

B P S R Bryson Purdon  
Social Research

# UNDERSTANDING MODERN FAMILIES

How can we improve the data infrastructure?

# Presentation overview

- UK evidence on ‘traditional’ families is stronger than for ‘blended’ families arising from separation
- ‘Understanding the lives of separating and separated families: what evidence do we need?’
  - ▣ scoping study funded by the Nuffield Foundation
  - ▣ involved team of methodologists and substantive experts
  
- Why should we be concerned?
- What evidence do we need?
- Why are the data lacking?
- What could (can) we do about it?
  - ▣ Need more longitudinal survey data!

Why should we be concerned?

# Family separation is common

- No longer a norm of a stable two-parent family throughout childhood
- One child in six born into a single parent household
- One in three children experience parents' separation during childhood
- At any point, 2.5m separated families raising 4m children
  - ▣ 3m children living in single parent households
  - ▣ 1m children living with step-parents
- 2% of UK families with children separate each year

# It can be associated with poorer outcomes

- Family separation can be associated with negative consequences and poorer life chances for parents and children
  - ▣ e.g. behavioural issues, educational attainment, health, risky behaviours
- Unpicking causality is hard, but evidence suggests due to:
  - ▣ Resultant living conditions (housing and finances)
  - ▣ Post-separation parenting approaches
  - ▣ Relationships between parents/non-resident parent and children
  - ▣ Added strain of complex family structures
- Need to know more about why – and why some families negatively affected and not others

# Particularly pertinent now

- Structure and fluidity of family formation changed a lot in recent decades – need for data not new, BUT....
- Increasing recognition of importance of co-parenting
  - ▣ No longer enough to measure contact – about family functioning, non-resident parent involvement, shared parenting, step-parent roles, etc.
- Need to evaluate several key policy changes
  - ▣ Encouragement to make family-based arrangements rather than use statutory services (e.g. child support) or courts
  - ▣ Investment in relationship support services
  - ▣ Welfare changes affecting single parents and low income households (e.g. Universal Credit/the benefit cap)

# What evidence do we need?

# Short- and longer-term evidence needs

- Drawing on wide-ranging consultation
  - ▣ These issues span government departments, policy areas and academic disciplines
- At its simplest, we need to describe and document how families are changing – in structure and in functioning
- Beyond this, we need to understand ways in which family structures affect parent and child trajectories and outcomes
  - ▣ To inform development of policy and practice
  - ▣ To maximise well-being and future life chances
- Current pressing need to evaluate impact and effectiveness of statutory, legal and third sector interventions



# Parenting in separated families is different (1)

- Experience of growing up – or parenting – in a separated family is different to when both parents live together
  - ▣ Not enough to rely on the kinds of data collected from ‘traditional’ families
- We need data from different family members:
  - ▣ from/about both resident and non-resident parents
  - ▣ from/about children
  - ▣ from/about step-parents and step-children and half-siblings, etc.

# Parenting in separated families is different (2)

- And we need data on family experiences which differ from ‘the traditional’:
  - Co-parenting when parents are not in a relationship
  - Formation and dynamics of step-families
  - How children spend time across/within two parents’ households
  - Children’s relationship (or lack of relationship) with non-resident parents
  - Ways in which two parents’ income cover two households rather than one
  - Negotiating and navigating child and financial arrangements with or without statutory, legal or third sector support
  
- Need specific data on what happens immediately prior to and in period soon after separation

# Why are the data lacking?

# Reducing value of administrative data

- Fewer families in contact with statutory and legal services following policy changes reduces usefulness of administrative data
  - ▣ Nothing like a census – even in combination
  - ▣ Biased towards higher conflict families or domestic violence cases
  - ▣ Limited value either for substantive analysis or survey sampling – unless interested in these specific groups
- Evidence about families outside of ‘the system’ can only be collected directly from families – surveys or qualitative research
- (In reality, much of the evidence too nuanced to be in administrative data anyway)

# Government departments tend to have particular foci

- Government commissions evaluations and research studies usually
  - ▣ One-off cross-sectional snapshot
  - ▣ Addressing particular (current) research questions
  - ▣ Focusing on specific groups (in touch with the system)
- Useful piecemeal evidence but
  - ▣ Need longitudinal data to understand dynamics and causal pathways
  - ▣ Need to know about those outside the system (especially now)

