

Maximising the involvement of fathers and/or partners in Life Study: what can we learn from other relevant UK studies?

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Contents

Background 3

Summary 3

Section 1: Introduction 6

Life Study 6

This review 6

Parameters of the review 7

The paucity of evidence from other quantitative surveys 8

Section 2: Surveys: sampling, identification, initial approach and response 10

Introduction 10

Fathers as part of a household survey involving both parents 10

Fathers randomly selected as ‘the parent’ to take part in a survey of parents 13

Surveys of individual parents, where fathers are approached as named individuals 14

Using non-traditional data collection modes 17

Section 3: Qualitative studies: sampling, identification and initial approach 20

Longitudinal qualitative studies recruiting fathers during pregnancy or the early years 20

Qualitative studies with non-resident fathers 22

Engaging fathers in service provision more generally 23

Section 4: Ensuring the continued involvement of fathers in later waves 24

Keeping track 24

Making families feel engaged 25

Maximising levels of participation 25

Ensuring the continued participation of fathers in qualitative longitudinal studies 26

Section 5: Asking consent for linking to administrative records 28

Introduction 28

Requesting access from the data holders 29

Asking for consent from survey respondents and parent carers 29

Ongoing consent in longitudinal surveys 32

Using administrative data to trace respondents 32

Acknowledgements 33

References 34

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| BackgroundIn recognition of the importance of fathers to children’s development and well-being, the Nuffield Foundation and the ESRC co-funded an Expert Advisory Group (EAG) on Fathers and Partners from the June 2013 to September 2014. It was tasked with considering a number of questions relating to the inclusion of fathers and partners in Life Study, expected to be the new UK cohort study, and with providing advice to the Life Study Scientific Steering Committee responsible for the scientific protocol. Its remit included the identification of key scientific opportunities and questions and a consideration of the approaches to maximising the recruitment, retention and tracking of fathers and partners. This review ‘Maximising the involvement of fathers and/or partners in Life Study: what can we learn from other relevant UK studies?’ was prepared for the EAG. It was undertaken between September 2013 and January 2014. As such, it does not incorporate research undertaken and/or published since the start of 2014.  |

# Summary

* **Life Study aims to maximise the number of fathers it involves**. Currently, this means ensuring that all efforts are made to engage fathers in the first wave of data collection at 28 weeks pregnancy (including if they are not living with the mother at that point). Going forward, should funding be secured to interview fathers in later waves, there is a second issue of ensuring that fathers remain in contact and engaged with the study, even if they are not living with their child.
* As part of a wider programme of work by Life Study’s Fathers and Co-parenting Expert Group, this review draws on a range of surveys and qualitative studies carried out in the UK over the past 20 years.[[1]](#footnote-1) It reports on **the methodologies used in these studies for identifying, approaching and engaging fathers** and, in the case of longitudinal studies, retaining their involvement over time. It also covers the ways in which studies have sought consent from parents and children to access their administrative data with a view to enhancing their survey data.
* While the review provides some **examples of successful practice** on which Life Study could draw, it also serves to highlight a **range of challenges** that the new birth cohort will face in terms of involving fathers, in particular those who are non-resident.
* A key finding from this review is the **paucity of data**, particularly survey data, **from fathers**:
	+ The majority of surveys and evaluations which focus on families or on children interview the main carers (almost always mothers), and sometimes the children. These studies usually collect limited proxy data on fathers. Some family- or child-focused surveys include subsidiary interviews with the main carers’ partners (so, including resident fathers), but very rarely non-resident fathers.
	+ Understanding Society[[2]](#footnote-2) is the best example of a longitudinal survey (outside of the birth cohorts) in which mothers and fathers hold equal status (rather than as main and partner respondents). It is of particular interest as it continues to include either parent if they leave the household.
	+ A limited number of surveys (e.g. on services for parents) randomly select one parent for interview. Whether non-resident parents are eligible for interview varies between surveys.
	+ A range of small-scale qualitative and (more rarely) quantitative studies focus specifically on fathers, often without the inclusion of mothers or children.
	+ Studies of family separation often involve interviews with parents with care (usually mothers) and non-resident parents (fathers), but rarely involve attempting to interview both parents from the same family.
* **Where families have separated, few studies involve interviews with both mothers and fathers**. Most studies involving main carers (usually mothers) and children do not interview non-resident parents (usually fathers). Understanding Society is one survey exception, as it continues to involve parents who leave the household, provided they were resident at some point in the life of the survey. And there are limited examples of qualitative studies which have sought to interview parents with care and non-resident parents from the same families.
* In general, **fewer resident fathers take part in surveys than resident mothers (i.e. the response rate is lower among fathers)**, with the differential potentially greatest among unmarried couples. This is true when both fathers and mothers are approached to take part (e.g. Understanding Society) or when one parent is randomly selected to be approached for interview. When fathers are approached only once the mother has completed the main carer interview (e.g. Families and Children Survey (FACS)), a fairly high proportion take part in the partner interview.
* Regardless of whether the mother is the gatekeeper to the research team gaining access to the father (e.g. in studies using Child Benefit records or sampling during pregnancy) or whether fathers are approached directly (e.g. in Understanding Society), **studies rarely tailor their approach to mothers and to fathers**. It is most common to use the same introductory letters and information leaflets, rather than attempt to address any facilitators or barriers to participation pertinent to mothers or fathers.
* However, a number of **qualitative studies among fathers very much ‘sold’ their research to participants on the basis that the research provided fathers with a ‘voice’** at a time when fathers were asked less often than mothers to be involved in services or in research. This approach was perceived by researchers as important and successful. Some engaged reticent fathers early in the process by inviting them to participate in focus groups with other fathers. Other (qualitative and quantitative) studies focused on ensuring that any **practical barriers to fathers’ participation were removed**: offering flexibility of times and locations for interviews, reminder text messages and flexibility of interview mode. For instance, FACS introduced the choice of a telephone or face-to-face interview for partners, to counter falling response rates.
* **Study designs often rely on the mother providing fathers’ contact details to approach them for interview.** Research teams did not raise any ethical concerns about asking mothers for this information (either when fathers are resident or if they have left the household since the previous wave): it was seen as unproblematic given that the mothers can choose whether or not to do so.
* **Engaging non-resident fathers in research is particularly challenging.** This is due in part to getting – and keeping – in touch with non-resident parents, and partly due to a reticence on the part of non-resident fathers to take part. A number of studies attempting to identify, contact and interview non-resident fathers (both through screening processes or Child Support Agency administrative records) have resulted in low response rates and samples biased towards those more likely to be in contact with or have good relations with their children or ex-partner. (Later waves of Understanding Society will be very useful in unpicking how well it has managed to keep in touch with non-resident parents.) Beyond the difficulties of not being able to contact non-resident parents (not identifying themselves as parents in survey screens, not providing up-to-date contact details, etc.), non-resident fathers can be reticent to participate in research for a number of reasons including: concerns about unsettling fragile relationships (even when they are currently good), confidentiality of their data from their ex-partner, and reticence to talk about their children when they themselves are not in contact.
* Many of the issues around the lack of engagement of fathers in research studies (e.g. being treated as ‘the second parent’), and barriers to their participation, are echoed in the wider literature about the involvement of fathers in family service provision.
* **Asking for consent from family members to access their administrative data (health, education, economic) is common, with typically high proportions of survey respondents providing consent** (either on their own behalf or on behalf of their children). Although the procedures for asking for this consent currently vary across studies (and across time), the new Administrative Data Research Network (ADRN) is likely to introduce standard procedures and a single channel of communication for researchers wishing to access administrative data.

