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Characteristics of separated parents: Challenges and issues for family relationships and wellbeing

This chapter provides an overview of the families that are actual or potential users of the family law system. It begins with an outline of the socio-economic and demographic characteristics of parents who separated post-1 July 2006, using data from the Longitudinal Study of Separated Families Wave 1 (LSSF W1) 2008. It then examines the extent to which parents in these families reported experiences of family violence, concerns about child safety, mental health problems, and issues with alcohol and other drugs or other addictions.

The issues of family violence and child safety are discussed throughout this report, but the primary purpose of the discussion in this chapter is to examine what the evaluation data (primarily from the LSSF W1 2008) reveal about:

- the characteristics and needs of the families who use or may use family law system services;
- the reported prevalence of family violence safety concerns (including child safety) among separated families;
- links between reports of family violence and safety concerns and the quality of the parents' relationship after separation;
- the reported "incidence" of alcohol and drug misuse prior to separation; and
- the reported "incidence" of mental health problems prior to separation.¹

The data presented in this chapter establish that family violence affects a substantial proportion of separated parents. Such families are the predominant users of both the family relationship services system and the legal and court systems. For this reason, the data in relation to these matters will inform discussion in a number of areas related to the family law reforms, and are presented here as a precursor to subsequent analyses in the remainder of this evaluation report.

When examining family violence, some complex definitional² and methodological issues arise. The term "family violence" is used in this evaluation report because it is the term also used in the main legislative (*Family Law Act 1975* (Cth) s4)³ and practice instruments (see Winkworth & McArthur (2008) that inform legal and professional approaches in this area. Where legal and service system professionals are asked for their views about family violence, these are the instruments that are likely to influence their responses and understandings.

In gathering data from parents, the interview instruments included questions on the socio-economic and demographic characteristics of parents, and their experiences of physical harm prior to separation and of a variety of behaviours amounting to emotional abuse before and during separation. Where parents reported experiencing physical harm, they were asked whether the children had witnessed any abuse or violence. All parents were asked whether they had current concerns for the safety of their child when in the care of the other parent.

1 Many of the "incidence" rates reported with respect to excessive drug and alcohol use and, more particularly "mental health" problems are necessarily subjective. What for one person might be regular and contained social drinking, for example, might for another be an issue with alcohol. Similarly, a person who links a former partner's behaviour with mental health problems may or may not have a basis in fact for such a statement. In the absence of a formal diagnosis, few individuals would be qualified to make this judgment. In addition, some might relate violence to a "mental health problem", whereas others would see it as an entirely separate issue unrelated in any way to a mental health issue and for which the violent person is fully responsible.

2 For a discussion on definitional issues, see Fehlberg, Behrens, and Kaspiew (2008, p. 185) and Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS; 2006).

3 The statutory definition is excerpted in Appendix D.

It should be noted that data on family violence collected according to the method applied in this study, in common with other large-scale quantitative studies, provide insight into the number of parents who report experiencing particular behaviours covered in the survey instruments. However, such reports do not provide a means of distinguishing between, for example, aggressive and defensive acts, nor do they provide insight into the subjective experience of the violence from the perspective of either the alleged target or the alleged perpetrator.⁴ Nevertheless, the implications of the presence of a history of family violence and current safety concerns for child wellbeing are addressed in Chapter 11.

2.1 Socio-economic and demographic characteristics of separated parents

This section provides an overview of the socio-economic and demographic characteristics of mothers and fathers who separated post-1 July 2006, using data from the LSSF W1 2008. The characteristics examined were: parents' ages, age of youngest child with the other parent, educational attainment, labour force status, being of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) descent, being born outside of Australia, relationship status at time of separation and whether currently living with a partner. These characteristics were measured at the time of the interview (after separation), with the exception of relationship status at separation. Some of the characteristics do not change over time (being born outside of Australia and being ATSI, while others change only slowly (educational attainment) and will therefore be the same, or very similar, to what they were at the time of separation. Labour force status, on the other hand, often changes following separation.

The average age of separated mothers was 33 years and separated fathers 35 years (Table 2.1). The most common age ranges for these separated parents were 25–34 years (38% of fathers and 39% of mothers) and 35–44 years (37% of fathers and 34% of mothers).

About half of the parents had a child (with the other parent) aged less than three years (47% of fathers and 50% of mothers). Relatively few had a youngest child (with the other parent) aged 12 years or older (7% of fathers and 7% of mothers).

About one-third of separated mothers and fathers had a highest level of educational attainment of Year 11 or less (32% of fathers and 33% of mothers). For the other levels of education, 13% of fathers and 14% of mothers had a degree or higher level qualification, 40% of fathers and 33% of mothers had a non-degree post-school qualification, and 16% of fathers and 20% of mothers had a highest level of educational attainment of Year 12. The education levels were lower than those found among parents who were together (see Tables 3.13 and 3.14 in Chapter 3).

