



THE LONDON SCHOOL  
OF ECONOMICS AND  
POLITICAL SCIENCE ■



Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion

Research at LSE ■

# **COVID-19: has the pandemic affected relationships between children and their non-resident parents?**

**Caroline Bryson and Stephen McKay**

## **Contents**

Key findings

Introduction

The data

Relationships and contact

Child maintenance

Discussion and conclusions

CASEbrief/39  
September 2020

Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion  
London School of Economics  
Houghton Street  
London WC2A 2AE  
CASE enquiries – tel: 020 7955 6679

## Key findings

- Three and a half million children in the UK are in separated families, where their parents do not live together. For these children, among the factors associated with their well-being and outcomes are the nature of their relationship with their non-resident parent (the parent they do not live with, at least most of the time) and the financial support provided by that parent, as child maintenance. It is therefore important to understand how COVID-19 has affected these relationships.
- Information provided by resident parents (the parent with whom the child lives most of the time) in June 2020 as part of the Understanding Society COVID-19<sup>1</sup> survey suggests a strong degree of stability in many children's relationships with their non-resident parent. This is measured in terms of the amount of contact they have, changes in the closeness of their relationship and changes in the amount of child maintenance, if any, the non-resident parent has been paying.
- However, those relationships most at risk during the COVID-19 pandemic are those which were of poorer quality beforehand. The resident parents most likely to report a worsening of their child's relationship with their non-resident parent, or less contact, are those who were less close prior to the pandemic. Likewise, child maintenance is most likely to have reduced during the pandemic where children had less contact with their non-resident parent beforehand.

---

<sup>1</sup> University of Essex, Institute for Social and Economic Research. (2020). [Understanding Society: COVID-19 Study, 2020](#). [data collection]. 3rd Edition. UK Data Service. SN: 8644, 10.5255/UKDA-SN-8644-3.

## **COVID-19: Has the pandemic affected children's relationships with their non-resident parents?**

### **Abstract:**

The well-being and outcomes of children living in separated families are associated with the quality of their relationship with their non-resident parent, and child maintenance provided by that parent. It is therefore important to understand how COVID-19 has affected these. While the Understanding Society COVID-19 survey suggests a strong degree of stability in many children's relationships with their non-resident parent, those relationships most at risk (of becoming less close or having less contact) during the pandemic are those which were of poorer quality beforehand. Child maintenance is most likely to have reduced during the pandemic where children had less contact beforehand.

### **Key words:**

Separated families; non-resident parent; child maintenance; contact; COVID-19.

## Introduction

While there has been a fair amount [written](#) about the implications of COVID-19 on family relationships, most commentators have focussed on relationships *within* households. Far less has been said about the situations of the [3.5 million children](#) in the UK living in 'separated' families where their parents live in *different* households, despite COVID-19 having particular ramifications for these children and their parents.

First, COVID-19 introduced a number of potential barriers to children seeing their non-resident parents: advice to avoid non-essential travel during periods of lockdown; risks in using public transport; financial constraints from precarious employment situations and/or reduced earnings; increased working hours (for frontline workers); and isolation due to symptoms. For all these reasons, despite [government advice](#) that children could move between their parents' homes during the pandemic, it has been up to parents to decide what to do in practice. And, for parents with already difficult relationships, [legal and advisory services](#) are reporting cases of resident parents 'using' the pandemic to restrict contact. Given children's well-being and outcomes are [associated](#) with the nature of their relationship with their non-resident parent, it is important to understand how COVID-19 has affected these relationships.

Secondly, several factors mean that COVID-19 may also affect financial support from the non-resident parent. First, financial support often comes hand-in-hand with [contact](#), so reductions in, or conflict about, contact may lead to changes in the amount or frequency of child maintenance payments. Second, precarious employment situations and reduced earnings during furloughing caused by COVID-19 may affect non-resident parents' capacity to pay – currently and into the future. Again, this is crucial to map given the important role of maintenance for resident parents and children.

## The data

The Understanding Society COVID-19 study<sup>2</sup> provides insight on what has happened within separated families during the pandemic. The study involved a [monthly online survey](#)<sup>3</sup> between April and July 2020, and a bi-monthly survey in September and November 2020, among its main panel members aged 16 and over, intended to capture their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. The June 2020 wave included a set of questions asked of separated parents with dependent children – ‘resident parents’ with whom their child(ren) live all or most of the time and ‘non-resident parents’ who have their child(ren) a minority or none of the time. This paper is based only on the reports of resident parents.<sup>4</sup>

The questions were aimed at assessing the extent to which COVID-19 has affected relationships and levels of contact between children and their non-resident parents as well as the financial support given in the form of child maintenance. Questions relied on perceptions and self-report either by comparing situations in the previous four weeks (late May and June) against the period before the pandemic or by asking directly about changes between the two time periods.