# Section 1: Introduction

## Life Study

Life Study, the new birth cohort study, will follow 100,000 children born in the UK in 2014 and 2015. It will collect data on these children from the time that their mothers are 28 weeks pregnant, combining survey, medical and administrative data. Currently, confirmed funding allows for data collection at 28 weeks pregnancy, then at six months and 12 months after birth.

The central focus of Life Study is the cohort of children. However, understanding the lives of children requires data on the family into which they are born and the family/families in which they live during their childhood. At each data collection point for Life Study, mothers will be interviewed not only about their child, but about themselves and their wider family circumstances. And they will be asked to give consent for the study to access administrative data held about them and their child. However, the current funding allows for the direct involvement of resident fathers/partners[[3]](#footnote-3) in the study only at the 28 weeks pregnancy point (pregnancy component) or at six months old (birth component), with limited capacity to interview some non-resident parents at 28 weeks pregnancy (pregnancy component only). At this point they will be asked to take part in a survey interview, provide certain medical data and to give consent for the study to access administrative data. Funding may be secured to interview fathers in later waves. If not, mothers will be relied upon to provide (necessarily more limited) proxy information about the child’s father. This can be combined with administrative data that the father has given consent for the study to access.

## This review

Life Study aims to maximise the number of fathers it involves. Currently, this means ensuring that all efforts are made to engage fathers in the first wave of data collection at 28 weeks pregnancy (including if they are not living with the mother at that point). Going forward, should funding be secured to interview fathers in later waves, there is a second issue of ensuring that fathers remain in contact and engaged with the study, even if they are not living with their child. One of the tasks of Life Study’s Fathers and Co-Parenting Expert Group is to review and recommend how best this might be achieved.

This paper addresses the following broad questions, asking about the methodologies employed in other UK studies and what Life Study might learn from these:

* Within surveys, how have fathers been identified, and how have they been approached about taking part? How representative are the fathers interviewed, and what efforts have been made to maximise the participation rates of the fathers approached to take part? (Section 2)
* Within qualitative studies, how have fathers been identified, and how have they been approached about taking part? What efforts have been made to encourage fathers to take part? (Section 3)
* How have longitudinal (qualitative and quantitative) studies sought to ensure the continued involvement of fathers across waves? (Section 4)

The final section of the review looks beyond the involvement of fathers to look more widely at:

* How have surveys sought consent from parents to access their administrative records for the purposes of the research? (Section 5)

## Parameters of the review

The review focuses on studies carried out in the past 20 years within the UK. It does not include the birth cohort studies (covered in another strand of work), except in relation to obtaining parental consent to access administrative records. It looks at both quantitative surveys and qualitative studies: whilst more obvious parallels can be drawn between Life Study and other quantitative studies, qualitative studies offer important learning in how to engage and maintain research relationships with fathers. The review includes both longitudinal studies (where respondents are re-interviewed over time) and cross-sectional studies (where respondents are interviewed once, with any repeat waves involving new samples of respondents). Some studies are descriptive in nature; others evaluate particular initiatives, policies or programmes.

Of key interest are studies focusing on pregnancy and the early years of a child’s life. Given the limited number of *surveys* involving fathers, the review net was widened to include *any* surveys about families or children involving fathers (including resident and non-resident fathers)[[4]](#footnote-4). The qualitative studies included in the review more closely focus on pregnancy and the early years in a child’s life, with the exception of studies involving non-resident fathers. The particular interest in engaging and maintaining contact with these fathers meant that we include studies in the review looking at a wider age-range of children.

**This is not a systematic review**[[5]](#footnote-5), but rather includes a selection of studies identified by:

* consulting academics and researchers working on research about children and families;
* internet searching of the work of academic research centres focusing on children and families;
* ‘snowballing’ from references included in other relevant studies.

As such, some relevant studies (likely smaller-scale studies) will have been overlooked. However, the review includes a wide range of studies - across disciplines, substantive foci and sampled populations - from which to learn. Moreover, at a certain point in the review, the value of identifying further smaller-scale studies diminished, given the similarities in the methods of approaching and engaging fathers across many of these studies.

In addition to drawing on the methodological information available in the published literature, a fair bit of the information reported below comes from informal discussions with the authors about the detail of their study methodologies.

## The paucity of evidence from other quantitative surveys

The references at the end of this review provide the range of quantitative and qualitative studies included in the review. What they do not provide is the long list of examples of quantitative studies and evaluations about pregnancy or a child’s early years which do *not* involve fathers. The length of this list is an important finding in itself: most of the quantitative studies and evaluations identified did not attempt to involve fathers. Rather, they relied on maternal report (and sometimes on data from the children themselves). While this is an interesting observation in terms of the paucity of data available from fathers, it also points to the limitations of what we are able to learn from other quantitative studies (other than the birth cohorts).

Reviews on research about fathers and fatherhood (e.g. Lewis and Lamb, 2007; Burgess, 2008) highlight how a number of the key studies in the area (across a range of disciplines) draw on data from the birth cohort studies such as the National Child Development Study or large-scale surveys like the Labour Force Survey. There are few examples cited in these reviews of surveys with fathers, although the findings from a wide range of small-scale qualitative studies are reported.

Among the studies reviewed here, a common theme emerges about the challenges of engaging fathers in research, particularly when compared to the usual level of success in involving mothers, where response rates are typically high. This is not a new or surprising finding, particularly in relation to non-resident fathers, and our review tries to focus on ways in which studies have tried to mitigate these difficulties. A number of commentators talk more widely about the challenges of engaging fathers *with services* (e.g. Burgess, 2009; Cullen et al, 2013). They discuss the fact that many services around pregnancy and the early years traditionally focus on mothers, and that while there are growing attempts to redress this balance, “the literature is dominated by a ‘big picture’ approach which is concerned to establish the role and importance of fathers and fatherhood, the benefits gained by actively including fathers in programmes....... comparatively little attention is devoted to practical, ‘hands on’ advice related to the recruitment and engagement of fathers to programmes” (Cullen et al, 2013). Given the difficulties in engaging fathers in *services* for families and children, we should perhaps expect to find parallel issues in relation to engaging fathers in *research* which focuses on their role as fathers. What is more, we should perhaps hope to learn from the ways in which services are engaging fathers, and translate these into our research studies, an issue to which we return in Section 2.

Section 2 of this review summarises how a range of surveys and qualitative studies in the UK have sampled or identified fathers to approach to participate in the research. Sections 3 and 4 report on how, and how far, these studies have managed to ensure that their studies are representativeness of their eligible population (fathers generally, or particular sub-groups of fathers); and how (well) those which are longitudinal have kept fathers engaged in the research over the course of the study.

# Section 2: Surveys: sampling, identification, initial approach and response

## Introduction

This section covers:

* How surveys have identified and sampled fathers, including the extent to which mothers have acted as gatekeepers to obtaining access to fathers’ contact details;
* The initial approach to fathers about taking part in the research, and methods of engagement;
* The interview modes, and relative benefits of these;
* The proportion of fathers participating in the survey, and the representativeness of those fathers;
* The use of proxy interviewing where fathers do not participate.

The surveys identified include:

* Household surveys, where both the mother and father were approached for interview;
* Household surveys, where *either* the mother *or* the father was randomly selected for interview;
* Surveys of individuals, where either the mother or the father was approached for interview, and the other parent was not part of the sampling frame or approached for interview. This includes surveys of separated parents.

