding where the child lives. The question did not specify what constituted a formal arrangement, and it may or may not have had a legal status.

TABLE 3.2 MULTINOMIAL LOGIT MODEL OF THE FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH MOTHERS GIVING PERMISSION TO CONTACT NON-RESIDENT FATHERS WHEN THE CHILD WAS 3 YEARS OLD, RELATIVE RISK RATIOS (BASE CATEGORY: REFUSAL)

	Consented	No contact details
Mother's age:		
26-30 years	0.706	1.366
31 + years	0.756	1.848
(Ref.: 25 or less)		
Mother's education:		
Upper secondary	1.000	1.013
Post-secondary/tertiary	0.938	1.231
Migrant background	0.565*	1.253
Urban area	1.025	1.278
Timing of separation:		
Pre-birth	1.715	0.550
Child <1 year	1.854±	0.719
Child 1-2 years	3.277***	0.486
Within last year	1.712±	1.336
(Ref.: Never lived together)		
Custody arrangement:		
Formal	2.325**	0.943
Informal	1.840*	0.493±
(Ref.: None)		
Payment arrangement:		
Regular	1.254	0.735
Ad hoc	1.706±	1.089
(Ref.: None)		
Father-child contact:		
Daily	2.804±	0.056***
1-2 times a week	3.691*	0.146***
Weekly or less	1.474	0.148***
(Ref.: Never)		
Poorer quality of parental relationship	0.587***	1.311*
Pseudo R^2	0.298	
N	1,118	

Source: GUI Cohort '08, Wave 1.
Note: *** significant at p<.001; ** p<.01; * p<.05; ± p<.10.

As indicated in Figure 3.1, consent rates were somewhat lower when the child was 9 years old. Rates are higher among mothers with a post-secondary or tertiary qualification (Table 3.3), a pattern not evident at earlier waves. Rates are lowest if parents never lived together and highest among the recently separated. Consent is also less likely if there is no payment arrangement in place. As in previous waves, consent is markedly related to frequency of contact between the father and child but the quality of the parental relationship makes no additional difference. Contact details are less likely to be available for older mothers, fathers who have no contact with their child and where the parental relationship is poor.

TABLE 3.3 MULTINOMIAL LOGIT MODEL OF THE FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH MOTHERS GIVING PERMISSION TO CONTACT NON-RESIDENT FATHERS WHEN THE CHILD WAS 9 YEARS OLD, RELATIVE RISK RATIOS (BASE CATEGORY: REFUSAL)

	Consented	No contact details
Mother's age:		
36-40 years	0.820	0.905
41 + years	0.790	0.507*
(Ref.: 35 or less)		
Mother's education:		
Upper secondary	1.392	0.713
Post-secondary/tertiary	1.987±	1.016
(Ref.: Lower secondary or less)		
Migrant background	0.945	1.192
Urban area	0.970	1.324
Timing of separation:		
<4 years	2.571***	0.922
5-7 years	2.633***	0.786
8-9 years	5.669***	2.881±
(Ref.: Never lived together)		
Custody arrangement:		
Formal	1.076	0.672
Informal	1.284	0.669
(Ref.: None)		
Payment arrangement:		
Regular	2.146**	0.601
Ad hoc	2.572*	1.573
(Ref.: None)		
Father-child contact:		
Daily	5.662*	0.231*
1-2 times a week	4.044*	0.191***
Weekly or less	2.076	0.225***
(Ref.: Never)		
Poorer quality of parental relationship	0.966	1.312*
Pseudo R^2	0.211	
N	907	

Source: GUI Cohort '08, Wave 1.
Note: *** significant at p<.001; ** p<.01; * p<.05; ± p<.10.

Survey completion by non-resident fathers

Analyses so far have indicated that fathers with more contact with their children and who have a better relationship with the child's mother are more likely to be invited to take part in the GUI study. Non-resident fathers were sent a paper copy of the questionnaire by post, which is likely to result in a lower response rate than a direct interviewer approach. Fathers living outside Ireland were included but would have had to pay the postage charges to return the questionnaire. At 3 years of age, questionnaires were returned by 35 per cent of the non-resident fathers in cases where the mother had given permission for them to be contacted. This made up 12 per cent of the total group of non-resident fathers. Table 3.4 looks at the factors associated with responding to the survey. Because of small numbers, fathers who completed the survey are compared with all those who did not,

whether by reason of refusal by the father, refusal by the mother or no contact details being available. The coefficients are presented in terms of average marginal effects, which indicates the percentage point difference in completion between having a particular characteristic or not, holding other variables constant.[18] By necessity, the analyses rely on information provided by the mother so may differ from paternal accounts of contact with child, for example, an issue that is explored further below.

The findings indicate that survey responses are less likely in migrant-origin families (with a difference of 7 percentage points) and more likely in households where the mother has post-secondary or tertiary qualifications (a difference of 5 percentage points). These demographic differences are no longer apparent when father contact and the nature of parenting arrangements are taken into account (Model 2, Table 3.4). Survey responses are found to be less likely to cover families with no custody or maintenance/payment arrangements. They are somewhat less likely to cover families where fathers have less frequent contact and where parental relationships are poor. Because of small numbers, a simplified model is presented in Table A3.1 which compares fathers who responded with those who did not only among the group for whom mothers had given permission to contact. Response rates are found to be higher, by 13 percentage points, in more highly educated households and where fathers have frequent contact with their children.

[18] Average marginal effects cannot be calculated for the multinomial logit models presented above.

TABLE 3.4 LOGIT MODEL OF THE FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH SURVEY COMPLETION AMONG THE TOTAL GROUP OF NON-RESIDENT FATHERS WHEN THE CHILD WAS 3 YEARS OLD, AVERAGE MARGINAL EFFECTS

	Model 1	Model 2
Mother's age:		
26-30 years	-0.009	-0.012
31 + years	0.014	0.007
(Ref.: 25 or less)		
Mother's education:		
Upper secondary	0.039	0.032
Post-secondary/tertiary	0.052±	0.048
(Ref.: Lower secondary or less)		
Migrant background	-0.068**	-0.024
Urban area	-0.008	-0.030
Timing of separation:		
Pre-birth		-0.032
Child <1 year		-0.015
Child 1-2 years		0.060
Within last year		0.025
(Ref.: Never lived together)		
Custody arrangement:		
Formal		0.078*
Informal		0.077**
(Ref.: None)		
Payment arrangement:		
Regular		0.060*
Ad hoc		0.125**
(Ref.: None)		
Father-child contact:		
Daily		0.070
1-2 times a week		0.115*
Weekly or less		0.024
(Ref.: Never)		
Poorer quality of parental relationship		-0.040**
Pseudo R^2	0.016	0.196
N	1,098	

Source: GUI Cohort '08, Wave 1.
Note: *** significant at p<.001; ** p<.01; * p<.05; ± p<.10.

At the 9-year wave, questionnaires were returned by 14.3 per cent of the non-resident fathers in cases where the mother had given permission for them to be contacted. This made up 3.8 per cent of the total group of non-resident fathers. This comparison was repeated for responses at this wave (Table 3.5). There is better response coverage of families with more highly educated and older mothers, differences that are explained by variation in parenting arrangements and contact levels (compare Models 1 and 2, Table 3.5). Responses are less likely to relate to parents that never lived together or separated just recently (i.e. when the child was aged 8/9 years) and are more likely to relate to households where the father has frequent contact with the child (Model 2, Table 3.5). Comparing only those fathers who received the survey, response rates are higher for fathers in

frequent contact and where mothers have higher levels of education[19] (Table A3.1).