The survey included 480 resident parents with a dependent-aged child (up to age 19 if still in full-time education) with a non-resident parent. Questions about relationships and contact were asked only of the 332 resident parents with a child under 16, while the child maintenance

---

<sup>2</sup> University of Essex, Institute for Social and Economic Research. (2020). [Understanding Society: COVID-19 Study, 2020](#). [data collection]. 3rd Edition. UK Data Service. SN: 8644, 10.5255/UKDA-SN-8644-3.

<sup>3</sup> With telephone survey option.

<sup>4</sup> Certain characteristics of the non-resident parent sample suggest that it is not representative, differing from other surveys of this group. First, whilst previous [studies](#) estimate the proportion of non-resident parents who are mothers at around 10 per cent, in the June COVID-19 survey the proportion is 42 per cent. Second, whilst there is a good degree of consistency between those identified as resident parents in this survey and two or three years earlier in Wave 9 of the main Understanding Society survey, there is a low level of overlap between the two surveys in terms of those identifying as non-resident parents.

questions were asked of all resident parents. The findings reported are based on data weighted to address survey non-response – starting from wave 9 of the main Understanding Society survey, respondents to the COVID-19 survey were weighted to correct for any non-response differences by demographics, health and economic status.<sup>5</sup>

While modest sample sizes limit the strength of any conclusions that can be drawn, the data nonetheless provide an important picture of the relationships between children and their non-resident parents during the first months of the pandemic.

### **Relationships and contact**

Resident parents were asked how close a relationship their child(ren) have with their non-resident parent on a four-point scale running from 'very close' to 'not close at all'.<sup>6</sup> They were then asked to compare the relationship now as being 'better', 'about the same' or 'worse' than prior to the pandemic.

The headline picture is one of stability in relationships between non-resident parents and their children during the pandemic: three quarters (73 per cent) of resident parents report that these relationships have not changed. Indeed, six per cent of resident parents report that relationships have improved. However, for one in seven (14 per cent), the period of the pandemic has seen a decline in relationships between non-resident parents and their children.

Those relationships most at risk over the period of the pandemic appear to be those already not close (Table 1). Where resident parents report that their children are 'not very close' or 'not close at all' to their non-resident parent, 22 per cent say that the relationship has worsened since

---

<sup>5</sup> The full set listed in the [user guide](#) (p. 24) is: "basic demographics, household composition, previous survey outcomes, COVID-19 survey paradata, economic variables and health variables".

<sup>6</sup> The question asks generally about the nature of the relationship rather than explicitly asking about the closeness of the relationship prior to the pandemic. However, as the general nature of the question implies that it asks about the ongoing relationship, for this analysis, it is used as a pre-pandemic measure of closeness.

the start of the pandemic, compared to three per cent of those whose relationship is 'very close' and seven per cent of those who are 'quite close'. Indeed, among those with a 'very close' relationship, 23 per cent report their relationship having improved since the pandemic. The pressures of the pandemic may be exacerbating existing inequalities.

*Table 1 Close relationships improved, more distant relationships worsened.*

	<i>How close is relationship between children and their non-resident parent?</i>					
	Very close	Fairly close	Not very close	Not at all close	Don't know	Total
<i>How does relationship compare with before? It is:</i>	%	%	%	%	%	%
Better	23	2	2	1	-	6
About the same	72	85	76	64	39	73
Worse	3	7	22	23	-	14
Don't know	2	5	0	12	61	7
<i>Base: resident parents with child(ren) under 16</i>	47	75	40	68	7	237

Chi-sq test:  $p < 0.001$ .

This finding is broadly mirrored in the association between a change in relationship quality and how much contact a child was having with their non-resident parent prior to the pandemic (Table 2). Where children were seeing their non-resident parent at least several times a month prior to the pandemic, 86 per cent of the resident parents rate the closeness of the relationship between their child(ren) and their non-resident parent as 'about the same' or 'better'. In contrast, where children were seeing their non-resident parent no more than once a month prior to the pandemic, the comparative percentage is only 72 per cent.