## Fathers as part of a household survey involving both parents

Three key surveys provide useful methodological data on the ways in which they approached fathers to participate where mothers (and in two cases other household members) are also approached:

* Understanding Society is a longitudinal largely face-to-face household panel survey of around 40,000 households, in which all household members aged 10 and over (and those who subsequently leave the household) are approached for interview. It has been running since 2008, and households are approached annually for an interview (see Scott and Jessop, 2013 for the latest technical details of the survey, and Boreham et al, 2012 for the Wave 1 technical report).
* The Families and Children Survey (FACS) was an annual longitudinal largely face-to-face survey of families with dependent children which the Department of Work and Pensions funded until 2008. In most waves both resident parents (in two-parent households) were approached for interview, together with children over the age of 11. Just under 6,000 households were interviewed in the final wave (see Philo et al, 2010 for the technical details of the survey).
* The Maternity and Paternity Rights and Women Returners Survey was a cross-sectional survey conducted in 2009/10 (as part of a cross-sectional survey series), involving interviews with parents with children aged 12 to 18 months. Over 2,200 mothers were interviewed face-to-face and over 1,300 resident fathers were interviewed over the phone (see Chanfreau et al, 2011 for the technical details of the survey).
* A longitudinal survey of young parents (involving around 150 fathers aged 17 to 23) which identified couples through the booking-in procedure in four health trusts. Parents were interviewed at five months pregnancy, at which time the intention was to screen on whether they exhibited risk factors for later separation. They were interviewed again at nine months after the baby’s birth (see Quinton et al 2002 for more details).

These surveys provide interesting contrasts:

1. In Wave 1 of Understanding Society, the household was approached ‘as a household’ to participate, with addresses drawn from the Postcode Address File (PAF) and the initial correspondence addressed to ‘the householder’. As result, the first contact with the household could have been with any adult household member, and within the household, fathers were approached in much the same way as mothers, or any other household members. With one household member asked to complete the ‘household interview’, mothers and fathers were then approached in the same way to take part in an ‘individual interview’. There was no tailoring of the materials or approach depending on the gender, or other demographics, of the respondent.
2. FACS used Child Benefit records as its sampling frame, resulting in mothers being the first point of contact in the vast majority of cases. The initial letter was sent to the mother (as the Child Benefit recipient). Indeed, she was treated throughout as the main respondent, with fathers invited (in most waves) to take part in a subsidiary ‘partner’ interview.
3. The Maternity and Paternity Rights Survey was also based on a sample of mothers drawn from Child Benefit records. As with FACS, the mother was the main respondent. In fact, in this survey, fathers were approached as a separate exercise: a telephone survey among those for whom mothers provided the telephone number.
4. The study of paternal depression involved, like Life Study, the recruitment of parents during pregnancy, at a regular antenatal visit. This study is interesting in the fact that, in the event, questions which would have identified the couple’s risk of separation were seen as too sensitive to be asked at the point of the first scan. The study therefore interviewed all couples (and single mothers to be) at nine months after birth, collecting information then on risk factors and assessing the impact of their parenting approaches.

At least in the first three studies, only resident fathers were included in the survey (although in subsequent waves of Understanding Society, Wave 1 respondents who left the household (including those becoming non-resident parents) continued to be included in the survey – see Section 4).

So, taking the example of Understanding Society, where fathers were recruited to the panel in exactly the same way as mothers (and other household members), overall 57 per cent of households approached took part in the survey (and 40 per cent among households in a BME boost). Interviewers managed to get hold of most households (in only four per cent of cases did they not), but 36 per cent refused. An unconditional incentive of £10 was included with the initial advance letter. The research team experimented with the effect of including an information leaflet with the initial mailing, which proved to have a small beneficial effect. Individual household members who took part in Wave 1 of the survey were given an additional £10 each (a conditional incentive). Among participating households (where at least one adult is interviewed) with dependent children, 91 per cent of mothers took part in the individual face-to-face interview, compared to only 72 per cent of fathers. (An analysis of the response rates of women and men showed that the differential response between genders was less pronounced among BME households (Lynn et al, 2012).) So, in a general household survey, where the initial approach was equally likely to be made to men as to women, and the same approach was taken to encouraging response among all household members, engaging fathers appears to be harder than engaging mothers.

In FACS, where the focus was primarily on the mother, with fathers asked to take part in a subsidiary interview, the participation rates of fathers was lower than in Understanding Society. At the start of the panel, around three quarters (76 per cent) of fathers took part in the survey which was (at that time) conducted face-to-face. Only the mother was offered an incentive (of £10) for participating. And in the introductory letter (and indeed the advance letter sent in subsequent waves), there is no mention of the fact that the study was interested in talking to the fathers as well as to the mothers. Given other differences in the designs of the two studies, it would be unreasonable to conclude that fathers are more likely to engage with a survey when they are asked ‘in their own right’ rather than as ‘the partner’. However, it may be worth considering whether there is any truth in this, when deciding how best to approach fathers in Life Study. (This is an issue to which we return later when considering the approach taken in a number of qualitative studies.) In later waves of FACS (discussed further in Section 4), fathers were given the choice of taking part either face-to-face or by phone, a choice which increased response rates by a few percentage points (Kerr et al, 2008).

The Maternity and Paternity Rights Survey is interesting in relation to Life Study, in as much as it focused on parents with young children (aged 12 to 18 months). Although the initial contact letter provided both parents with the opportunity of opting out of being approached for interview, the letter is addressed to the mother, as the Child Benefit recipient. To this extent, she is the gatekeeper for access to the father. Also, for the father to participate, mothers were asked to provide the fathers’ phone number. Although it is hard to get a very clear idea of the numbers from the information available, it does appear that relying on mothers to provide father’s contact details was not always successful. Eighty three per cent of mothers who were asked about fathers present in the household confirmed whether or there was one. Among these, around half (48 per cent) provided a phone number. Although some mothers will have confirmed there was *no* partner in the household, this would not account for half the sample. This implies that a fair proportion of mothers did not provide a phone number.

Among fathers for whom the research team had a phone number, 70 per cent took part, with the response higher amongst those who were married, older and living in more affluent areas. The research team reported that no ethical issues were raised about the mother giving out contact details of the father. Similarly, the Understanding Society research team ask parents for the contact details of fathers who had left the household in later waves. The fact that the mothers are able to refuse to provide this information was seen as sufficient.

In the study of paternal depression, the couple parents were interviewed separately at the nine month interview, where possible by different interviewers. The importance of this is not made clear in the available information about the survey. Eighty seven per cent of the mothers recruited and 71 per cent fathers were interviewed. Again, even recruiting fathers during pregnancy, the research team found it harder to engage the fathers than the mothers some months after the birth (although there is no information on how many fathers had left the household by the nine month interview).

Both Understanding Society and FACS ask mothers for proxy information about the fathers[[6]](#footnote-6). In Wave 1 of Understanding Society information on two per cent of mothers and 10 per cent of fathers was collected in this way. In most waves of FACS, a small amount of proxy information is asked during the mother’s interview (that is, in advance of knowing whether the father takes part), to ensure these key pieces of information are collected about all fathers. (Again, this is a potentially useful approach to consider.) In some waves of FACS (e.g. the final wave, Wave 10), there was no ‘partner interview’ and instead mothers were asked to provide proxy information about the resident father (about paid work, earnings and qualifications). Virtually all (99 per cent) mothers provided this information.

## Fathers randomly selected as ‘the parent’ to take part in a survey of parents

Included in this review are a number of cross-sectional surveys in which one parent in a household was selected to take part in an interview. So, in two-parent households, one parent was selected at random. (The surveys vary as to whether they include non-resident parents in the survey.) These surveys are interesting in so far as they show how fathers react to being approached as a parent, rather than as a wider family research unit.