Turning to labour force status, 84% of separated fathers and 52% of separated mothers were in paid employment. These employment rates are lower than those found among parents who have not separated. Around 4% each of mothers and fathers in the LSSF W1 2008 were of ATSI descent. The proportion of separated fathers born outside of Australia was 19% and the proportion of mothers was 15%. A substantial minority of parents reported that they had not been living together at the time that the relationship ended (12% of fathers and 15% of mothers). Of this group who were not living together when the relationship ended, only 20% of the fathers and 23% of the mothers reported that they had ever lived together. More fathers (14%) than mothers (6%) had re-partnered in the first year or two following separation.

2.2 Separated parents' reports of experiencing family violence

The following sections examine the incidence of family violence (including in the presence of children) before and during separation, and how many parents reported the presence of concerns about personal or child safety relating to ongoing contact with the other parent. The source of these data is LSSF W1 2008, supplemented by data from the Survey of Family Relationship Services Program (FRSP) Clients 2009.

⁴ For discussions about the advantages and disadvantages of different types of data collections methods and the extent to which they provide detailed insight into family violence see, for example, Taft and Flood (2001).

Table 2.1 Socio-economic and demographic characteristics of separated parents, 2008

	Fathers	Mothers
	%	
Age		
< 25 years	11.8	19.9
25–34 years	37.7	39.4
35–44 years	36.9	34.2
> 44 years	13.7	6.6
Mean age (in years)	35.2	32.5
Age of youngest child with the other parent		
0–2 years	46.6	50.3
3–4 years	18.6	17.0
5–11 years	27.5	25.5
12–14 years	4.8	4.7
15–17 years	2.5	2.5
Educational attainment		
Degree or higher qualification	13.1	13.8
Other post-secondary qualification	39.5	33.2
Year 12 (no post-secondary qualification)	15.9	19.9
Year 11 or lower (no qualification)	31.5	33.1
Labour force status (after separation)		
Full-time	74.0	16.4
Part-time	10.0	35.6
Not employed	16.0	48.0
Indigenous	3.7	4.2
Born outside of Australia	18.6	15.4
Relationship status (at separation)		
Married	52.8	48.9
Cohabiting	35.6	35.8
Other ^a	11.6	15.2
Currently living with a partner	14.0	6.0
Number of respondents	4,983	5,019

Notes: Data have been weighted. ^a Mainly those who had not lived with the other parent since the birth of the child. Most of these parents (80% of fathers, 77% of mothers) had never lived together.

Source: LSSF W1 2008

2.2.1 Family violence before or during separation

Parents who were involved in LSSF W1 2008 were asked about whether they had experienced family violence.⁵

Table 2.2 shows the proportion of fathers and mothers who reported having experienced family violence. Family violence is categorised as physical hurt or emotional abuse. The physical hurt measure includes those who experienced both physical hurt and emotional abuse, because the majority of parents who reported having experienced physical hurt also reported having experienced emotional abuse.

5 Parents were asked whether the other parent had emotionally abused them before or during the separation, with options for nominating different types of emotional abuse being available (multiple forms could be nominated). The measure of emotional abuse covers the other parent: (a) preventing the respondent from contacting family or friends, using the telephone or car, or having knowledge of or access to family money; (b) insulting the respondent, with the intent to shame, belittle or humiliate; (c) threatening to harm the child/children, harm other family/friends, harm the respondent, harm pets, or harm themselves; and (d) damaging or destroying property. Parents were then asked: “Before you separated, were you ever physically hurt by (child’s other parent)?” If they said “yes” to this question, they were asked whether the children had heard or seen any abuse or violence.

Table 2.2 Experience of physical hurt before separation, or emotional abuse before or during separation, fathers and mothers, 2008

	Fathers	Mothers
	%	
Physical hurt ^a	16.8	26.0
Emotional abuse alone	36.4	39.0
No violence reported	46.8	35.0
Total	99.9	100.0
Number of respondents	4,918	4,959

Notes: ^a Physical hurt includes those who experienced both physical hurt and emotional abuse, given that the majority of parents who experienced physical violence also experienced emotional abuse. Percentages may not total 100.0% due to rounding.