TABLE 3.5 LOGIT MODEL OF THE FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH SURVEY RESPONSE AMONG THE TOTAL GROUP OF NON-RESIDENT FATHERS WHEN THE CHILD WAS 9 YEARS OLD, AVERAGE MARGINAL EFFECTS

	Model 1	Model 2
Mother's age:		
36-40 years	0.014	0.010
41 + years	0.033*	0.023
(Ref.: 35 or less)		
Mother's education:		
Upper secondary	-0.001	-0.002
Post-secondary/tertiary	0.052**	0.027
Migrant background	-0.016	-0.009
Urban area	0.012	0.015
Timing of separation in relation to child's age:		
<4 years		0.058***
5-7 years		0.046**
8-9 years		0.053
(Ref.: Never lived together)		
Custody arrangement:		
Formal		0.030±
(Ref.: None or informal)		
Payment arrangement:		
Regular		0.011
Ad hoc		0.001
(Ref.: None)		
Father-child contact:		
Daily/1-2 times a week		0.057**
(Ref.: Less often/Never)		
Quality of parental relationship (higher=poorer)		-0.003
Pseudo R^2	0.078	0.262
N	932	909

Source: GUI Cohort '08, Wave 1.
Note: *** significant at p<.001; ** p<.01; * p<.05; ± p<.10.

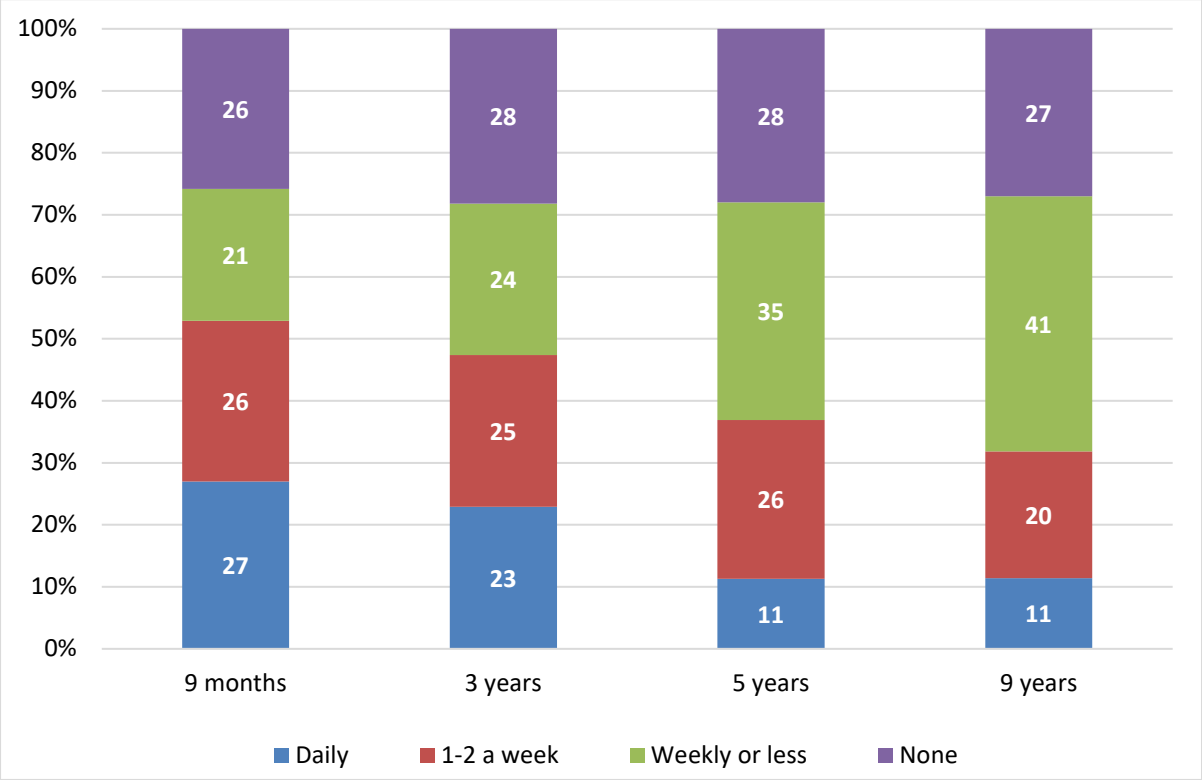
3.3 FATHER-CHILD CONTACT

At all waves of the survey, mothers were asked about the frequency of in-person contact the child had with their non-resident father. Figure 3.3 shows that over a quarter of mothers report no contact between the father and child, a pattern that is fairly stable over time. Frequency of contact is greatest in the early years, with

[19] Couples tend to have similar levels of educational attainment, a pattern known as educational homogamy. The patterns found are therefore likely to relate to higher response rates among more highly educated fathers. This is consistent with higher response rates among more highly educated households found in GUI more generally (see, for example, McNamara et al., 2020).

around half of the babies and toddlers seeing their fathers every day or once or twice a week. Contact is somewhat less frequent as children make the transition to school, though around a third of 5- and 9-year-olds see their fathers at least a few times a week. At ages 5 and 9 years of age, mothers were asked about other contact (not face-to-face), presumably phone and/or video calls, with such contact happening at least a few times a week for 39 per cent and 35 per cent respectively. As well as father-child contact, the frequency with which mothers talk to fathers about the child also declines (not shown). However, reported relationship quality between parents remains stable. From the child perspective, over half (53 per cent) characterise their relationship with their non-resident fathers as 'very good'. The father-child relationship is better where there is more frequent contact and where the parents have a better-quality relationship (see Smyth and Russell, 2021).

FIGURE 3.3 FREQUENCY OF IN-PERSON CONTACT BETWEEN NON-RESIDENT FATHERS AND THEIR CHILDREN FROM 9 MONTHS TO 9 YEARS, AS REPORTED BY MOTHERS



Source: GUI Cohort '08.

The information collected from mothers also provides interesting insights into the complexity of family structures and parenting arrangements. When the study child was 9, mothers reported that 23 per cent of their former partners were now living with other children. This comprises 9 per cent who were living with the child's full siblings and 14 per cent who were living with another child or children (either the child's half-sibling or an unrelated child).

As discussed in Chapter 1, data on non-resident fathers at ages 3 and 9 were recently archived. The amount of detail that can be included here is limited by small cell sizes, especially at the 9-year wave. When the child was 3 years old, around half of these fathers described the amount of time they spent with the child as 'about right' with the remainder describing it as 'nowhere near enough' or 'not quite enough'. Just over half indicate that the child spends at least seven nights a month with them. Four-in-ten fathers described themselves as having 'a lot of influence' in major decisions concerning the child. A number of studies internationally have pointed to differences in the accounts of separated parents (see Chapter 1). The questions on frequency of contact were not the same for mothers and fathers so cannot be directly compared. However, similar measures were collected for the frequency with which the parents discussed the child, and for the quality of the parental relationship. Measures of parental discussion had a moderate correlation[20] (0.385), indicating some consensus but quite a bit of variation in parental accounts of the frequency of communication about the child. Mothers reported significantly less communication than fathers did. Measures of parental relationship quality are more strongly correlated (0.523) but indicate some divergence in views between parents. Unlike parental discussion, this did not vary markedly by gender. Smaller participant numbers at the age 9 wave mean that most information cannot be reported. However, a similar level of agreement between parents about relationship quality (0.592) is evident at the 9-year wave.