* The Department for Education (DfE) evaluation CANparent trial of free universal parenting classes for parents of children aged five and under includes face-to-face surveys of the eligible population (that is, of parents with young children, living in the trial areas or in matched comparison areas). The families are selected from Child Benefit records, with the advance letter addressed to the mother (as the Child Benefit recipient). On the doorstep, one parent is randomly selected and asked to take part in the interview. (See Cullen et al, 2013 for an interim evaluation report.)
* The DfE Parental Opinion Survey similarly selected one parent per household to be interviewed, in households with children up to 19 years old. However, in this survey, the sampling frame was the Postcode Address File (which does not include names) and no advance letter was sent, due to the need to screen on the doorstep for households with children. Unlike surveys using Child Benefit records, the initial contact was not necessarily with the mother. Moreover, the sampling frame allowed for the inclusion of non-resident fathers (eligible to be interviewed if they had or had attempted to have contact with their child in the previous year). The survey approach did not appear to have differentiated between mothers and fathers in the way in which the survey was introduced and no information is given on the response rates of mothers and fathers (the overall response rate was 55 per cent). (See TNS BMRB, 2010.)
* The DfE Parental Involvement in their Children’s Education Survey (most recently conducted in 2007) used random digit dialling to identify parents with children aged 5 to 16 to approach for a telephone survey. In two-parent households, one parent was randomly selected for interview, and lone parents and non-resident parents were also included in the survey. Interestingly the report does not include the number of mothers and fathers interviewed, and does not differentiate between them in its reporting. Like the Parental Opinion Survey it is not possible to see whether mothers and fathers differentially responded to the survey. (However, it appears to under-represent non-resident parents, who accounted for only three per cent of the sample.) (See Peters et al, 2007.)
* A YouGov survey for the Equalities and Human Rights Committee achieved a similar split between mothers and fathers in an online survey of parents. (See Ellison et al, 2009.)

None of these surveys appear to have tailored their approach differently to mothers and fathers (perhaps focusing on those issues that may be most salient to either parent). In the CANparent evaluation (the only one of the three studies for whom the information is available), the proportion of mothers in two-parent households taking part in the survey was higher than the proportion of fathers in two-parent households (56 per cent compared to 44 per cent). Importantly, among cohabiting fathers the proportion was lower than among married fathers (41 per cent compared to 45 per cent). Although the information on the reasons for non-response among fathers are not available, again, this study highlights the lower cooperation rates of fathers.

## Surveys of individual parents, where fathers are approached as named individuals

The final set of surveys included in this review is those where fathers were approached as individuals, either within a survey of parents or a survey of fathers. These include surveys where parents are sampled from a database of parents involved in a particular service (e.g. the Child Support Agency) or approached directly (e.g. in surveys around pregnancy and early childhood).

Several of these surveys involved separated parents. From a methodological perspective, these studies provide interesting insight into research with non-resident fathers. From a substantive perspective, the fact that we found more studies where fathers were approached ‘in their own right’ when they were separated rather than in a couple relationship is an interesting comment on the peripheral role that resident fathers play in many quantitative studies of families and children.

However, the survey below which is not related to separation – but to early parenthood – provides an example of a far more ‘father-centred’ approach than the surveys reported above, where the importance of talking to fathers is stressed in the recruitment process. Their approach echoes more closely the approaches taken in a number of the qualitative studies reported on in Section 3.

Example surveys included in this section are:

* A longitudinal study about paternal depression after childbirth: the research team approached parents on postnatal wards on the day after their baby’s delivery. They asked for their contact details and consent to write to them to ask them to take part in the study. Where possible they spoke directly with fathers at this stage, although where the father was not at the hospital, they asked mothers for the contact details of fathers. The recruitment focused very heavily on the importance of talking to fathers about their postnatal experiences. They focused clearly on the need to understand fathers, in a situation where virtually all the focus is on mothers and children. The response rate does not reflect what might be possible in Life Study, as it relied on postal self-completion (and was focused on the very specific topic of mental well-being or depression): 38 per cent of fathers (1,562) responded to the postal survey, after one reminder. Half (57 per cent) of those then approached to take part in a home interview took part, when the baby was 14 weeks old. It is nonetheless an interesting example of a survey recruiting fathers at the very early stages of a child’s life. (See Edmondson et al, 2010.)
* In their studies of fathers’ experiences of the birth of their child, Greenhalgh et al (2000) approached 93 fathers in two maternity hospitals within 48 hours of their child’s birth, of whom 78 completed a questionnaire booklet. They were contacted by post again within six weeks of the birth and 82 per cent returned a second questionnaire. This is a very high response rate for a postal survey, presumably reflecting a high level of engagement in the study from the fathers, and the short period of time since the initial approach.
* A cross-sectional one-off survey about contact after separation attempted to identify parents with care and non-resident parents (from different families) through a face-to-face screen during the ONS Omnibus survey interview (among a random probability sample of households). Despite clear questioning about whether respondents had dependent children living outside of the household, and stressing the confidentiality of the survey, plus the importance of hearing about the experiences of non-resident parents, only 30 per cent of self-identified separated parents interviewed were non-resident parents. As only two per cent of parents with care said the father did not know of the child’s existence, clearly, the under-identification of non-resident parents in the survey was rarely due to them not being aware that they were parents. Methodologically, this study highlights the difficulties in engaging non-resident fathers in research studies. (See Peacey and Hunt, 2008.)
* The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) Survey of Relationship Breakdown in 2007 interviewed parents with care and non-resident parents, split into those with and without contact with the Child Support Agency. (Again, no attempts were made to interview both parents in the same separated family.) Those involved with the CSA were sampled from the CSA’s records. Other parents with care were identified by cross-checking CSA and Child Benefit records, sampling parents appearing on Child Benefit but not CSA records. Other non-resident parents were identified through a screening interview following up respondents from the Family Resources Survey. Like Peacey and Hunt’s study, the Survey of Relationship Breakdown under-represented non-resident parents, particularly those not identifiable through CSA records. The proportion of non-resident parents who could not be contacted was four times the number of parents with care. Among those contacted, while 84 per cent of CSA parents with care took part in the survey (and 16 per cent refused), only 69 per cent of CSA non-resident parents did so (and 31 per cent refused). This led to some biases in the CSA non-resident parent sample. However, the real issues were with the non-resident parents identifying themselves in the screen. There were clear biases in the sample towards fathers engaged with their children. (See Wikeley et al, 2008.)
* The DWP Maintenance Direct Child Support Survey found a similar differential in response rate between parents with care and non-resident parents involved with the CSA. In that survey, a split run experiment was used to test whether a £10 financial incentive would increase the response rate among non-resident parents. The difference in the response rate between the two groups was not statistically significant, illustrating the limited effect of a financial incentive among fathers particularly reticent to participate in research. (See Bell et al, 2006a.)
* The evaluation of the Separated Parents Information Programme illustrates that fathers *can* be as likely to engage in the research as mothers if the subject is salient to them. The Separated Parents Information Programme is an intervention for families attending court about contact arrangements post separation. Both mothers and fathers were equally likely to participate in a telephone survey several months after the Programme. Again, this study did not differentiate in its approach to mothers and fathers. It took a standard approach of an opt out letter (from DfE and Cafcass) followed by a telephone survey in which several attempts were made to contact the parents, including calls at the evenings and weekends. (See Trinder et al, 2011.)

The surveys above provided some mixed messages in terms of relevant learning for Life Study. They highlight the ability to achieve good (or mother equivalent) response rates among resident or non-resident fathers when the approach is ‘father-focused’ or the topic is salient. But, once non-resident fathers leave the household, these studies suggest it will be harder to keep them engaged in the research, particularly if they do not retain contact with their child. This presents real problems in terms of biased data on non-resident parents towards those with better relations with their child or their ex-partner.