*Table 2 Less frequent contact, relationships worsened.*

	<i>Contact between children and non-resident parent prior to pandemic</i>			
	<i>Weekly or more</i>	<i>Several times a month</i>	<i>Once a month or less, or never</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>In June, compared to before, relationship is ...</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>
Better	3	5	9	6
About the same	83	81	62	73
Worse	11	10	18	14
Don't know	3	4	11	7
<i>Base: resident parents with child(ren) under 16</i>	<i>102</i>	<i>30</i>	<i>103</i>	<i>235</i>

Chi-sq test: p=0.054.

Similarly, while most children are in contact their non-resident parent as frequently as before the pandemic, a substantial minority of resident parents report a reduction in contact<sup>7</sup> in the previous four weeks (Table 3). Among the children who were in contact with their non-resident parent at least weekly prior to the pandemic, 31 per cent had been in contact less often during the previous four weeks (18 per cent several times in the past month and 13 per cent less often than this). Likewise, 32 per cent of those had been in contact several times a month prior to the pandemic had had less frequent contact in the previous four weeks. However, for some children with less frequent contact with their non-resident parent before, the pandemic period has seen an increase in contact. Among those who were in contact with their non-resident parent once a month or less prior the pandemic, 16 per cent had been in more frequent contact in the preceding four weeks, including 10 per cent who had been in contact at least once a week. Likewise, among those who had

<sup>7</sup> The question asks about seeing or having contact with the non-resident parent.

previously had contact with their non-resident parent several times a month, nine per cent had been in at least weekly contact more recently.

This is not related to keyworker status – those resident parents working as keyworkers reported similar levels of change to those who were not.

*Table 3 Some evidence of reduced contact during the pandemic between children and non-resident parents*

	<i>Frequency of contact between children and non-resident parent prior to pandemic</i>			<i>Total</i>
	<i>Once a week or more</i>	<i>Several times a month</i>	<i>Once a month, less often or never</i>	
<i>In the past four weeks ...</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>Once a week or more</i>	69	9	10	34
<i>Several times a month</i>	18	59	6	17
<i>Once a month, less often or never</i>	13	32	84	49
<i>Base: resident parents with child(ren) under 16</i>	<i>102</i>	<i>30</i>	<i>103</i>	<i>235</i>

Chi-sq test:  $p < 0.001$ .

### **Child maintenance**

It is potentially early days to assess the effects of the pandemic on the payment and receipt of child maintenance. Non-resident parents on furlough, living on 80 per cent of their usual wage (with an upper limit)<sup>8</sup>, may be less able to afford to pay child maintenance. And those made redundant during the pandemic will have had their child maintenance liability reduced<sup>9</sup> in line with their sharp drop in income. However, the full

<sup>8</sup> Percentage as per the timing of the June 2020 fieldwork.

<sup>9</sup> Non-resident parents on benefit are generally liable to pay £7 per week in child maintenance.

effects of the pandemic on non-resident parents' ability to help financially support their children will only be known once the government-funded furlough system comes to an end and once we see the full impact of the pandemic on the economy. With the UK [economy](#) seeing the biggest slump on record in the period April to June 2020, we might expect high levels of unemployment and limited job opportunities to negatively impact on non-resident parents' ability to pay maintenance in the coming months and years.

By June 2020, there were some early – but small - signs that the pandemic may be affecting the child maintenance received by resident parents (Table 4). Fewer than half (46 per cent) of resident parents with dependent aged children have any arrangement with the non-resident parent<sup>10</sup> to receive child maintenance. Among these<sup>11</sup>, one in eight (12 per cent) said they had received less or no maintenance in the previous four weeks than they had during the pandemic.<sup>12</sup>

*Table 4 Some evidence of reduced child maintenance during the pandemic*

<i>Comparing the past four weeks to before the pandemic...</i>	<i>%</i>
Received more	1
Received about the same	87
Received less	8
Did not receive any	4
<i>Base: resident parents with dependent child(ren) under 19 with a child maintenance arrangement</i>	<i>159</i>

<sup>10</sup> Note that the child maintenance questions were asked of resident parent with children under 16 or aged 16 to 19 and in full-time education. In contrast, the questions on relationships and contact were only asked for those with children under 16.

<sup>11</sup> Sample sizes mean that we are unable to look across resident parents with statutory, court or private arrangements.

<sup>12</sup> One per cent had received more and 87 per cent said that the amount was about the same. The survey did not ask resident parents whether, prior to the pandemic, they usually received any maintenance under these arrangements. However, according to the 2018-19 Family Resources Survey, 85 per cent of resident parents with a CSA/CMS arrangement received any maintenance, compared with 91 per cent for Court Orders and 94 per cent for voluntary agreements. Therefore, the proportion receiving 'about the same' in the past four weeks will include a fair proportion of resident parents who were not receiving maintenance prior to the pandemic.