3.4 CONCLUSIONS

Both resident and non-resident fathers have been included in almost all waves of the GUI study and information on non-resident fathers' involvement with their children has been collected from mothers. Non-resident fathers are found to have frequent contact with their children, with half seeing babies and toddlers several times a week. Contact is somewhat less frequent as children make the transition to school, though around a third of 5- and 9-year-olds see their fathers at least a few times a week. Just over a quarter have little to no contact with their children. From the child's perspective, just over half (53 per cent)[21] report getting on 'very well' with their father at age 9, indicating the importance of their father in their lives. Previous analyses found that children who had more contact with their father and stayed over at least once a fortnight were more likely to report 'getting on very well' (Smyth and Russell, 2021).

As in several other cohort studies (see Chapter 2), resident mothers act as a gatekeeper to accessing non-resident fathers. Around a third of mothers were willing to give permission for the father to be contacted when the child was

20 Pearson's correlation ranges from 0 to +1 (and 0 to -1) with higher values indicating a stronger relationship.

21 This figure rises to 65 per cent if those who did not respond to the question (presumably those who have no contact with their father) are excluded.

9 months and 3 years old, dropping to just over a quarter when the child was age 9. Such willingness does not vary markedly by socio-demographic factors but does reflect father-child contact and mother-father relationship quality. As a result, fathers in more frequent contact with their children and who have better relationships with the resident mothers are more likely to be invited to take part in the study. Among those who were contacted when the child was 3, 35 per cent completed the survey; this is on a par with the response rate for non-resident fathers in many comparable studies internationally (see Chapter 2). The response rate falls to 14 per cent by the age of 9. Again, international studies seem to indicate some decline in response rates as children grow older (as well as a decline over time in survey response rates in general). Fathers in more frequent contact with their child and formerly partnered with more highly educated mothers are more likely to complete the survey.

The survey responses from non-resident fathers relate to a more selective group. Nonetheless, they yield useful insights, highlighting the dissatisfaction of many fathers (even those who have more contact) with the frequency with which they see their child. In keeping with international research (see, for example, Coley and Morris, 2002; Kitterød and Lyngstad, 2013), there are some differences between parental accounts, with mothers appearing to report lower levels of father-child contact than do fathers.

TABLE A3.1 LOGIT MODELS OF THE FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH SURVEY RESPONSE AMONG NON-RESIDENT FATHERS WHERE MOTHERS HAD GIVEN PERMISSION FOR CONTACT WHEN THE CHILD WAS 3 AND 9 YEARS OLD, AVERAGE MARGINAL EFFECTS

	3 years	9 years
Mother's education:		
Upper secondary	0.109	-0.007
Post-secondary/tertiary	0.131±	0.134*
Father-child contact:		
Frequent (daily/ 1-2 times a week) (Ref.: Weekly or less/ never)	0.135±	0.112*
Pseudo R^2	0.020	0.076
N	396	300

Source: GUI Cohort '08, Wave 1.
Note: *** significant at p<.001; ** p<.01; * p<.05; ± p<.10.

CHAPTER 4

Perceived benefits of, and challenges in, including non-resident fathers: Stakeholder interviews

4.1 INTRODUCTION

A number of scholars have highlighted the challenges involved in identifying and involving non-resident fathers in population surveys (e.g. Bryson and McKay, 2018). This has resulted in challenges in producing reliable information for policymaking. This chapter draws on interviews with NGOs working with parents and with a number of parents to highlight the perceived benefits of, and challenges in, including non-resident fathers in child cohort studies. Both groups were asked about how best to contact fathers and encourage them to participate as well as about the kind of information that should be gathered from fathers.

4.2 INTERVIEWS WITH NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS

Four interviews were conducted with organisations working with lone parents or separated fathers. The interviews were carried out online in November 2024. They were recorded with the interviewees' permission and transcribed for analysis. Two of the interviews involved one respondent and two were attended by two representatives from the organisation. The interviews discussed: the challenges of reaching fathers who were not ordinarily resident with their children; the advantages and disadvantages of different types of approaches to contacting fathers; and the potential gain of including these fathers in studies of child development and outcomes. The organisations contacted were working directly with fathers and provided support and advice to this group in different ways. Two of the four were specifically targeted at fathers, while the other organisations worked with fathers and mothers.

4.2.1 Definitions – when is a father 'non-resident'?

A fundamental question for efforts to include non-resident parents is who does this encompass. Organisations working with fathers contested the terminology of 'non-resident' and highlighted that where separated couples share parenting, the child has two homes. To split these homes and parents into a primary and secondary residence, they argued, belies the reality of children's lives and relegates the father's role:

> *It's important to … move away from that type of thinking because, you know, we would talk about children having two homes, children are living in one adult households, but they have two parents. … Even that decision of OK, look … the mam is present. We'll just go to her house. You know why can it not rotate? Especially if children are moving,*

> *across both houses and parents, why would it all be focused [on the mother]? (Organisation 1, interviewee 1)*

> *You will have children who, their normal life is, you know, two houses, blended families, half siblings, you know, all of this. Geographical distance between the two houses. And if you are naming that very openly, it just helps, I think, …. to normalise this, to open it up. … There's so many children now where this is their normal experience and [it's important] for us to proactively normalise that for them. (Organisation 1, interviewee 2)*

> *But I think for fathers in particular, to be called non-resident or the secondary parent, it's very hurtful because it's not a choice. Usually it's not what they wanted to see happen. (Organisation 1)*

The variety of circumstances of separated fathers and families was emphasised, and one respondent suggested a typology of parents was needed:

> *There needs to be some kind of taxonomy of what are the different groups of, I don't use the phrase absent parents, parents that live in a second home. Like there can be people who never probably never had a lasting relationship in the first place but have had a child. There can be people who did but separated. There can be people who for work reasons, one parent lives in another place. Then as well, you'd have to come up with … what constitutes a parent living in another place, like if they're home one weekend in every six. Would that count as living [apart] even though they may still be in a full relationship between the parents? (Organisation 2)*

4.2.2 Including non-resident fathers in research

The strong preference of all four stakeholder groups was that fathers should be included in any research on children. The inclusion of fathers, wherever they reside, recognises their role as a co-parent of the child:

> *I would say that if the father's a legal guardian, that both parents are invited at the very start to engage because a lot of men would say to us that nobody ever picks up the phone to them and asks them, they just move ahead with the mam saying yes to whatever…… If the mam is the sole legal guardian, but the dad has access and he sees the child on a regular basis, I again would be inviting them….to tell them about the study and invite them to participate. (Organisation 1)*

Including fathers was viewed as filling an important gap in what is known about fatherhood, shared parenting and father-child relationships:

> *[Collecting information from non-resident fathers] is an opportunity that we thought was being missed in the previous studies whereby we could look at the impact at different stages in a child's life and it's great with these longitudinal studies, because you can see, perhaps where there was relations with children, are they more likely to be maintained later on in a family break-up if the work has been done with the bonding at an earlier stage. …. there's a dearth of quality information. (Organisation 3)*

While the stakeholders were supportive of including the fathers, they all recognised that this poses logistical challenges. The capacity to collect contact information from mothers was limited because mothers may be unable or unwilling to provide contact details for the father. In cases of conflict between partners, for example where issues of child access were contested, mothers were likely to be reluctant to provide contact details for the father and may object to their inclusion in the study. Such concerns would be further amplified in cases of domestic violence:

> *Depending on what the relationship is like, going through the mother can be really problematic. (Organisation 4)*

> *It's really difficult sometimes for mums to share the contact details of Dad, especially if there is domestic violence or anything. (Organisation 1)*

Secondly, it was felt that fathers may be suspicious of an indirect approach via contact details collected from the mother:

> *Sometimes we would have dads that would complain and say that their privacy rights were breached, that somebody shouldn't have passed on their contact details but the GDPR, like the Commissioners, they would say that there's a lawful basis to have the contact details of both parents … when the work involves the shared child. (Organisation 1)*

> *I'd have a little bit of a concern if someone rang me to ask me a question after getting the number. … Could start it on the wrong foot because you might be hit with 'who gave you the number and who gave you permission to ring me?'. There could be a bit of resistance on that. (Organisation 4)*

> *The thing that you're gonna be battling against is that there's massive resistance for a lot of the fathers anyway. 'Cause they already feel like they're being attacked on all different fronts. And when you're trying to approach your dad sometimes to get information, that can be a quite a lot of resistance. (Organisation 4)*

One stakeholder emphasised the importance of retaining the contact details and remaining in contact with fathers in families that separate during the course of the longitudinal study.

> *You know, if it's phone number, e-mail as well as an address, at least the dad or the parents who might no longer be at that address should still be kept informed of the study. So if there's break-up down the road, they're still getting the e-mail the same time as other parents about what the studies are and how it's progressing. (Organisation 1, interviewee 1)*

4.2.3 Quality of proxy information collected from resident parent

A strong case was made by all four stakeholder organisations that the best information on the father was that provided by the father himself. Not only was this seen as best practice for any data collection, it was argued that the quality of the relationship between the parents would likely bias the information obtained. Where there was a poor or strained relationship between separated parents, information could be presented in a more negative way. It was argued that this would impact on both subjective and seemingly more 'objective' indicators such as frequency of contact.

> *Just thinking of the stories I've listened to. You could get a very skewed version of events that might not be remotely accurate, you know, depending on how amicable they are. (Organisation 4)*

> *Because again, if the relationship has finished acrimoniously or if there has been dispute about access, then what comes from the primary caregiver, who the child is living with? There could be obvious distortions there. (Organisation 2)*

> *I would know women that would say that their ex is never there, and I'd know the ex and I know they are. But there's so much friction between the two of them, and that's half the thing you're battling with. I think if you want to get a true picture, you've probably got to speak to the dads directly. (Organisation 4)*

> *Ask the mother how often does the father make contact? 'Oh, he doesn't. He's so sporadic. He never comes.' And then you ask the same question to the father. How often do you make contact? 'Well, I'd love to do a lot more, but every time it's just so argumentative. … So I just don't bother doing it.' And so you get a totally different perspective from the father. (Organisation 3, interviewee 1)*

However, one respondent felt that where there was a good relationship between the parents, proxy information was possible:

> *It all depends on the circumstances and how the shared parenting is going. There are plenty of couples who share parenting, have mutual respect for each other, and there is no issue there getting information from each other about each other or about the other parent. (Organisation 3, interviewee 2)*

Another stakeholder noted that while more quantitative information might be collected by proxy, for example, on the amount of maintenance and frequency of contact, this would not convey the quality of the relationship between the non-resident parent and the child:

> *But I think what people really want to talk about is the relationship and the quality … A dad might only see their child once a week or once a fortnight. But if the quality of that relationship is really good and they have absolutely attached, and there is a strong bond, the influence he'll have on that child's life is just going to be much better. …. So sometimes the quantity can be misleading. (Organisation 1)*

> *You'd have to probably be careful around what story it was going to tell. If you're just learning from the mam, and if you're just hearing about numbers. (Organisation 1)*

The collection of data directly from children about their relationship with their dad was also seen as a possible means of supplementing information from fathers. One informant advised earlier collection of this information before children would have their responses influenced or even 'coached' by one parent.

> *Asking children their views and opinions at 4 and 5 years old can actually tell you quite a lot. You know, [they] verbalise quite a lot around what the relationship is like. … I suppose at 9 [years] sometimes they're more heavily influenced by [what they hear] and maybe understanding more about what they're hearing in the house around the adults, whereas at 4 and 5, 6, they don't have as many*

filters. … Definitely at 9 children are much more cagey around what they're going to say. (Organisation 1, interviewee 1)

However, another stakeholder suggested that there were issues around consent and sensitivity in asking the child about their relationship with the non-resident parent.

There could be Information about how often they [the child] sees the other parent or whether they feel they see them enough…... You'd have to make consideration for consent and stuff like that. And what the primary caregiver parent may feel about the child being asked that. Because it could be something that they're quite sensitive about or it could be something that upsets the child if they asked about it. (Organisation 2)

4.2.4 What kinds of information should be collected from non-resident fathers?

Stakeholders identified significant gaps in the knowledge about parenting in families that have separated, and about the experiences of the non-resident parents in navigating their parenting role.

I think it'd be really interesting to hear their perspective on their relationship with their children. You know, what is your time with your child like? ……. And what do you notice about your child? What do you think your child is really good at? What is it like living away from your child? (Organisation 1, interviewee 2)

Finding out more about dads and their sort of view of themselves as a parent… just finding out more about the relationship and how they view themselves as parents and dad's role in children's lives. (Organisation 1, interviewee 1)

Another stakeholder felt that it would be enlightening to compare the answers of the two parents:

I think there'd be a very interesting comparison to see how much variance there is between the primary caregiver and the non-resident parents. If you ask them things like how many hours a week do you spend with your child. Maybe if there's questions around 'I feel I have sufficient input into how my child is raised' and then the other parent is asked. 'I feel the other parent has sufficient input' because the comparison between the two I think could be very interesting. (Organisation 2)

Major gaps in the supports for non-resident/separated fathers were also identified There was also a perception among fathers that the supports were not designed for or available to them, even if they were not officially excluded.

> *The family support social care work, it tends to be a lot of mothers presenting, whereas a lot of dads come to [voluntary service] because there's very little. There's a huge gap in service provision out there and it's very challenging and a lot of fathers that we would meet are really struggling with the court service and with the other parents, struggling with the emotional impact that not seeing their children has on them and having to fight for time with their children. (Organisation 1, interviewee 2)*

> *Because a lot of dads don't link in with services, a lot of dads have found the process not really for them, it's for mam and baby. (Organisation 4)*

For a number of the organisations interviewed, providing information and support to separated parents was one of the aims, and they noted that were still gaps in information and support for fathers.