Source: LSSF W1 2008

Nearly two-thirds of the mothers and just over half the fathers indicated that their partner had either emotionally abused them or physically hurt them, with emotional abuse alone being considerably more commonly reported.⁶ Similar proportions of fathers and mothers said that they had experienced emotional abuse alone, although this was slightly more common among mothers than fathers. Table 2.2 shows that mothers were considerably more likely than fathers to indicate that their child's other parent had physically hurt them. In addition, given that virtually all respondents who had been physically hurt by their child's other parent also reported that this parent had engaged in one or more emotionally abusive behaviours, it is important to appreciate that emotional abuse was more widespread than suggested by the figures for experiencing emotional abuse alone.

A relatively high proportion of parents (72% of mothers and 63% of fathers) who reported having experienced physical hurt before separation by the other parent also reported that their children had witnessed violence or abuse (not shown in table).

Information about the experience of different types of emotional abuse is provided in Figure 2.1. Just over half the fathers (52%) and nearly two-thirds of mothers (64%) indicated that they had been recipients of emotional abuse either before or during the separation, with most of the forms of abuse mentioned being experienced by a substantially higher proportion of mothers than fathers. Insults that were designed to shame, belittle or humiliate these parents represented the form of emotional abuse most commonly experienced.⁷ In addition, 75% of fathers and 84% of mothers who indicated that they had experienced such insults also said that they had been recipients of at least one other form of emotional abuse.

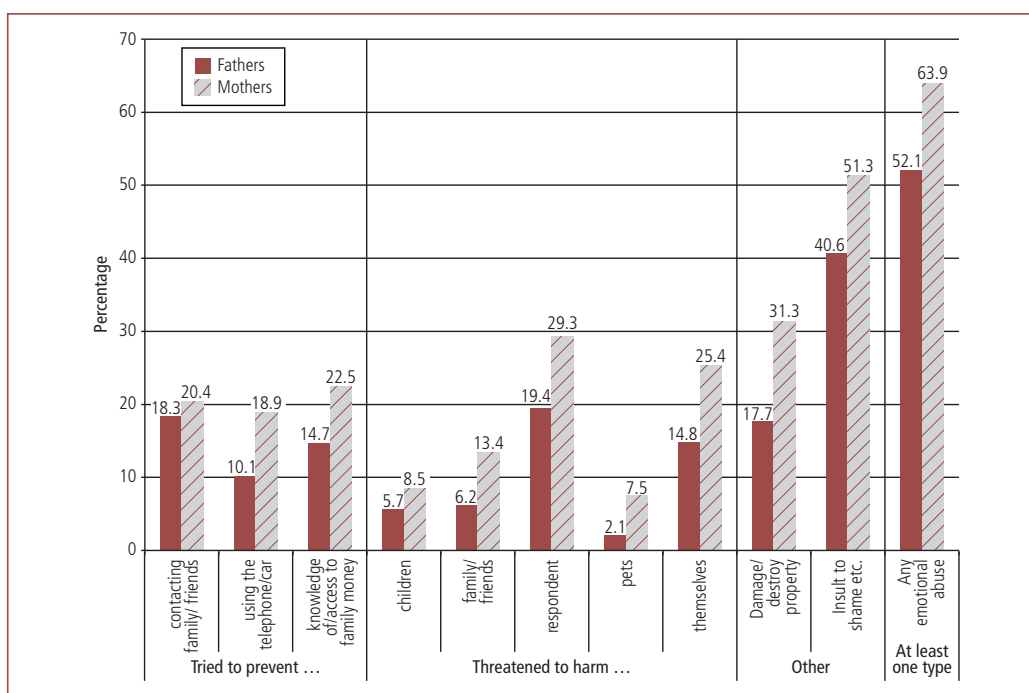
After insults, mothers most commonly reported fathers threatening to damage or destroy property, and threatening to harm them or to self-harm. Somewhat less common were mothers' reports of fathers' attempts to prevent knowledge of or access to money, followed by preventing contact with family or friends, or use of the telephone or car. The least commonly mentioned experiences reported by mothers were fathers' threats to harm the children, pets or family or friends. Fathers also reported these issues, but in most cases were considerably less likely to do so. Mothers were more likely to report having experienced multiple types of emotional abuse than were fathers.

One in four mothers and around one in six fathers said that the other parent had hurt them physically, and among those who reported such experiences, the majority indicated that their children had seen or heard some of the abuse or violence.

The Survey of FRSP Clients 2009 also revealed high rates of family violence in separated families. Table 2.3 shows that 33% of clients reported being physically hurt by the person about

6 Since the question about emotional abuse covered the periods both before and during separation, and the question about physical hurt only covered the period before separation, the reports of the incidence of physical hurt and emotional abuse are not directly comparable.

7 Although insults in general could be interpreted to include serious and light-hearted matters, it is probable that respondents who reported such experiences were generally referring to more serious matters. There are two reasons for this interpretation. Firstly, this question restricted insults to those that were seen as entailing malevolent intentions (to shame, belittle or humiliate) and, secondly, this question was embedded in a list of clearly abusive behaviour.