Peacey and Hunt (2008) point to a range of possible reasons why their study under-represented non-resident parents (usually fathers). While on the face of it, these relate to the screening process necessary in that project to identifying non-resident parents, in fact they translate into some useful points for Life Study when considering how best to engage and retain resident and non-resident fathers in the study:

* In general, men are less likely to respond to surveys than women (in the Omnibus, 56 per cent of respondents of likely child-rearing age (16 to 52) were women);
* There was a lower response rate to the Omnibus from divorced or separated men, and from non-resident parents who were never married (which was echoed in the CANparent evaluation figures). Again among respondents aged 16 to 52 (broadly, ‘child-rearing age’) 36 per cent of divorced respondents were men and 30 per cent of separated respondents were men.
* The authors suggest a reluctance on the part of non-resident parents to identify themselves to the interviewer, either due to concerns about being traced for child support or because they found the topic of talking about their children too painful. (This is an issue to which we return in Section 3.) Linked to both of these possibilities is the fact that the sample under-represented particularly non-resident parents without contact with their children.

Evidence from Understanding Society that a lower response rate among men than women was due to a mixture of higher levels of refusal and higher levels of non-contact for men suggests a need to address both issues:

* Think carefully about minimising the proportion of fathers who are not interviewed because the interviewer does not manage to get hold of them during the interview period. All random probability sample surveys of a high standard employ strict call patterns including weekend and evening calls in order to do this, with some asking neighbours for ‘intelligence’ about when the respondents are likely to be at home (for instance, see Scott and Jessop, 2013 for a description of the procedures on Understanding Society). There may be more analysis to calculate the optimal call pattern for getting hold of fathers.
* Think how best to introduce the survey to fathers, in order to maximise the numbers wanting to participate in the research. Examples above suggest focusing on the importance of understanding their role as fathers and making the study salient to them are both helpful.
* Think how to ensure that non-resident fathers who do not currently have contact with their child still want to engage in the research.

## Using non-traditional data collection modes

Given the challenges in engaging some fathers in surveys and other research studies, a pertinent question is whether the use of new technologies – or less traditional data collection modes – might help to involve fathers, or at least certain groups of fathers. So, might online or text surveys for instance help to boost response rates among fathers, particularly with the growing proportion of people with smart phones and internet access on their phones? Or offering a choice of different modes? Although there is a growing body of experimental social research looking at the effect of using different modes, or combinations of these modes, the findings are mixed. Differences in substantive foci, sampled populations and mode combinations make it hard to extrapolate too far from these pieces of research. However, on balance, the response rates which appear achievable – and resulting sample biases - via these non-traditional methods raise concerns for a study like Life Study striving for high response rates and continued participation over time. Moreover, using these modes can limit the amount or quality of data collected.

Certainly, if funding levels allow for interviewer-administered interviews, these more safely elicit higher response rates and better quality data than the online alternatives. There *may* be merit in trying to use phone technology as a keeping in touch mechanism for fathers (confirming interviewer appointment, for instance), but a decision to offer alternative or mixed modes would need a great deal of thought and experimental testing. That said, experimenting with different modes is not without its own longer-term risks to the survey quality. Understanding Society has experimented with different modes, using its Innovation Panel of 1,500 households who were recruited in the first wave of Understanding Society (and are refreshed periodically with new respondents). For instance, they experimented with the response rates achievable using (a) only face-to-face interviews and (b) phone interviews with face-to-face interviews with non-responders to the phone survey, and found that the mixed mode approach achieved a lower response rate. In the next wave, in which they reverted back to face-to-face interviewing, they found a knock-on effect of the previous wave’s response rate, with the mixed mode sample still resulting in lower response rates one wave later, especially among men (Lynn, 2011). Understanding Society has a special Innovation Panel for doing these methodological experiments: it certainly appears risky to test different modes among the main sample of any longitudinal survey like Life Study.

Here, by way of example about the research on the use of new technologies, we draw on a number of papers presented at the European Social Research Association conference in 2013 and some experimental work carried out as part of the Understanding Society Innovation Panel.

* A split-run experiment (where respondents were randomly allocated to one of three groups) on the Cabinet Office’s Community Life survey, compared the response rates achieved from (a) a web survey (b) a web survey with postal follow up to non-responders and (c) a face-to-face survey. Embedded within the experiment was a test of the effect of different levels of conditional and unconditional financial incentives[[7]](#footnote-7) (none, £5 or £10). Response rates were significantly lower in the web survey compared to face-to-face (for example, with a £5 conditional incentive, the web survey achieved a 19 per cent response rate compared to 60 per cent face-to-face). A postal self-completion follow up to non-responders to the web survey increased the response rate by 12 percentage points, but the resulting response rate was still half that of the face-to-face approach. What is more, those who responded to the online version were biased towards more educated, middle-aged, white respondents, with little improvement with the addition of the postal element. The author raised other concerns with the online approach, including the fact that, in a quarter of cases, it appears that the wrong individual completed the survey (Williams, 2013).
* Another experimental survey (de Bruijne and Wijnant, 2013) randomly allocated smart phone and tablet users into people being asked to complete (a) a web survey by computer, (b) a web survey adapted to be like a mobile phone survey, and (c) a survey via their mobile phone. They all received an invitation to participate via email. The response rate on the mobile phone was significantly lower than the response rate on computer (47 per cent compared to 61 and 64 per cent in other two approaches). The authors found that most respondents in the mobile phone arm completed the survey whilst at home, which brought into question an assumption that mobile phone surveys could increase response rates by allowing respondents to complete them ‘on the go’.
* A study which tested the effects of contacting people by text message or email found that the text message elicited lower response rates than the email invitation (Emde and Fuchs, 2013). They too found that half of respondents using a mobile device for completing the survey did so at home.
* Toepoel and Lugtig (2013) tested the propensity for respondents to take part in an online survey versus a telephone survey, when offered the choice. They found that 57 per cent chose the phone.
* In Wave 5 of the Understanding Society Innovation Panel, they tested the effect of sequential mixed mode, where respondents were asked to complete an online survey, followed up face-to-face only if they did not respond to the online survey or to a reminder. They found that around a fifth (19 per cent) responded to the online survey. A further 56 per cent responded face-to-face, resulting in an overall response rate of 75 per cent. This compared to 78 per cent among respondents simply contacted face-to-face. The cost difference between the two options was not clear (Burton et al, 2013). Earlier experiments with the Understanding Society Innovation Panel compared the response rates achievable from a face-to-face survey compared to a mixed mode design of using telephone where possible and following up with face-to-face contact if necessary. This resulted in a lower overall response rate than using purely face-to-face interviews (Lynn, 2011).
* Understanding Society has also looked at whether it would be possible – or cost effective - to tailor the mode to respondents’ preferences (provided in a previous interview round). The research team found that respondents’ earlier stated preferences on modes were quite good predictors of whether they responded via that mode in a later wave (or did not respond if they were offered a mode they had said they preferred not to use) (Lynn, 2011).

# Section 3: Qualitative studies: sampling, identification and initial approach

This section covers similar issues to those discussed in Section 2, but draws on a range of relevant qualitative studies:

* How studies have identified and sampled fathers, including the extent to which mothers have acted as gatekeepers to obtaining access to fathers’ contact details;
* The initial approach to fathers about taking part in the research, and methods of engagement.

The studies identified include:

* Studies where both the mother and father were approached for interview;
* Studies where just the father was approached for interview, either as a resident or non-resident parent.

Most of the studies included here are longitudinal, recruiting fathers during the mother’s pregnancy or the early years of their child’s life. The exceptions are studies involving non-resident fathers, where the age range of their children was wider and the studies were often conducted at a single point in time - but the learning about non-resident fathers is still pertinent for Life Study.