> *Dads need huge mental health supports … We need to get it right and we're miles away in relation to services and resources for dads. (Organisation 4)*

This suggests the need for additional data collection on access to formal and informal supports for fathers, their use of services and unmet needs. This could usefully inform policy development in the area.

4.3 INTERVIEWS WITH PARENTS

In order to explore issues around collecting data on non-resident fathers in Ireland, one-to-one interviews were conducted with five fathers not living full-time with their children and one lone mother who was no longer living with the father of her children. As outlined in Chapter 1, these interviewees were contacted via the NGOs working with parents interviewed for Section 4.2. The interviews with parents focussed on a number of issues, including how to identify and contact fathers who are not living full-time with their children, implications regarding collecting contact details of fathers from mothers, implications regarding obtaining information from birth register data, and collecting information on fathers from mothers. The fathers were also asked to identify information that should be collected from them.

4.3.1 Establishing contact with non-resident fathers

The interviewees acknowledged the difficulty of identifying and contacting non-resident fathers: 'I probably understand that. If they're not living with children, that that could be difficult' (Dad4). The interviewees felt that, in general, contact information on such fathers could be collected from the mother of the child/children. However, the success of this approach largely depends on the quality of relationship between the father and the mother.

> *I think in my case, if you were to contact my ex, she would give you my details, you know. … But my understanding is, as you probably know, in other situations, there are conflicts you know. And … a lot of times they [mothers] are sometimes not talking to the dads. (Dad1)*

In order to identify and engage non-resident fathers in a research study, some interviewees suggested using social media, radio or newspaper advertisements.

> *I suppose if it was on the radio, you know and if I saw something in the newspaper, or… I suppose if I saw, you know, an advertisement or something – I would respond. (Dad1)*

> *Probably try the social media … will be one way. (Dad3)*

> *So maybe a social media campaign or stuff like that, that that might help. (Dad4)*

One interviewee noted that data protection can be an issue when trying to identify non-resident fathers, particularly if the mother is not comfortable sharing the information: 'GDPR and stuff like that. It probably might be an issue' (Dad4).

Several fathers suggested going through support organisations or groups for lone parents: 'I can understand it could be difficult, but I think even linking in with [organisation] or helplines for fathers.' (Dad4). This approach could be used to:

> *…maybe contact some kind of groups like separated fathers' support groups. And then there's like maybe IrishDads.ie, contact them maybe. And then obviously Lads to Dads, which is the group that I was involved in at one stage, you could contact them and they would have a list of separated parents, fathers and they could probably give you the information … So, I think the thing to do would be to try and go in with support groups and there's some support groups for separated fathers and … or let's say, there's websites … You could probably get information from fathers through that. (Dad2)*

Dad2 felt that going through dedicated support groups or organisations is likely to provide more positive results than contacting non-resident fathers directly:

> *I would say an organisation would definitely… probably get more results quicker than cold contacting or unless the parties were part of some kind of group whatever … the separated parents' group, or whether it was something online … So, you know, … a direct contact might not always be advisable. Well, you can always try direct contact, but I think it depends on circumstances, I guess. I think contacting an organisation is probably the best way, or through word of mouth even. (Dad2)*

However, some of these suggestions were more relevant for targeting non-resident fathers in general rather than for the fathers of the study child.

Incentives could be used to encourage fathers to participate in a study:

> *Maybe some sort of incentive or project or interview maybe. Not necessarily a monetary reward, but along them lines – that would encourage fathers to contact you…. maybe they could offer to people you know, maybe the free, the free legal advice … maybe GP recommended to people, or something like this, or psychologist maybe … something like that. (Dad3)*

A snowballing approach was considered another option for contacting non-resident fathers:[22]

> *There's another way you could go about … so, for example, let's say I know maybe three or four separated parents, fathers … I could probably reach out to them and ask did they want to be involved in the survey to get information from them. (Dad2)*

Dad2 felt that when it is evident that the father does not have much contact with the mother or the child, there may be little point in trying to contact these fathers:

> *I think again it depends on the circumstances; separated or just some cases out there, father just goes walkabout and doesn't have any contact with the mother or the children as I'm sure you're aware of. So then … there's no point in trying to reach out to those kinds of people. (Dad2)*

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22 As with working through organisations, this is unlikely to assist with including fathers in a child cohort study.

An interview with a separated mother indicated that in order to understand the reluctance of some mothers in not providing information about the father of the child, the survey questionnaire should probe for the reasons behind it.

> *I suppose the first thing I would think would be the questionnaire of the survey. You know in terms of the questions that are being put there, to maybe expand on them more to try and gather more insight as to the reasons behind the information not being disclosed. Is there more questions that can be asked in the survey just to get that sense? … And then that would maybe give you a better picture to the reasons why, you know, I suppose in a sensitive way … that's not going to concern them. (Mother)*

4.3.2 Collecting contact information from mothers

The interviewees felt that collecting contact details for fathers from mothers can be difficult, particularly if the relationship between the child's mother and father is not amicable. It was also noted that in order to pass on the father's contact details, the mother needs to first secure his agreement for them to do so.

> *And certainly, there are circumstances – like trying to get access time with their children … so … it's quite difficult. And then there's probably other parents … probably would shy away from giving that information…. I would say it depends on the circumstances between the fathers and mothers – like… is the relationship amicable at this stage. It depends on the circumstances of their relationship. And maybe some mothers probably wouldn't want to give out information about fathers, because they'd have to get the father's permission first, and then, depending on how well they're now in that relationship – is there, you know a problem. It will probably be quite difficult getting that information from mothers. (Dad2)*

A mother's reluctance to pass on contact details for the father may also be related to the financial implications for the mother who may be concerned about the information collected being passed on to relevant authorities. However, if the mothers are assured that the information is collected for research purposes only, they may be more likely to share the father's contact details.

> *Whether they're willing to share. There might be certain lack of understanding around of why [the contact details are needed]. Will the mother get into trouble? (Dad4)*

> *Single parents, basically – they may lose certain elements of benefits or child benefit or the social welfare aspect, if you are not working. Because like you know, just sharing your information, or your story, because it can be presented to people you know … passing information*

to be shared …. I think if it's an anonymous, kind of a targeted survey, probably yeah. (Dad3)

Furthermore, depending on the quality of relationship, the fathers may not appreciate the mother passing on their contact details.