Source: LSSF W1 2008

Figure 2.1 Experience of different forms of emotional abuse before or during separation, fathers and mothers, 2008

Table 2.3 Family violence reported by clients who attended an FRSP service to sort out issues about their children after a relationship break-up or separation, 2008

Before you went to the service, did [the person you went to the service about] ever:	%
try to control you by either preventing you from contacting friends and family or preventing you from using a car, or having knowledge about or access to money	49.7
threaten to harm you, themselves or others (including pets)	43.4
seriously put you down or insult you	76.9
physically hurt you	32.8
Number of respondents	1,327

Notes: Responses are reported only for clients who indicated that they attended the service to sort out issues about their children after a relationship break-up or separation. Response categories for each item were "yes", "no" and "prefer not to say". Responses of "prefer not to say" represented only a small number of responses (< 4%). They are included in totals for calculating the proportion of "yes" responses above.

Source: Survey of FRSP Clients 2009

whom they attended the service and 77% reported being seriously put down or insulted. The participating client reported the other party making threats to harm them, themselves (i.e., the other party) or others (including pets) in 43% of cases. Controlling behaviour on the part of the other party had been experienced by 50% of clients participating in the survey.

2.2.2 Current safety concerns

Parents who participated in the LSSF W1 2008 were asked to indicate whether they currently held safety concerns for themselves and/or their focus child as a result of ongoing contact with the child's other parent.⁸

⁸ The question on safety concerns identified whether the concerns related to the respondent alone, the focus child alone, or both the respondent and child. Those who reported that they held such concerns were also asked to indicate: (a) whether their concerns related to contact with the child's other parent, the new partner

Around one in five parents (17% of fathers and 21% of mothers) reported safety concerns associated with ongoing contact with their child's other parent (Table 2.4). In total, 15% of fathers and 18% of mothers expressed concerns about the safety of their child—either alone or in addition to concerns about personal safety—and 4% of fathers and 12% of mothers were concerned about their personal safety (combining concern for child and concern for self).

Table 2.4 Current safety concerns, fathers and mothers, 2008

	Fathers	Mothers
	%	
Safety concerns for:		
both for child and self	2.6	8.4
self	1.6	3.6
focus child	12.3	9.1
no concerns	83.5	79.0
Number of respondents	4,825	4,772
Of those reporting safety concerns, concerns related to:		
child's other parent	68.3	92.3
the other parent's new partner	18.0	8.0
another adult	28.0	11.2
another child	5.8	2.5
don't know	4.4	1.7
Number of respondents	831	1,033
Of those reporting safety concerns:		
attempted to limit contact with other parent	24.3	50.1
Number of respondents	820	1,016

Source: LSSF W1 2008

The concerns of most of these respondents, especially mothers, related to the other parent; fathers were more likely than mothers to refer to concerns about the other parent's new partner and/or another adult. For 92% of mothers who expressed concerns, the other parent was the source of the concern, compared with 68% of fathers. Only 6% of fathers and 3% of mothers had a concern that another child may pose a threat to the safety of their child.

Fathers' and mothers' actions in relation to contact arrangements that were linked with safety concerns also differed: 50% of mothers and only 24% of fathers who held safety concerns indicated that they had attempted (or managed) to limit contact for safety reasons. Among fathers and mothers who cared for their child for 66–100% of nights and who held safety concerns about ongoing contact with the child's other parent, 17% of fathers and 56% of mothers indicated that they had attempted to limit contact with the other parent (not shown in Table 2.4).

2.3 Experience of mental health problems, alcohol/drug misuse, or other addictions before separation

In order to gain insight into other issues that might affect separating families, parents involved in LSSF W1 2008 were asked whether three sorts of issues were relevant to their relationship prior to separation. These were mental health problems, issues with alcohol or other drug use or another addiction.⁹

of that parent, another adult, and/or another child; and (b) whether respondents had ever limited or tried to limit their child's contact with his or her other parent because of these concerns. As noted in Chapter 7, where the child never saw his or her father, 7% of fathers and 24% of mothers indicated that the question tapping safety concerns did not apply to them. These respondents were treated as having no current safety concerns.

⁹ The LSSF W1 2008 question was: "Before finally separating, were there ever issues with: Alcohol or drug use? Mental health problems? Another addiction?" The respondents who mentioned that another addiction was apparent were then asked to indicate the nature of this addiction. Gambling was the most commonly cited of the range of addictions mentioned.

Given that respondents may well be reluctant to acknowledge that they themselves were prone to such problems, they were not asked about which family member(s) exhibited such problems. The question was thus designed to maximise the chance that any such issues prevailing in the family would be acknowledged.