## Longitudinal qualitative studies recruiting fathers during pregnancy or the early years

There are a range of small-scale quantitative or qualitative studies carried out with parents – or with fathers in particular – recruited antenatal or postnatal in a hospital setting. (We have included a selection in the review.) These longitudinal studies highlight the importance of engaging directly with fathers, and explaining the pertinence of the research to them as fathers. This applies whether the main focus of the research is fathers, or whether it is the child. In the latter, the importance of involving fathers is explained in relation to the need to understand the child’s life, of which the father is an integral part.

In these studies, the research teams tended to approach and engage fathers directly. Often mothers were not included as part of the study at all. These research teams talk of focusing their recruitment on the fact that fathers can tend to be overlooked in research – and indeed in service provision – and that taking part in research can give them ‘a voice’. Researchers spoke of fathers being very engaged and willing to participate, and about managing to retain their involvement throughout the study. Although qualitative studies allow for a much more bespoke and intensive approach than quantitative studies such as Life Study – given the sample size and flexibility of approach - these are nonetheless transferable approaches. (However, we should note that these fathers had often opted in to the research study, and were therefore already self-selecting. In a number of cases, fathers were recruited via the National Childbirth Trust (the NCT), the membership of which is skewed towards parents who have paid for antenatal or postnatal classes.)

* In a qualitative study of (resident) fathers, looking at how they attach to their babies, fathers were recruited through National Childbirth Trust (NCT) classes and local media. They were interviewed two months prior to the birth of their child and then followed up quite frequently - two weeks after the birth, then at three months and six months. Fathers were encouraged to participate by focusing on the fact that during pregnancy and their child’s very early life, fathers have limited opportunities to have their voices heard. All the fathers recruited remained engaged in the research throughout the eight month project (Machin, 2010)
* Following Fathers, a longitudinal study of 30 young fathers (leading on from the TimeScapes study of 12 young fathers), engaged fathers who are often otherwise ‘under the radar’ of much research, and of service provision. In the case of these young fathers (recruited between the ages of 15 and 22), local practitioners (including in schools) worked with these fathers to recruit them to the study. Anecdotally, the Following Fathers team found it easiest to engage the more educated respondents (who, in this case, were a group of university students) (see http://followingfathers.leeds.ac.uk).
* A pilot longitudinal qualitative study about fathers’ experiences of antenatal genetic screening recruited eight men whose partners were in the first trimester of pregnancy via the NCT. They ‘opted in’ to the study, with all correspondence directly with them rather than to their partner. The study was conducted by email, with fathers contacted twice during pregnancy and once after the birth of their child. The authors reflected on the use of the online approach, feeling it provided a vehicle for men to report on quite sensitive feelings, which may be more difficult to articulate face-to-face or in a group setting. They also felt it allowed the fathers to do the research in their own time. However, they recognise that their methodology could exclude men with literacy problems or poor English language (Williams et al, 2010).
* The authors of a qualitative focus group study of African and African-Caribbean fatherhood talked about the difficulties of recruiting these fathers via health visitors and primary care professionals, despite follow up phone calls and emails. Instead, the research team engaged the help of people working more closely with the fathers’ communities, more successfully recruiting fathers through faith and cultural groups. The authors felt that recruiting these fathers to the study required building their trust before they would agree to participate. There may be useful learning points here for Life Study in terms of engaging BME fathers (Williams et al, 2012).
* Henwood and Proctor (2003) qualitatively interviewed 30 men, tracking them from pregnancy (5 to 8 months) to when their babies were two to four months old and again when they were 4 to 9 months. Although the majority lived with the mother, a small number did not. The interviews focused very heavily on fathers’ experiences of being a father.
* Draper (2002) conducted a longitudinal ethnographic study with 18 fathers, recruited from antenatal classes and followed during pregnancy (twice) and once after the child’s birth. Again, they were recruited through the NCT as well as some snowballing. The authors point to the fact that their sample was biased towards white middle class fathers and those keenest to participate. They talk (as other authors have done) about the fact that – at an early stage – they used focus groups to engage fathers and make them ‘feel involved’ in the study, prior to conducting one-to-one interviews at subsequent stages. Again, this may be useful in the early stages of Life Study if there are concerns about fathers feeling sufficiently that they ‘belong’ within the study.
* Miller (2010) has been following 17 fathers who opted in to her study when their child’s mother was pregnant. She is still in contact with 10 of these fathers (including some separated from the mother) now their children are aged five and six. Like other authors, she talks about fathers’ strong engagement with the study, providing them with ‘a voice’, as well as the advantages of continuity of the same researcher interviewing the fathers.

## Qualitative studies with non-resident fathers

The qualitative studies with non-resident fathers reported here serve to highlight why some non-resident fathers are reticent to take part in research studies, even when research teams manage to get in touch with them. These include:

* A reticence on the part of some fathers to talk about their role as fathers, or their situation, when they are unhappy with having little or limited contact with their children;
* Concerns about unsettling fragile relationships with ex-partners and children, even when current relationships are good;
* Concerns that their responses will be kept confidential from the other parent, especially in studies where both parents are interviewed.
* A qualitative study among separated parents using the Child Support Agency (CSA) provides an example where separated parents were approached to take part in a study in which their ex-partner was also going to be approached. (The CSA records allowed the research team to contact each parent separately without dealing with gatekeeper access issues. There was no mention of interviewing the other parent in the initial opt out letter.) Parents were asked firstly if they wanted to take part in the research and, secondly, whether they were happy to take part if their ex-partner was also doing so. Very few (only four per cent) of parents said they were not happy with this, usually on the grounds of not wanting to ‘rock the boat’. Researchers sought to assure parents and encourage participation by stressing the confidentiality of the interview, including from the other parent and assigning different interviewers to each parent’s interviews. This may be worth considering for Life Study where, either in the first or subsequent waves, parents are not together, and fathers’ involvement may be better secured by stressing his independence from the mothers’ participation (Bell et al, 2006b).
* The Cohabitation, Separation and Fatherhood study (Lewis et al, 2002) also attempted to qualitatively interview both parents post separation, achieving this in around a third of cases. In this study, concerns about confidentiality between parents, or reticence to involve ex-partners were key reasons for not managing to interview both parents. Again, this highlights the potential sensitivities felt by non-resident fathers, which appear to have been more keenly felt in this study compared to the one above. This may reflect the fact that some ex-cohabitees will have had less stable relationships than divorced couples (the CSA study would have been a mix of the two).
* Philip’s study on family separation tracked 23 men who lived apart from their child (and had done so for at least a year at recruitment) but had maintained contact. The fathers were recruited mainly from family support networks and employers (Philip, 2012).
* The Family Fragments study (Smart and Neale, 1999) involved interviewing 60 separated parents (30 mothers and 30 fathers, not from the same families), looking at contact arrangements in the light of changes in the law under the Children’s Act giving married parents parental responsibility from birth and non-married fathers the opportunity to apply for parental responsibility.

## Engaging fathers in service provision more generally

There is potential to learn not only from ways in which qualitative studies have tried to recruit and engage fathers, but also from work written more generally about how best to engage fathers in family services. This is somewhat outside of this current review, but we briefly summarise a check list of practical strategies provided by Burgess (2009) to engage fathers, where she draws on a range of projects and papers:

* Include fathers from the outset;
* Target information at fathers (e.g. parenting newsletters for fathers and young children);
* Sign the father up at the beginning;
* Meet the father in the family home;
* Enquire about non-resident fathers;
* Extend a specific invitation to each father to attend;
* Make sure fathers realise how their involvement benefits their children;
* Have a staff member leading on father engagement, talking to mothers about involving fathers;
* Build relationships with fathers, as with mothers;
* Change times to accommodate working fathers and mothers;
* Train the entire team.