I do know not all dads want to be involved in the child's life – it's very sad. (Dad5)

I don't think it's always going to be successful, you know. … And in terms of …breakups you know what I mean. … …I think you'll get some mams refusing to give you a number and I think … you might also get some dads responding negatively to the fact that you've got the number from the mothers you know what I mean. … I think in these scenarios I think you need to try and maximise your reach, don't you. So, … it's like you have to have a multi-pronged approach to getting the numbers, you know. (Dad1)

4.3.3 Collecting information from birth registration data

In principle, birth registration records could be used for directly recruiting non-resident fathers for the study (see Chapter 2 on the Early Life Cohort Feasibility Study in the UK). In Ireland, the HSE birth registration application form contains contact information for both parents of the child. In order to explore the acceptability of this approach, the interviewees were asked how they would feel about researchers collecting information from birth registration data. Some fathers did not see a problem collecting information from birth registration, particularly if the purpose of the study is explained to them:

I think that would be a good idea. And then I guess …you can get their contact details and maybe contact them straight either via phone call or an e-mail to let them know that you're doing this survey, and you're just interested in asking them some key questions. (Dad2)

I don't have a problem with it personally, you know. I think it's OK. (Dad5)

However, collecting information from birth registration data also has a potential downside, particularly if the fathers are uncertain about the purpose of collecting their information or if the father is not present in his child's life:

Positive is that you're getting to the fathers. Negative is they might probably lack understanding of how you got it or why you're contacting them. It will come down to maybe a personal opinion. I

> *know from my thought process; my mindset would be – you have to make fathers heard, give them a voice. So that's ultimately why I'm here. Possibly some of the fathers mightn't have that opinion, you know, so. But yeah, at least you're contacting them. (Dad4)*

> *I suppose I think there are some dads that don't take responsibility for their kids and I think it's not the way to contact those dads. I would approve [of collecting info from birth registration], so I suppose that's the short answer you know. (Dad1)*

However, Dad1 argued that it would be better to opt to in the study than having their details accessed without their knowledge, an approach which could be considered intrusive.

> *If I got a call out of the blue you mean? You just want it to do a study about parents of kids growing up in Ireland. I suppose I would be feeling a slight intrusion, you know what I mean. Your personal details you know … I would prefer to go willingly into something like this. I might be the first one to participate in this, but I'd prefer to opt in. (Dad1)*

Furthermore, not all fathers may be recorded on birth registration data, as was the case of Dad3 who became a father at a very young age.

Confidentiality was the major concern among the interviewees regarding collecting information directly from birth registration.

> *I suppose depending on what the objective is, if there's going to be any negative consequences for the mother, you know. If it's just a survey and yeah, you know, I can't see why not. Obviously, you have the whole GDPR situation. … We're all contacted randomly for things you know. So I don't [know], I mean, if it's important that these fathers are contacted. (Mother)*

> *You'd have to be making sure … their confidentiality … that it's definitely going to be released to the right people obviously, that no person that would just ring up and say I'm his dad. And next thing there's information leaked everywhere about the kid... you know what I mean? That's the only downfall I can think of. Now I wouldn't think there's any problem with that in any information off of a birth registration you know. At the end of the day, you're not going to get*

much out of it really. You're going to get, you know, was the children's father present at birth, yes or no. (Dad5)

Well, I suppose there could be pros and cons to that depending on the father status within the unit, the family unit. You know, if they are involved. Like that could be a contentious issue, potentially. You know you could be contacting a father that is trying to get in contact or trying to be present and have access within their children's lives. They will be very happy with that, you know, and then you could find somebody else that is intimidated by it, you know, and feels as an agenda. And that could come back on the mother. So it's difficult. (Mother)

Well, it's just if the father is getting a random phone call from somebody asking questions, you know, there might be, depending on what's going on in that family situation, it could, you know, potentially cause issues. I don't know. So I suppose it could be positive and negative, you know outcomes depending on each individual situation. (Mother)

4.3.4 Information on fathers collected from mothers

Internationally, information has been collected from mothers and older cohorts of children on non-resident fathers (Goldman et al., 2021). The interviewees in this study were asked about what kind of information could be collected from mothers on fathers. Overall, it was felt that compared to non-resident fathers, it is easier to contact mothers who might also be more willing to respond to the questions.

I think … it's probably easier to contact mothers than it is fathers, I would say. Maybe more mothers are more open or more willing to give information freely for whatever reason. … I would say, it's quite difficult to get in contact with fathers in general who are separated. (Dad2)

When asked what information could be collected on fathers from mothers, a number of topics emerged, including time spent with the father, means of contact between the father and the child, father's access to the child, and supports available to separated/divorced fathers.

So what type of information can be collected …. I'd say it'd be down to how often their children get to spend time with their father … I guess how often are their children allowed to spend time with their father, let's say are they eligible for video or phone calls once twice a week now, how much contact they have, are they able to spend a weekend

> *with their father – every second or third weekend … whether it's in the father's house or are they able to get access to phone calls, video calls at least, at least once a week I would say … is it possible that the children are allowed to stay over in the father's house and possible … depending on circumstances and obviously during holidays, whether that's Christmas holidays, maybe Easter holidays, bank holidays, school holidays. (Dad2)*

> *I'd like you know …what level of time …. do you feel is available to you as a parent …. I know a few situations where dads are restricted from seeing the kids. … It would be interesting, I think, to hear from dads [where] … there is no restriction you know … or else I'm not allowed to see my kids, you know. So I think that's valuable information … and national supports. Are there supports for young men? (Dad1)*

This being said, there was some uncertainty about the accuracy of this information, when collected only from the mother:

> *I would wonder … I think it would be biased in an answer you'd get, and I would wonder about the validity of that information you know. And because … and like you could get a situation where he's had moments when he stayed with the dad but she says no… I would wonder about the validity of the information. I would be concerned about that actually. (Dad1)*

> *And I suppose from my experience- like I'm very involved in the lives of my child, so … you know, I could probably do a lot of things that maybe a lot of women do – extracurriculars planning, school work planning, exam prep – all that kind of stuff. But I think if you ask my ex what I do … you wouldn't get all that information, you know. And it's not necessarily malice or anything, but … just from knowing her, I don't think she would. So, in my case – I don't know if it will be accurate. And then … you could ask, but … you'd have to verify that from the dad, you know … I think. You're really talking about perception I think, … and you're not getting information …. I wonder, how scientific that information is, you know what I mean. (Dad1)*

4.3.5 Information that should be collected from non-resident fathers

In terms of information that should be collected from fathers, the interviewees noted that it depends on the focus of the study as well as the questions asked of the mothers. It was suggested that information be collected about different

aspects, including father's time with his child/children, father's involvement in helping with homework, and general interaction with the child. Access to their children emerged as a major topic for several fathers that were interviewed for this study.

> *I guess whatever questions you're asking, it makes sense to ask the fathers the same kind of questions. Whether they're in school years or whether they're in teenage years or work years and all that kind of thing. Why would age make a difference? Because, I guess, … if parents had children in school years – you could try and find out how much time dads spend with their children, does he get to be able to do homework to benefit this child, talk about school or be around to be able to help with schoolwork. (Dad2)*

> *Possibly their access arrangements. How much involvement they have in their children's lives. How did it come to this kind of access arrangement? (Dad4)*

> *To be able to access child's health you know …. you have every right to access that. (Dad5)*

As many dads referred to 'circumstances' when talking about the dynamics between themselves and their ex-partners, they were also asked whether both parents should be asked individually about the quality of their relationship with each other. The interviewees felt that in order to understand the quality of the relationship, it is important to establish the dynamics between the two birth parents:

> *I think it would be OK to ask that question and get an understanding of if there's a good relationship, a healthy relationship that's focused on their children. Ultimately, I think that will benefit your research of children growing up in Ireland. (Dad4)*

4.4 CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has drawn on interviews with NGOs working with parents and with six parents themselves to explore the potential for involving parents not living (full-time) with their children in research about those children. There was a consensus among both groups of the value of including non-resident parents in research, with interviewees highlighting the active involvement of fathers in their children's lives and the consequent impact on child development. Interviewees indicated some potential for information on the father-child relationship to be collected from resident mothers but cautioned that this might provide a partial or potentially

biased account. The importance of recognising the diversity in living arrangements and cases where the child had no 'primary' residence was also highlighted.