Half the mothers and around one-third of the fathers indicated that at least one of these issues (mental health, use of alcohol or drugs, gambling or other addictions)¹⁰ was apparent before separation (Table 2.5). The two matters specified in the question—issues with mental health problems and use of alcohol or other drugs—were the most prevalent, with mothers being more likely than fathers to indicate the presence of each of these issues. This gender difference was more marked in relation to concerns about the use of alcohol or other drugs than for mental health problems. Few mothers and fathers identified gambling or addictions other than alcohol or other drugs. There was a significant overlap between reports of mental health issues and addiction (e.g., alcohol and drug use) issues, for both fathers and mothers (not shown in the table).

Table 2.5 Mental health problems and addiction issues, before separation, father and mother reports, 2008

	Fathers	Mothers
	%	
Mental health problems	22.7	29.1
Alcohol or other drug use	20.1	36.5
Gambling	0.8	1.8
Other addictions	2.5	3.2
None of the above	64.7	49.8
Number of respondents	4,983	5,019

Note: Multiple types of issues could be reported, so column percentages sum to more than 100.0%.

Source: LSSF W1 2008

2.4 Co-occurrence of family violence, mental health problems and addiction issues

Table 2.6 shows the extent to which parents who reported that mental health problems or addiction issues existed prior to separation also indicated that they had experienced family violence. Parents who said that both mental health and addiction issues had existed were the most likely to report that the other parent had physically hurt them (43% of fathers and 50% of mothers), followed by parents who reported either mental health problems alone or addiction issues alone (26% of fathers in each case, and 29% and 34% of mothers respectively). Only 9% of fathers and 13% of mothers who said that there had been no mental health or addiction problems indicated that the other parent had physically hurt them.

Parents who reported that neither mental health nor addiction issues had existed prior to separation were also less likely than the other parents to say that they had experienced emotional abuse alone. Overall, experiences of family violence were reported by 85% of fathers and 92% of mothers who said that both mental health and addiction issues had been present before

¹⁰ In the remainder of this chapter, we use the term “addiction issues” to cover the question of “issues with alcohol or drug use” and the subsequent question relating to other addictions. The more generic term “substance misuse” is also used in sections of the evaluation. As noted in footnote 1, a respondent’s judgment that such an issue exists is inevitably subjective. Just as statements about mental health would need external diagnostic support before they could be formally verified, statements about addiction issues or substance misuse also have a technical meaning, the confirmation of which falls outside the scope of this evaluation. Considering the relevant item in LSSF W1 2008 (see footnote 9), the common sense view is that respondents are likely to have linked the question about the use of drugs and alcohol with the question about “other addictions”. More broadly, a respondent’s perception that there is an issue or a problem in one or more of these areas is very likely to have been an important aspect of his or her understanding of the separation and an important driver of any dispute resolution behaviours.

Table 2.6 Experience of family violence, by mental health and addiction issues, before separation, mothers and fathers, 2008

	Mental health and addiction issues	Mental health and no addiction issues	Addiction and no mental health issues	No issues
	%			
Fathers				
Physical hurt	43.2	26.0	25.5	9.2
Emotional abuse alone	42.2	50.2	44.3	31.3
Neither	14.6	23.8	30.2	59.4
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	99.9
Number of respondents	520	669	611	3,118
Mothers				
Physical hurt	50.2	29.3	34.4	12.8
Emotional abuse alone	42.2	51.7	44.5	32.9
Neither	7.6	19.0	21.0	54.3
Total	100.0	100.0	99.9	100.0
Number of respondents	937	575	1,016	2,431

Note: Percentages may not total 100.0% due to rounding.

Source: LSSF W1 2008

separation, compared with 41% of fathers and 46% of mothers who said that neither of these problems had been present. In other words, family violence seemed to be pervasive among families in which both mental health and addiction issues were thought to be present.

At the same time, it is important to point out that, among those who did not report family violence of either sort, around one in five (18–22%) said that mental health problems or addiction issues were apparent prior to separation (Figure 2.2).

Parents who experienced family violence prior to separation were particularly likely to indicate that there had been issues in the pre-separation relationship involving mental health problems or use of alcohol or other drugs (or other addictions). In fact, most respondents who said that they had been physically hurt also indicated that issues pertaining to mental health problems or addictions were apparent prior to separation, with mothers being more likely to report this than fathers (reported by 75% of mothers who had been physically hurt, and by 64% of relevant fathers). In addition, most mothers (58%) who reported emotional abuse alone and 44% of their male counterparts said that such other dysfunctional issues were apparent in the pre-separation relationship.

