

Summary

The *Attitudes to Child Support Study*, conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies early in 2005, was designed to inform the work of the Ministerial Taskforce on Child Support. The study was jointly funded by the Australian Government Department of Family and Community Services (FaCS) and the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

Data were obtained from a general population sample comprising 1,001 people aged between 18 and 64 years. Data were also collected from a national random sample of 620 separated/divorced parents with at least one child under 18 years. These data represent the views of two distinct groups: those within the ambit of the system “looking out” (resident mothers and non-resident fathers – the two most common post-separation parent groups); and those outside of the system “looking in” (men and women who had not experienced separation). Telephone interviews lasting approximately 12-15 minutes were conducted with respondents.

Most of the survey questions were taken from a recent UK survey series of attitudes to child support, which explored scenarios in which the father was the non-resident parent. The issues covered focused largely on whether child support should be paid, rather than enforcement issues or the recognition of unpaid work in caring for children.

It should be noted that there is a danger in placing too much emphasis on community attitudes in the shaping of policy, particularly where the rationale behind policy decisions entails a complex set of issues that may not be well understood.

Key findings

- Most (77 per cent) respondents in the general population had heard of the Child Support Scheme.
- Most non-resident fathers believed that the Scheme was not working well (62 per cent) and was unfair (74 per cent). Resident mothers were evenly divided on the Scheme’s functioning and fairness; an argument could be made either way for whether they perceived their glass to be “half full” or “half empty”.

Broad principles underpinning the Scheme

- Most respondents in all groups maintained that:
 - child support should always be paid – regardless of the gender or financial circumstances of the non-resident parent;
 - both parents’ income should be taken into account in setting child support liability;
 - payments should be based on net rather than gross income;
 - there should be an upper limit on the amount of support payable by high-earning fathers;
 - the age of children should be taken into account in the Scheme; and
 - children with a disability should continue to receive child support after they turn 18 years.

- Although a majority of respondents in all groups held the foregoing views, systematic differences between groups nonetheless emerged for almost all of the above issues.
- There was a consistent majority view for three of the four groups on several issues. Most groups were inclined to believe that:
 - helping children should be the main priority of the Scheme – but non-resident fathers tended to support either the objective of helping children, “fairness to parents” or both (with helping children being the more common response);
 - child support should be based on the non-resident father’s capacity to pay (“fathers who earn more should pay more”) rather than on the “basic costs” of children – but non-resident fathers were fairly evenly divided on this issue; and
 - parents alone should hold the main responsibility for the financial support of their children – but resident mothers were evenly divided between this view and the view that the main responsibility should rest with parents together with the government (a trend that was related to the disproportionate number of resident mothers and children reliant on government support).
- Women and men differed markedly on the extent to which they thought that fathers would pay child support without government intervention: women (especially resident mothers) believed government involvement was necessary; men (especially non-resident fathers) did not.
- Finally, most respondents believed that, where mothers were on government income support, these payments should not be reduced by the total amount of child support. Instead, most respondents argued in favour of mothers keeping all or some of these payments, with some reduction tending to be the more popular of these alternatives.

New partners, second families

- While there was some inconsistency, most groups were inclined to believe that:
 - where a resident mother remarries, continuation of child support should depend on the new partner’s financial situation – but resident mothers were divided on this issue;
 - where a non-resident father repartners and has stepchildren, child support liability should not be reduced – but non-resident fathers were slightly more likely to argue in favour of some rather than no reduction; and
 - where a non-resident father has a child born of a new relationship, child support liability should not be reduced – but most non-resident fathers disagreed.

Parent–child contact

- There was much agreement across the groups on two issues related to parent–child contact. Most respondents in all groups believed that:
 - a non-resident parent’s (male or female) lack of interest in maintaining contact with children should have no bearing on their duty to support children financially; and
 - overnight stays should be taken into account in the calculation of child support.

- Nevertheless, non-resident fathers were less likely than other groups to agree that fathers who lacked interest in having contact should pay support. They were also more inclined to believe that overnight stays should be taken into account, while resident mothers were the least supportive of this proposition.
- In addition, most non-separated women and men, and particularly resident fathers, believed that child support should be reduced where a father has to establish new housing for his children to stay overnight – but most resident mothers disagreed with this proposition.
- Non-resident fathers tended to differ from one or more groups on scenarios that alluded to potential obstruction of parent–child contact:
 - non-resident fathers were inclined to believe that non-resident parents (male or female) should not have to pay child support if the resident parent is preventing contact – but other groups tended to be fairly evenly divided on this issue;
 - most groups argued that, where a resident mother moves interstate, child support payments should still continue – but only half the non-resident fathers agreed; and
 - most non-resident fathers maintained that child support should not be paid if the resident mother moved overseas – but resident mothers and non-separated women were more inclined to say payments should continue; the non-separated men were evenly divided on this issue.

Suggested changes to the Scheme

- At the end of the survey, respondents were asked: “Is there anything that you’d like to see changed about the Child Support Scheme as it currently stands?”
- Here, two things should be borne in mind:
 - many suggested changes are likely to have been triggered by the survey questions asked during the course of the interview; and
 - respondents’ comments should not be seen as representative of the views of all respondents in either sample, or of any broader population.
- When asked what they would like to see changed, women’s and men’s responses differed in some ways:
 - the women who made suggestions wanted to see child support paid (even if fathers moved overseas), arrears collected, and income minimisation itself minimised;
 - by contrast, the men who made suggestions wanted (a) both parents’ income included in the formula; (b) the current percentages reduced (especially where fathers had to support new children); (c) the formula to be based on net rather than gross income; (d) some accountability of how child support was spent; (e) the income of former partner’s new partner to be included in the formula; and (f) child support to be exempted or reduced where contact is impeded because of relocation or denial (“no-see, no-pay”).
- There was nonetheless common ground between women and men on a number of issues, including:
 - the need and importance of mediation, relationship counselling, and parenting programs (both pre- and post-separation);
 - perceived problems with administrative and assessment processes; and
 - the need to ensure that the Scheme was fair for children (young and old, disabled or otherwise), and for resident parents, non-resident parents, and government.

- The above findings suggest the need for:
 - better education and information for separated parents and the general community about the principles and rationale behind the Scheme;
 - a more therapeutic process in helping separating parents handle the many challenges they face, especially in relation to reaching their own parenting and financial agreements;
 - optimising the impact of the soon-to-be-established network of Family Relationship Centres by including opportunities to help parents negotiate child support and associated financial issues where appropriate; and
 - research into children’s views about child support, as well as research into the reasoning behind parents’ attitudes – including the extent to which these attitudes are based on their own needs, their children’s needs, those of their partner, those in similar circumstances and those of the community.

Striking a balance

The *Attitudes to Child Support Study* is predicated on the belief that community perceptions, values and expectations (particularly those of separated parents) need to be understood as part of the evolving nature of child support policy. These perceptions and their various crosscurrents attest to the difficulties in balancing the diverse desires and needs of all family members and the State in relation to the financial support of children after parental separation.