There was a consensus too on the challenges involved in contacting and engaging this group of fathers. Contacting fathers through the resident mother is seen to be difficult where the relationship is poor or even involves conflict over access arrangements. Mothers may be reluctant to pass on contact details without first asking permission while fathers may be suspicious about why they are being contacted. Interviewees were asked about their perceptions of using birth registration data to contact fathers directly, as has been done in the Early Life Cohort Feasibility Study in the UK (see Chapter 2). Views were mixed, with some feeling it would be good to contact fathers in their own right while others expressed some hesitation about fathers being contacted without warning.

Interviewees were asked about how best to involve fathers in the study. Some of the suggestions, such as working through parent organisations and using social networks, were more relevant to general surveys of non-resident parents rather than to involving the father of the GUI study child. However, an emerging recommendation centred on being very clear about the purpose of involving non-resident fathers and how their information would be used.

CHAPTER 5
Conclusions and implications for the future

5.1 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Research on children's lives has been criticised for not taking adequate account of the involvement of fathers, especially those who are not living (full-time) with their children (Goldman and Burgess, 2018). Birth and child cohort studies internationally have varied in the extent to which they include the perspectives of resident fathers, with even greater variation found in the inclusion of non-resident fathers. Studies that do include non-resident fathers have yielded important insights into their influence on child outcomes as well as the factors that facilitate more frequent contact with their child (King and Sobolewski, 2006; Marryat et al., 2009). Research has indicated the importance of the resources – financial, social and emotional – that fathers provide for their children (Dermott, 2016). Findings point to some discrepancies between paternal and maternal accounts of father-child contact, highlighting the importance of involving fathers in their own right (Coley and Morris, 2002). Existing research has also highlighted the complexity of living arrangements for many families, showing that children do not always have a 'primary' residence, and that many parents who do not live together are still in a relationship (Haux and Luthra, 2019; Raybould et al., 2023).

The Growing Up in Ireland (GUI) study has included all fathers, wherever resident, in almost all waves of data collection for Cohorts '98 and '08, although the data have not been archived until recently because of small case numbers. This report is designed to scope out the potential for including non-resident fathers in future waves of data collection for the new GUI birth cohort. To do so, it draws on the international literature on non-resident fathers, interviews with the Principal Investigators and other team members involved in cohort studies internationally, new analysis of GUI data on households with non-resident fathers and the perspectives of these fathers, and interviews with separated parents and NGOs working with parents in Ireland.

By necessity, given the small number of non-resident mothers included in GUI and other cohort studies, this study has focused on non-resident fathers. However, over 14,000 households with children under 19[23] consisted of lone father households in 2022, so this group would merit further research. Similarly, children living in same-sex couple households are rarely represented in cohort studies in sufficient numbers to be analysed separately. Nonetheless, the number of children living in same-sex couple households has increased over time (from 353 in 2011 to

[23] data.cso.ie, Table F3032.

1,853 in 2022),[24] and this group would merit further research. Future research could usefully adopt a more inclusive definition of non-resident parent.

5.2 NON-RESIDENT FATHERS IN IRELAND

Available data indicate that a significant proportion of children and young people in Ireland are not living with both parents, at least full-time. Since 2014, Irish legislation requires that the father be named on birth certificates. As a result, information on fathers is recorded in all but around 3 per cent of cases (CSO, personal communication). Birth records indicate that the father and mother were not living at the same address in 16 per cent of cases.[25] It is not possible to look at trends over time in the proportion of children not living with their fathers, as blended families are not routinely distinguished from other two-parent families in national statistics.

GUI data show similar levels of parental separation to those in national statistics, at around 14 per cent for children between 9 months and 5 years, rising somewhat to 18 per cent by 9 years of age. Families with a non-resident father are distinctive in profile, with a higher proportion of much younger mothers, lower levels of education and an over-representation in urban areas. Fathers who were initially living with the child but subsequently moved out of the household are also more disadvantaged in profile, having lower educational levels, higher unemployment levels and greater financial difficulties (see Smyth and Russell, 2021).

Information collected from mothers indicates frequent contact between non-resident fathers and their children, with half seeing babies and toddlers several times a week. Contact is somewhat less frequent as children make the transition to school, though around a third of 5- and 9-year-olds see their fathers at least a few times a week. Just over a quarter have little to no contact with their children. Although the non-resident fathers from whom we have information tend to be more actively involved in their children's lives (see Section 5.3), around half of them would like more frequent contact with their child. The findings point to a disparity in parental accounts of frequency of contact, with mothers reporting lower levels than fathers do, highlighting the importance of capturing both perspectives in understanding children's lives. Over a third (38 per cent) of separated mothers receive regular payments from the non-resident father while 11 per cent receive payments on an ad hoc basis, suggesting the importance of these resources for a significant group of families. From the child's perspective, just

[24] https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/hubs/p-cyp/childrenandyoungpersonshub/population/householdcomposition/.

[25] Data.cso.ie, Table VS77.

over half (53 per cent)[26] report getting on 'very well' with their father at age 9, indicating the importance of their father in their lives.

5.3 NON-RESIDENT FATHERS IN INTERNATIONAL LONGITUDINAL STUDIES

Early longitudinal studies, such as the National Child Development Study (NCDS) and the British Cohort Study 1970 (BCS70), collected information only from mothers and children, an approach that reflected the then actual and/or assumed gendered division of labour in families. Later studies have tended to include resident fathers but this is still not the case for all cohort studies. Furthermore, several studies have not included fathers in all waves of data collection, largely because of funding constraints.

There has been much greater variation in whether cohort studies have included fathers not currently living (full-time) with their children. Interviews with research teams indicated the perceived value of including this group of fathers to provide a more complete picture of the range of influences on child and adolescent development. However, several studies have not included the group because of funding constraints and/or the perceived challenges in achieving a high response rate.

Where studies have included non-resident fathers, there has been a good deal of variation in the response rates achieved. The interviews and desk research highlighted three studies that had higher response rates, at least in their early waves: the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (ECLS-B) in the US, Growing Up in Australia – the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) and the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing (FFCW) Study in the US. The reasons for their success appeared to relate to the inclusion of fathers from the beginning or at least early on, emphasising the importance of capturing fathers' perspectives in messaging to both resident mothers and fathers themselves, and proactive interviewer contact and follow-up with this group of fathers. These data have been archived for use by researchers and have provided valuable insights into topics such as the role of (financial and non-financial support) from non-resident fathers in child poverty rates (see, for example, Nepomnyaschy and Garfinkel, 2011) and on children's own experiences of parental separation (Qu and Weston, 2014).