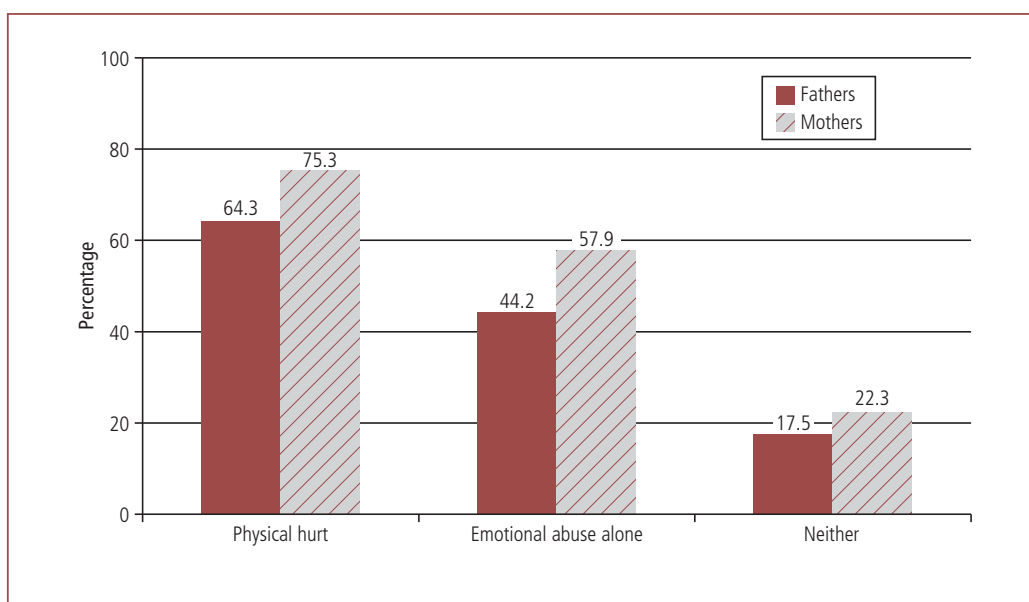
2.5 Quality of relationships between parents after separation

In order to gain insight into the quality of post-separation relationships and to assess the extent to which a reported experience of family violence may affect this, parents involved in the LSSF W1 2008 were asked to indicate the quality of their current relationship with their child's other parent. These data develop further understanding of the issues relevant to families who use the family law system.

Table 2.7 shows the proportions of fathers and mothers who described their current relationship in these different ways. A solid majority of separated mothers and fathers indicated that they had a friendly or cooperative relationship with the other parent, while almost a fifth rated their relationship as distant and a little under a fifth rated it as either very conflicted or fearful, although almost twice as many mothers than fathers considered the relationship to be fearful.

2.5.1 Post-separation relationships and pre-separation family violence

Where no family violence was reported, post-separation relationships were particularly likely to be friendly or cooperative (reported by 84–85% of fathers and mothers). The data indicate



Source: LSSFW1 2008

Figure 2.2 Having mental health and addiction issues before separation, fathers' and mothers' reports, by experience of family violence, 2008

Table 2.7 Quality of current inter-parental relationship, fathers' and mothers' reports, 2008

	Fathers	Mothers
	%	
Friendly	35.7	34.2
Cooperative	27.8	27.5
Distant	19.2	18.8
Lots of conflict	14.0	13.1
Fearful	3.4	6.5
Total	100.1	100.1
Number of respondents	4,860	4,927

Note: Percentages do not total 100.0% due to rounding.

Source: LSSFW1 2008

that experience of emotional abuse did not preclude post-separation friendly and cooperative relationships for half the fathers and more than half the mothers in the sample (Table 2.8).

Even physical violence was not incompatible with these sorts of relationships for significant minorities of fathers and mothers. However, roughly a quarter of both mothers and fathers who had reported physical violence or emotional abuse had developed a distant relationship with their former partners. Two-fifths of mothers and fathers who reported physical violence were either in highly conflicted or fearful relationships at the time of the survey, as were one-fifth who had reported emotional abuse alone. The fact that fear characterised roughly a tenth of the fathers and roughly a fifth of the mothers who had reported physical violence suggests that post-separation parenting arrangements would need to be assessed and handled with special care. On the other hand, the fact that high conflict was reported by only a very small percentage of parents who had not experienced violence or abuse in their relationships points strongly to the fact that the experience of a past or present abusive dynamic is very likely to characterise high-conflict family law clients.