Some of these points echo what has been raised within the studies reported above. But they serve to reemphasise the importance of ‘father-specific’ communication, either written (e.g. newsletters, introductory letters) or verbal, recruiting fathers ‘in their own right’ rather than as the ‘partner’ or ‘secondary parent’.

# Section 4: Ensuring the continued involvement of fathers in later waves

Beyond the birth cohort studies (covered outside of this paper), there are few pertinent examples of longitudinal surveys involving fathers on which to draw for this section of the review. Here, we learn from Understanding Society and FACS, and from a number of small-scale longitudinal qualitative studies. The two types of study provide a useful combination of evidence on the types of *systems* for ensuring fathers’ continued participation (e.g. keeping in touch, tracing movers, etc) and the types of *ethos* which help (e.g. ensuring that fathers feel part of the study).

Both Understanding Society and FACS use a number of procedures to try to ensure that panel members stay engaged with the study, which largely mirror those used in a wider range of longitudinal surveys (and, where relevant, longitudinal qualitative studies). Neither distinguishes between mothers and fathers in the approaches they take, with no particularly tailored approaches for either gender which could take account of different reasons why each might decide to leave the panel or might lose touch with it. The key difference between Understanding Society and FACS is that Understanding Society continues to involve parents who leave the original household, where FACS does not (unless they re-enter the household at a later stage).[[8]](#footnote-8)

Their procedures can be split into those which (a) keep track of the whereabouts of families or individuals, so they can contact them wave on wave; (b) keep them engaged in the study, so they are happy to continue to be involved; (c) ensure that respondents are contacted and interviewed at their known address. Between the two surveys, the following mechanisms are used:

## Keeping track

* In FACS, the family where the child lived was followed to their new (UK) address if they moved. Non-resident parents were not followed. In Understanding Society, all household members are followed if they move (within the UK).
* In Understanding Society, if a household member (e.g. a non-resident father) has moved out of the original household, the remaining household members are asked for their new contact details. The team reports that household members are usually willing to provide this information. The team are not concerned about the ethics of asking for this information, as respondents are under no obligation to provide it if they choose not to.
* In both surveys, respondents (i.e. each individual) are asked at each wave for information allowing multiple methods of contact: email, mobile phone and work numbers, which can be used to trace them if no longer at the address;
* FACS provided a £5 incentive for respondents who sent in a change of address card between waves, and also facilitated this process online via a participants’ website;
* Respondents are also asked to provide stable address information, a friend or family who could be contacted to ask the whereabouts of the respondent if they have moved;
* In the event that these methods fail, the Understanding Society research team uses internet searches to trace people. Using an online database called CapScan or eTrace, they check online databases such as the Post Office change of address file;
* In FACS, contact details were checked against Child Benefit records, which picked up moves of the parent(s) with whom the child was living;
* If they are unable to contact the non-resident parent in one wave, the original household are asked again in the next wave about their whereabouts in case they have any new information.

## Making families feel engaged

Methods included:

* Giving respondents a branded fridge magnet, reminding them of the month they would be approached for the next interview;
* Branded documents and pen – a folder to keep their survey information in (e.g. consent forms);
* Participants’ website – with information and latest news, etc;
* Sending a newsletter (and change of address card) just before the time of the next interview;
* Periodic summary report findings for participants.

## Maximising levels of participation

* A strict procedure to ensure a minimum number of calls are made at each household, including weekend and evening calls;
* Reissues of non-contacts and ‘soft’ refusals to different or more experienced interviewers;
* If an interview is not achieved at a particular wave (for whatever reason), at later waves, there are attempts to interview and get them to rejoin the panel.

In terms of assessing the response rates achieved wave on wave in Understanding Society, and the success of maintaining non-resident parents in the panel, it is still in its early stages, with Wave 3 data very recently published. Ninety per cent of mothers responded in both Waves 1 and 2, while only 70 per cent of fathers did so. However, it is not clear from these figures, what proportion of fathers had left the household, and what the response rate was among non-resident fathers.

In FACS, the collection of data from resident fathers has varied across the course of the study (and, as mentioned, no attempts were made to interview fathers who leave the household). In most waves, the interviewer attempted to interview the father, conducting a much shorter interview than the mothers’ interview (around 15 minutes). In early waves, this was a face-to-face in-home interview, but between Wave 6 in 2004 and Wave 8 in 2006, fathers were offered the choice of a face-to-face or a telephone interview.

At the start of the panel (where all partner interviews were conducted face-to-face), 76 per cent of fathers took part in the survey, but this reduced over time to as low as 56 per cent in Wave 4 before the telephone option was introduced. Because the response rates do not differ much between the panel respondents and a boost sample of new respondents (included to reduce sample bias caused by panel attrition), this drop in response rate is unlikely to be due to panel tiredness. In the three waves (Waves 6, 7 and Wave 8, 2004 to 2006)) in which the phone was offered as an alternative interview mode, this increased response rates. For instance, in 2006, among the new sample of families (i.e. not the original panel respondents), two thirds (64 per cent) of fathers were interviewed - 50 per cent face-to-face and 14 per cent by telephone. This is potentially interesting for Life Study in considering how to maximise the participation rates of fathers.

Where an interview with the father had not been achieved, in 69 per cent of cases someone (presumably the mother) had refused on their behalf. In only 10 per cent of cases did the father refuse in person. This barrier to resident fathers’ participation is clearly an issue to consider.

## Ensuring the continued participation of fathers in qualitative longitudinal studies

Clearly, the issues of keeping in touch with respondents in longitudinal *qualitative* studies are somewhat different to the survey issues raised above. On several occasions, researchers talked about the high level of engagement that their respondents had during the course of their studies (which typically ran between one and three years). Often these fathers had actively opted in to being involved in the study, which meant that their continued involvement was more secure. That said, a number (e.g. Edmondson et al, 2010) sent newsletters and Christmas cards to keep in touch, and talked about the need to be very flexible in terms of when the interviews are conducted with fathers. Here we pick out a few pointers raised by the research teams on a number of the qualitative studies we introduced in Section 3. There are certainly some parallels that could be drawn with potential approaches in Life Study, focusing on flexibility, reciprocity and stressing the importance of the fathers’ continued involvement (as either a resident or non-resident father).

* The Following Fathers study echoes some of the quantitative work in terms of the fact that fathers who do not have contact with their children can be more difficult to keep engaged in the research. This is not only because of the practicalities of keeping in touch with these fathers, but also because of fathers’ reticence to be involved in research about their children when they themselves are not in contact. This is important in thinking about how Life Study could try to mitigate this problem in explaining the importance of fathers’ roles regardless of their current contact with their child.
* In the Following fathers study, ‘dropping out’ of the study for a wave did not always mean dropping out altogether, with fathers choosing to re-enter subsequently. Again, ensuring mechanisms for allowing this to happen (as done in Understanding Society) is important.
* In Following Fathers, retaining the same interviewer for each wave was seen as important in keeping the engagement and trust of the respondents. Being very flexible in when and how they engage with fathers, and being patient, were all seen as key.
* As with study cited earlier, the Following Fathers work begins with a focus group bringing fathers together, which was seen to help fathers engage in the research.
* Edmondson et al (2010) talk about the relationship between the researcher and respondent in longitudinal qualitative studies, and the potential reciprocity involved. They talk of offering advice and support where appropriate. This is potentially problematic in terms of a larger scale study such as Life Study. However, it is worth considering whether the study (e.g. links via its website) could be seen as a useful resource to families in terms of where to go for services and support. The researchers also feel it useful to emphasise the importance of fathers’ involvement in the research and how their participation could help to influence government policies.
* Machin’s work used text messaging to remind respondents about appointments that had been made, for the researcher to visit them. (This is an issue we raised earlier in relation to the use of new technologies.) She also used online questionnaires which she felt facilitated fathers’ engagement, as it gave them flexibility about when they completed the questions, as well as flexibility over doing this either at home or at work.