In keeping with other scoping and qualitative research in the UK and elsewhere (Goldman et al., 2019; Raybould et al., 2023), researchers interviewed for this study reported a number of challenges in involving non-resident fathers in cohort

[26] This figure is as a percentage of all children with non-resident fathers, including those who have no contact with their father.

studies. Almost all such studies have used the resident mother as a gatekeeper for access to the father, asking her to provide contact details for him or to pass on study materials. The numbers of mothers willing to do so have varied across studies, with permission to contact more likely in the case of better parental relationships and greater father-child contact. As a result, the fathers who can be contacted via the mother are not likely to be representative of all fathers not living with their children full-time. A different approach was adopted by the Early Life Cohort Feasibility Study, using birth registration data to contact non-resident fathers directly. This did not seem to be sufficient to ensure high response rates, however, though response was higher in Scotland, Wales and England (where access to birth registration data was obtained) than in Northern Ireland (where contact was via the resident mother). A significant challenge in this study related to the housing mobility of this group of fathers, with difficulties in securing up-to-date contact details for the group even over a relatively short period of time, rather than the refusal of fathers who were contacted to take part in the study.

Those interviewed were asked to reflect on what might enhance participation among this group of fathers. Suggestions included persuading resident mothers of the value of involving non-resident fathers, messaging about the importance of fathers in their children's lives, a focus on positive aspects of parenting in the survey of fathers, and proactive contact and follow-up by interviewers.

5.4 NON-RESIDENT FATHERS IN GROWING UP IN IRELAND

The GUI study has included both resident and non-resident fathers in almost all waves. Information on non-resident fathers' involvement with their children has been routinely collected from mothers. As in almost all other studies, resident mothers are asked to facilitate access to non-resident fathers by providing contact details or passing on information. Around a third of mothers were willing to give permission for the father to be contacted when the child was 9 months and 3 years old, dropping to just over a quarter when the child was 9. Mothers were more likely to be willing to pass on contact details where fathers were in more frequent contact with the child and where they characterised their own relationship with the father as good, yielding a more selective group of fathers that could be approached to take part in the study. Among fathers who were contacted when the child was 3, 35 per cent completed the survey; this is on a par with the response rate for non-resident fathers in many comparable studies internationally. The response rate falls to 14 per cent by the age of 9. Again, international studies seem to indicate some decline in response rates as children grow older (as well as a decline over time in survey response rates in general). Fathers in more frequent contact with their child and formerly partnered with more highly educated mothers are more likely to complete the survey.

Although the survey responses from non-resident fathers relate to a more selective group, they yield useful insights into the perspectives of fathers. Even though this group of fathers have more contact with their children, around half would like to see their child more often. There are also differences between parental accounts, with fathers indicating more contact than mothers do (for similar findings internationally, see Coley and Morris, 2002; Kitterød and Lyngstad, 2013). These findings highlight the importance of capturing the perspectives of both parents.

5.5 THE PERSPECTIVES OF NGOS AND PARENTS

Interviews were conducted with four NGOs working with parents and with six separated parents themselves to explore the potential for involving parents not living (full-time) with their children in research about those children. Like the researchers, both groups strongly emphasised the importance of including non-resident parents in research, with interviewees highlighting the active involvement of fathers in their children's lives and the consequent impact on child development. Interviewees indicated some potential for information on the father-child relationship to be collected from resident mothers but indicated that this might provide a partial or potentially biased account.

The interviewees highlighted some of the challenges in involving this group of fathers. Using mothers to access fathers may be problematic, especially where there has been conflict or where the relationship is poor. In this context, fathers may be unclear why they are being contacted. In general, these perspectives echo some UK-based research which indicated a number of barriers to participation, including concerns about data confidentiality, the sensitivity of individual circumstances and the potential for participation to cause further tensions with the resident mother (Raybould et al., 2023). Despite the caution expressed about using mothers as gatekeepers, views were mixed about contacting fathers directly, using, for example, birth registration data. Some felt it would be good to contact fathers in their own right while others expressed some hesitation about fathers being contacted without warning. In recommending how best to involve this group of fathers, both sets of interviewees emphasised the importance of being clear about the purpose of involving non-resident fathers and how their information would be used.

5.6 IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

The scoping study has highlighted the perceived value of including the perspective of non-resident fathers in child cohort studies, including GUI.[27] The research teams, NGOs and parents interviewed emphasise the importance of providing a

[27] The study findings also have implications for cross-national studies of children and their families as well as, as they age, for capturing the experiences of GUI cohort members who themselves are not living full-time with their children.

comprehensive picture of the range of influences on children's lives, including the role of fathers not currently living with them. This perspective has been reflected in the inclusion of non-resident fathers in almost all waves of GUI to date. The study findings point to a number of grounds for their inclusion in future waves of data collection. First, a significant proportion of children – around one-in-six – do not live with their father full-time so not including their father gives only a partial picture of their lives. Second, around half of these fathers have very frequent contact with their children, especially when the child is younger, and thus can be considered as a key influence on their development. Third, children themselves value this relationship, with over half of 9-year-olds saying they get on very well with their non-resident father. Fourth, parents do not necessarily share the same perception of the father's involvement in the child's life so capturing both perspectives is important. Fifth, families with a non-resident father are more socio-economically disadvantaged in profile than other families. Understanding the resources – financial (direct and in-kind), social and emotional – provided by non-resident fathers is therefore crucial in understanding child poverty and developing policy to tackle it.

However, the study findings do point to challenges in involving non-resident fathers in child cohort studies. Response rates for non-resident fathers in GUI have been on a par with several international studies but lower than others. A key challenge is accessing non-resident fathers. GUI, like almost all other studies, relies on contact via the resident mother, resulting in a more selective group of fathers who receive any contact from the research team. Non-contact and non-response mean that those who complete the survey are even more selective in profile, over-representing those in frequent contact with the child and with a good relationship with the mother. Direct contact with the non-resident father, through birth registration data, does not necessarily result in high response rates. Nonetheless, this avenue is worth exploring in the Irish context; there is near-universal coverage of all fathers and direct contact may serve as an important signal of the centrality of fathers to their children's lives. At the same time, the issue of contacting a non-resident father without the mother's permission must be handled with care, with targeted messaging to both parties about the importance of including fathers.

Based on the experience of international studies and qualitative interviews here and elsewhere, the scoping study findings point to ways of potentially enhancing survey participation among this group of fathers. These include: strong messaging to the resident mother as to why fathers are being included in the study; strong and tailored messaging to all fathers – including those not living with their children – as to their centrality in their children's lives, an approach that could also help participation by resident fathers; limiting the scope to non-resident fathers that

have at least some contact with their child (on the basis of mother reports);[28] using interviewers as the first point of contact and follow-up, rather than relying on postal or online questionnaires; and demonstration of the value of the information collected through feedback to participants and the wider public. Demonstration of the value of this information depends on archiving these data for use by researchers and stakeholders; potentially guidelines on the use of these data, given lower response rates, would be helpful to data users. While consideration should be given to capturing the specificities of parenting arrangements in separated families, focusing more positively on their role as a father may enhance the experience of participation. Valuable information on the child's contact with the non-resident father has been, and should continue to be, collected from the resident mother. However, other research has indicated that the quality of the information gathered could be further enhanced, given some ambiguity in the interpretation of some questions, especially around the amount of time the child spent with their father (see Goldman et al., 2019).

[28] There are discrepancies between mother and father reports of contact but these generally relate to level of contact among those who have any. Not including fathers with no contact whatsoever helps address ethical and practical challenges about contacting them for survey purposes.

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