# Household panels and birth cohorts (1)

- Government spending cuts mean greater reliance on large, longer-term studies
  - ▣ UK Household Longitudinal Study
  - ▣ Millennium Cohort Study – and now Next Steps
  - ▣ ?? A future cohort study??
- Best holistic data
- Representative sample of all separated families
- Longitudinal data to track trajectories and outcomes – sometimes prior to separation

# Household panels and birth cohorts (2)

- BUT...
- Competing priorities and multi-purpose nature constrains amount of data it is reasonable to collect
  - ▣ Can't achieve depth and granularity
- Even with big sample sizes, limited numbers of separations per year (for newly separated)
  - ▣ e.g. c.100 per wave of the UKHLS
- Majority of data from resident parents
  - ▣ UKHLS attempts to identify and track, but skewed and retention very hard
  - ▣ MCS focuses on resident family
  - ▣ (Life Study did intend to include non-resident parents)
- MCS cohort are now in late teens – and Life Study cancelled

# What do these studies provide?

- Main focus on household in which children are living
  - ▣ e.g. very little on parenting roles of non-resident parent; on households of non-resident parents
- Data rich where mirrors data collected from 'traditional' families
  - ▣ little on co-parenting across separated households, etc.
- Mostly data collected from resident parents
  - ▣ Far less from non-resident parents, children, step-relatives
- Data from non-resident parents biased towards those with better relationships



What can (could) we do about it?

# Methodologically very challenging

- We've established we need longitudinal survey data, BUT
- No comprehensive sampling frame(s)
  - ▣ Large-scale filtering of households (expensive, prone to bias)
  - ▣ Even more difficult to find those recently separated
- Recruitment and retention of separating families hard
  - ▣ Non-resident parents often don't self-identify
  - ▣ Separating families – especially non-resident parents – more likely to drop out of studies
- A lot of new question development required

# Too important to conclude it's all too hard

- Our study identified different approaches
  - ▣ Balance between cost/feasibility and depth of data
- Option 1: New longitudinal study of families
- Option 2: New longitudinal study of separating and separated families
- Option 3: Add to existing studies
  
- BUT pilot first!

# Option 1: New longitudinal survey of families

- If had unrestricted budget!
- Sample cross-section of families and track over time
  - ▣ 2% separate each year
- Advantages
  - ▣ Pre- and post-separation data
  - ▣ Quickly identify newly separated families
  - ▣ Resident and non-resident parents from same family
  - ▣ Could 'sell' survey as one about families to help retention after separation – especially non-resident parents
  - ▣ Could devote all interview time to relevant issues
- To warrant cost (wave 1 sample size c28k), would need to be a call for a study of family life more generally

# Option 2: New longitudinal survey of separating and separated families

- More realistic
- Sample cross-section of separated families and track over time
  - ▣ Boost the newly separated
- Advantages
  - ▣ Could 'sell' survey as one about families to help retention after separation – especially non-resident parents
  - ▣ Could devote all interview time to relevant issues
- Disadvantages
  - ▣ Large-scale screening exercise to identify eligible families, especially newly separated
  - ▣ No pre-separation data
  - ▣ Very hard (impossible) to recruit resident and non-resident parents from same family
  - ▣ Problems of self-identification of non-resident parents
- Methodologically more challenging than Option 1

# Option 3: Add to existing studies

- Main focus to date on UKHLS
  - ▣ Add a limited number of new questions on main survey?
  - ▣ Follow-up studies at trigger points (e.g. separation; new step-family)?
  
- Although capitalizing on existing study attractive
  - ▣ Still an issue with sample sizes, especially of newly separated
  - ▣ Would need to try to address issues of non-representativeness/attrition of non-resident parents
  - ▣ Need to weigh up risks to the overall panel

# Ideal next steps...

---

- Continued discussions with UKHLS and cohort studies
- Large-scale two-wave pilot
  - ▣ Methodological testing ground
  - ▣ Much-needed short- to medium-term substantive data

# Understanding the lives of separating and separated families in the UK: what evidence do we need?

Caroline Bryson, Susan Purdon and Amy Skipp with Anne Barlow, Tamsin Ford, Joan Hunt, Kathleen Kiernan, Hamish Low, Stephen McKay, Joanna Miles and Liz Trinder

<http://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/news/understanding-lives-separating-and-separated-families-uk>

The study was funded by the Nuffield Foundation, but the views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Foundation

Contact: Caroline Bryson, [c.bryson@bpsr.co.uk](mailto:c.bryson@bpsr.co.uk)