Although the survey included a follow-up question about why the amount had reduced, only 22 resident parents were asked this question. However, furlough, redundancy, and being self-employed with less work were the most usual replies. It is reasonable to hypothesise that the pandemic will result in further reductions in child maintenance into the longer-term, with the expected job losses as we come out of the furlough scheme and into recession. The child maintenance liabilities for non-resident parents will reduce if they are not working or working less. Any changes in contact arrangements may also affect amounts of child maintenance.

Those resident parents most at risk of losing child maintenance are those whose children are in less contact with their non-resident parent (Table 5). Although the sample sizes are too small to make any firm inferences, those resident parents who are most likely to have seen a reduction in child maintenance receipt are those whose child(ren) had least contact prior to the pandemic.

*Table 5 Some evidence of reduced child maintenance during the pandemic particularly for lower contact families*

	<i>Frequency of contact between children and non-resident parent prior to pandemic</i>			<i>Total</i>
	<i>Once a week or more</i>	<i>Several times a month</i>	<i>Less often or never</i>	
<i>Comparing the past four weeks to before the pandemic...</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>
Received more	-	-	-	-
Received about the same	95	86	82	90
Received less or none	5	14	18	10
<i>Base: resident parents with child(ren) under 16 with a maintenance arrangement</i>	<i>56</i>	<i>23</i>	<i>38</i>	<i>117</i>

Chi-sq test: p=0.108.

## **Discussion and conclusions**

The level of reported stability in the closeness of children's relationships with their non-resident parents, in how often they are in contact, and in child maintenance receipt, is encouraging. Solid relationships and contact patterns appear to have weathered the storm of the early months of the pandemic, with its stringent lockdown measures. It is also good to see some children being in *more* contact than before with their non-resident parent. However, signs that poorer quality relationships are at most risk of deterioration is concerning, and it will be important to monitor whether any negative consequences of the pandemic are long-lasting. If this proves to be the case, less contact and less closeness with non-resident parents means the pandemic has the capacity to negatively affect children's well-being and their longer-term outcomes.

Similarly, the fact that most child maintenance arrangements have not been affected by COVID-19 is good news. However, with some signs (albeit on very small sample sizes) of those families with less contact prior to the pandemic receiving less maintenance, again, it is important to watch for further change over time. This is particularly important given that the economic consequences of the pandemic have not yet been fully realised. Greater numbers of non-resident parents are likely to experience job losses and greater economic insecurity which will, in turn, impact on their ability to financially support their children.

## **Acknowledgements**

This paper makes use of data from the *Understanding Society* COVID-19 study which is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and the Health Foundation. Fieldwork for the survey is carried out by Ipsos MORI and Kantar. *Understanding Society* is an initiative funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and various Government Departments, with scientific leadership by the Institute for Social and Economic Research, University of Essex. The research data are distributed by the UK Data Service. We would like to thank the Understanding Society team for fielding the questions used in this paper, which provide invaluable data on the experiences of separated families during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. We also thank those taking part in the survey.

None of these bodies are responsible for any interpretations in this briefing, and any errors or misunderstandings are the responsibility of the named authors.

Caroline Bryson is a partner of Bryson Purdon Social Research LLP and a PhD student at CASE. Stephen McKay is Distinguished Professor in Social Research at the University of Lincoln.

T: [twitter.com/@CLBryson4](https://twitter.com/CLBryson4) (first author)

T: [twitter.com/@SocialPolicy](https://twitter.com/SocialPolicy) (second author)

## **Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion**

The Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion (CASE) is a multi-disciplinary research centre based at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), within the Suntory and Toyota International Centres for Economics and Related Disciplines (STICERD). Our focus is on exploration of different dimensions of social disadvantage, particularly from longitudinal and neighbourhood perspectives, and examination of the impact of public policy.

In addition to our CASEbriefs, we produce a discussion paper series (CASEpapers), and reports from various conferences and activities in CASEreports. All these publications are available to download free from our website. Limited printed copies are available on request.

For further information on the work of the Centre, please contact the Centre Manager, Annie-Rose Nicholas, on:

UK+20 7955 6679      [a.nicholas1@lse.ac.uk](mailto:a.nicholas1@lse.ac.uk)      [sticerd.lse.ac.uk/case](http://sticerd.lse.ac.uk/case)

© Caroline Bryson  
Stephen McKay

All rights reserved. Short sections of text, not to exceed two paragraphs, may be quoted without explicit permission provided that full credit, including © notice, is given to the source.