Table 2.8 Quality of inter-parental relationship, by experience of family violence, before separation, fathers and mothers, 2008

	Fathers			Mothers		
	Physical hurt	Emotional abuse alone	Neither	Physical hurt	Emotional abuse alone	Neither
	%			%		
Friendly	16.0	22.8	52.5	15.8	24.9	57.2
Cooperative	19.7	27.1	31.1	23.5	30.3	27.6
Distant	24.6	26.7	11.9	22.0	22.8	12.1
Lots of conflict	29.2	19.9	3.9	20.2	17.7	3.0
Fearful	10.5	3.6	0.6	18.5	4.4	0.1
Total	100.0	100.1	100.0	100.0	100.1	100.0
Number of respondents	812	1,802	2,190	1,283	1,951	1,633

Note: Percentages may not total 100.0% due to rounding.

Source: LSSF W1 2008

2.5.2 Post-separation relationships and current safety concerns

While it has already been shown that pre-separation family violence has repercussions for inter-parental relationship dynamics after separation (which in some cases would be marked by continuing threatened or actual violence), current safety concerns are particularly pertinent, as they may well compromise the wellbeing of the parent and child. Table 2.9 shows the proportions of respondents with and without current safety concerns for themselves or their focus child who said that they had been victims of family violence or that there had been issues relating to mental health problems or alcohol or other drug use prior to separation.

The majority of parents who had safety concerns reported that they had been either physically hurt or emotionally abused by their child's other parent (90% of fathers and 95% of mothers). The proportion of parents with safety concerns who reported having experienced family violence is much higher than the proportion of parents without safety concerns who reported having experienced family violence. For example, among fathers with safety concerns, 44% reported having been physically hurt, compared to 11% of fathers without safety concerns. Among mothers with safety concerns, 42% reported having been physically hurt, compared to 19% of those without safety concerns.

Regardless of whether they held safety concerns, the proportion of parents who indicated that prior to separation there had been mental health problems or addiction was quite high. However, these problems were more commonly reported by parents who held safety concerns than by other parents (fathers: 62% with safety concerns compared to 30% without; mothers: 77% with safety concerns compared to 43% without).

Around half the fathers and just over half the mothers (49% and 54% respectively) with concerns about their own or their child's safety indicated that their current inter-parental relationship was marked by either conflict or fear, with mothers who held safety concerns being more likely than fathers with such concerns to report that their relationship was a fearful one (reported by 24% of mothers and 14% of fathers) (Figure 2.3). Highly conflicted or fearful relationships were reported by only 11% of fathers and mothers who did not hold safety concerns.

2.6 Summary

While the family law system deals with families from all sectors of society, separated parents have, on average, a lower level of education and lower income and are more likely to have a preschool-aged child when they separate than parents who stay together.

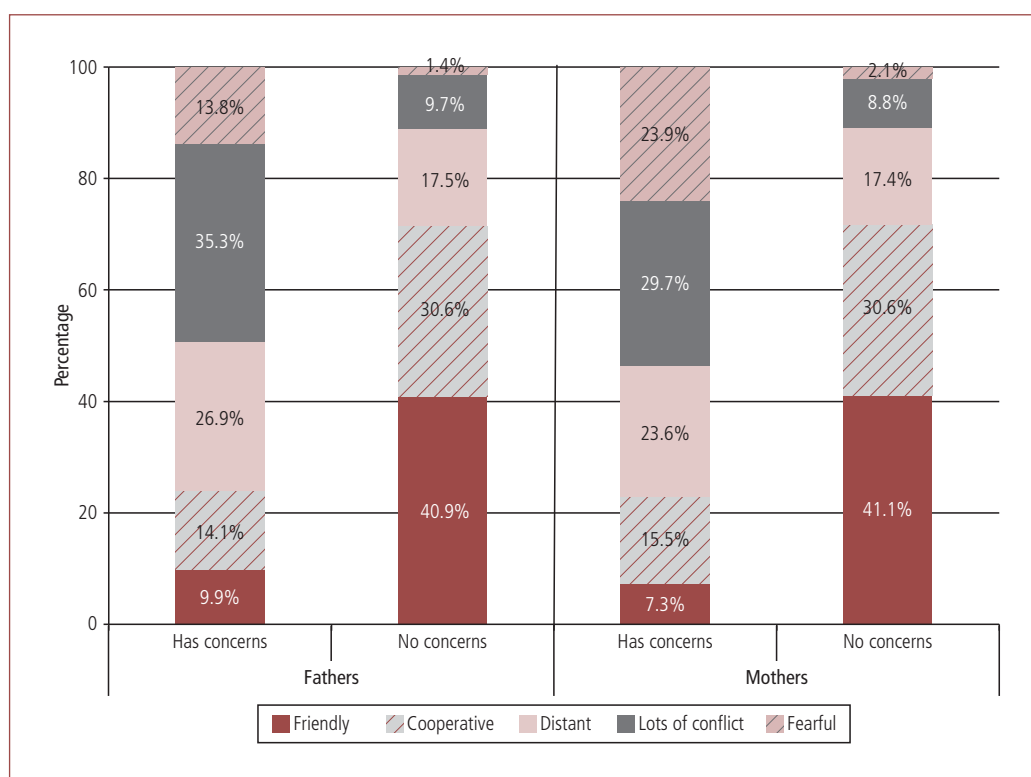
In relation to family violence, the following patterns are relevant among families in the LSSF W1 2008. Around two in three mothers and just over half the fathers indicated that their child's other

Table 2.9 Family violence and mental health/addiction issues, before separation, by current safety concerns, fathers and mothers, 2008

	Fathers		Mothers	
	Has safety concerns	No safety concerns	Has safety concerns	No safety concerns
	%		%	
Family violence				
Physical hurt	44.3	11.2	52.5	18.9
Emotional abuse alone	45.5	34.4	42.0	38.2
Neither	10.2	54.4	5.5	42.9
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Mental health/addiction issues				
At least one of these issues existed	61.9	29.6	76.8	43.1
No such issues existed	38.1	70.4	23.2	57.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.1
Number of respondents	833	3,953	1,033	3,886

Note: Percentages may not total 100.0% due to rounding.

Source: LSSF W1 2008



Note: Percentages may not total exactly 100% due to rounding.

Source: LSSF W1 2008

Figure 2.3 Quality of inter-parental relationship, by whether parent had safety concerns, fathers and mothers, 2008

parent had emotionally abused them through at least one of the means examined in this study, including the use of humiliating/belittling insults, property damage, threats to harm respondents or others, and other forms of controlling behaviours. One in four mothers and around one in six fathers said that the other parent had hurt them physically and, among those who reported such experiences, most indicated that their children had seen or heard some of the abuse or violence. It must be noted here that these data do not distinguish between, for example, aggressive and defensive acts, nor indicate the severity of the violence. Nor do they provide insight into the subjective experience of the violence from the perspective of either the alleged target or the alleged perpetrator.

Half the mothers and around one-third of the fathers indicated that mental health problems, the use of alcohol or other drugs, gambling or other addictions were apparent before separation. The gender difference was more marked in relation to concerns about the misuse of alcohol or other drugs than for mental health problems, with nearly twice as many mothers as fathers reporting problems with alcohol and drug use before separation. Gambling or other addictions were mentioned by fewer than 5% of parents.

Around one in five parents reported safety concerns associated with ongoing contact with their child's other parent. In total, 15% of fathers and 18% of mothers expressed concerns about the safety of their child—either alone or in addition to concerns about personal safety—and 4% of fathers and 12% of mothers were concerned about their personal safety, regardless of their views about their child's safety.

Where no family violence had been reported, post-separation relationships were particularly likely to be friendly or cooperative (reported by 84% of fathers and 85% of mothers). Roughly a quarter of both mothers and fathers who had reported physical or emotional violence had developed a distant relationship with their former partners. In addition, two-fifths of mothers and fathers who reported having experienced physical violence were in highly conflicted or fearful relationships at the time of the survey, as were one-fifth who had reported emotional abuse alone. High conflict was reported by a very small percentage of parents who had not experienced violence or abuse in their relationships. This suggests that the experience of a past or present abusive dynamic is a very common characteristic of high-conflict family law clients.

A solid majority of separated mothers and fathers (62% and 64% respectively) were nonetheless at the time of the survey in friendly or cooperative relationships with each other, whereas almost a fifth rated their relationship as distant and a little under a fifth rated it as either very conflicted or fearful. Almost twice as many mothers (7%) than fathers described the relationship as fearful. Reports of fathers and mothers with respect to dimensions other than fearful were quite similar.

Most respondents who said that they had been physically hurt also indicated that issues pertaining to mental health problems or addiction were apparent prior to separation, with mothers being more likely to assert this than fathers (reported by 75% of mothers and 64% of fathers who had been physically hurt). In addition, most mothers (58%) who reported emotional abuse alone and 44% of their male counterparts said that these issues were apparent in the pre-separation relationship.

Of those who held current safety concerns for themselves or their focus child, 90% of fathers and 95% of mothers reported that they had been either physically hurt or emotionally abused by their child's other parent. Nevertheless, around one in five mothers and just over one in ten fathers who did not hold safety concerns also indicated that they had been physically hurt prior to separation. For some of these parents, separation may have relieved them of such concerns.

Regardless of whether they held safety concerns, the proportion of parents who indicated that, prior to separation, there were mental health problems or issues related to alcohol or other drugs was quite high. However, these problems were more commonly reported by parents who held safety concerns than by other parents.