# Section 5: Asking consent for linking to administrative records

## Introduction

Life Study intends to ask for parental consent for the research team to access data from a range of health-related and other administrative sources (both for themselves and their child). It is testing how best to approach this with respondents in the pilot phase. In this section, we provide an overview of the approaches taken in other key quantitative studies – birth and age cohorts, and longitudinal and cross-sectional household surveys, including:

* Millennium Cohort Study (MCS)
* Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (ALSPAC)
* Longitudinal Survey of Young People in England (LSYPE)
* Understanding Society/British Household Panel Survey (BHPS)
* FACS
* Health Survey for England (HSE)/Scottish Health Survey
* Family Resources Survey (FRS)
* UK Biobank

Numerous other studies ask for respondent consent for data linkage, with procedures broadly in line with those described here.

In this section, we summarise what is known from the studies above on the following issues:

* Requesting access from the data holders
* Asking for consent from survey respondents and parent carers
* Ongoing consent in longitudinal surveys
* Using administrative data to trace respondents

To date, although there are strong similarities in the approaches taken across the range of studies (with some studies choosing to learn from other studies along the way), there has not been a consistent approach nor have there been authoritative guidelines. In 2011, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), the Medical Research Council (MRC) and the Wellcome Trust set up the Administrative Data Taskforce (ADT) to look into issues around the use of administrative data for research purposes. In its report, it recommended (ADT, 2012) that an Administrative Data Research Network (ADRN) was set up in order to facilitate research using administrative data across government departments and ensure a single governance structure about how these are used. The ADRN was formed in 2013, involving five UK universities.

In time, the presence of the ADRN should simplify the process for obtaining consent from data holders to use the data. And it plans in the relative short-term to provide authoritative advice on the procedures that should be followed – with survey respondents and with data holders – about requesting access. As such, Life Study should look to the ADRN when developing its plans around data linkage.

In this section, we draw on a recent review conducted by the Administration Data Liaison Services (ADLS, 2013), which summarises the approaches taken by various key studies and highlights areas of best practice. We also refer to technical details provided on a range of studies and on experimental work carried out to test different approaches to asking for respondent consent.

## Requesting access from the data holders

Currently researchers wishing to access administrative data apply to the data holder directly. The procedures for doing this vary depending on the dataset and the requirements of the particular data holder – and these may change with the advent of the ADRN. Often a Memorandum of Understanding is made with the data holder. This includes a business case for using the data and planned procedures for assuring the secure, legal and ethical use of the data (e.g. around data storage and the destruction of identifiable information). This can be a lengthy process, involving negotiation at various levels with the data holders (e.g. around legal issues, around data security) and this requires sufficient time to be built into the development process. There are different levels of complexity and sensitivity about accessing different datasets. For instance, health records can be among the more sensitive, while for the National Pupil Database (NPD), there is a standardised approach to requesting access, perceived as having fewer hurdles.

## Asking for consent from survey respondents and parent carers

The ADT (ADT, 2013) recommends that, going forward, the processes for asking for consent from survey respondents to access administrative data held about them and link it to their survey responses are standardised. They recommend a set of ethical guidelines and standardised agreed wording for linking to particular datasets, to ensure consistency and quality across different surveys requesting data access. Here, we report on what research teams have done on other studies. Although there are a lot of common features across them, there is evidence of the differences in approach taken (a) over time and (b) depending on the requirements of different data holders and different ethical review bodies.

* **Respondent – or parent carer – consent is nearly always sought for accessing administrative records:** the ADT report recommends that, where it is possible to obtain consent (e.g. when research teams are already in contact with respondents via the survey process), it should be sought. Recently, with approval from the relevant police bodies, ALSPAC has taken an ‘opt out’ approach to obtaining consent from the young people to access police records. Young people are told that, if they do not get in touch to opt out, the research team will assume that they have given consent.
* **For adult respondents, consent needs to be sought from each individual – rather than at a household or family level:** so, if a particular adult (often the father in many family surveys) is not interviewed in the survey (and perhaps a proxy interview is conducted), consent to access his administrative data cannot be obtained by proxy. This further highlights the implications for Life Study of not interviewing some fathers, as it loses not only the survey data but the opportunity to link to administrative data as well.
* **Consent for linking to children’s data is usually sought from their mothers:** so in two-parent households, fathers do not seem to be involved in this process (unless the mother is absent). In some studies, where children are directly involved, assent is also sought from children (e.g. MCS asks for assent from children aged seven and over, the Southampton Women’s Study does so for children from the age of six). So, while mothers give consent, the process is also explained to children who have the opportunity to say verbally if they are happy. In cases where children do not give assent, no data linkage would happen.
* **In a small number of studies, consent to data linkage is a prerequisite for taking part in the study:** This is true for LSYPE (linking to the NPD), Born in Bradford (linking to medical records), and the UK Biobank (linking to medical records).
* **Consent is usually sought at the end of the interview:** it is argued that it is better to do so once a rapport has been built between respondent and interviewer, with concerns that asking for it earlier in the interview might lead to some respondents terminating the interview early. It seems usual not to mention data linkage in the advance information provided (e.g. letter or leaflet about the survey sent in advance). However, there is some evidence from the Understanding Society Innovation Panel that respondents might be *more* likely to consent to linking their data when the question is more salient. In a split-run experiment, respondents were more likely to consent to the research team accessing DWP records on their benefit receipt when they were asked during a set of questions related to income, rather than at the end of the interview, as they could see better the relevance of the request (Sala et al, 2013).
* **Consent is very often sought in the first wave of a longitudinal survey:** that said, further consents for access to other datasets are often sought in later waves. However, there is some evidence from the Understanding Society Innovation Panel (Sala et al, 2013) that respondents are more likely to consent if they are asked in later waves, when they have built up a rapport, or feel a greater sense of attachment to the study. For the time being, with only one data collection wave among fathers for Life Study, it will necessarily need to ask for consent at that initial wave.
* **The majority of respondents give their consent for data linkage:** in the MCS – perhaps the most relevant to Life Study – between 80 and 90 per cent of mothers gave consent (with variation across data sources asked for in various waves[[9]](#footnote-9)). Similarly, in FACS, it was around 90 per cent (asking for requests to link to DWP and NPD data). Although different studies have found some associations between respondents’ socio-demographics and their propensity to give consent, there have been no consistent patterns across these studies, with variation in the drivers. Gala et al (2013) report that feelings of altruism and trust are the only common factors reported across studies. Certainly, when respondents in studies including Understanding Society and LSYPE were asked about why they gave or would give consent for the research team to access their administrative data, most talked about wanting to be helpful and trusting the research organisation. And the MCS research team feel that their high levels of consent are due to the trust and rapport that respondents have with them. Concerns over data sharing appear to be the greatest barrier to respondents consenting for access to their administrative data (although, that said, these concerns are also sometimes voiced by people who gave consent). DWP records appear to elicit the greatest concerns for respondents, particularly about these data getting into the ‘wrong hands’ (Collingwood et al, 2010). This is something to consider when designing information for respondents about the reasons for data linkage. Some studies – such as the Southampton Women’s Survey felt that the fact they achieved almost 100 per cent consent reflected the fact that the study was effectively ‘endorsed’ by respondents’ GPs, who had sent the initial letter of approach.
* **Many studies provide information leaflets specifically about the data linkage element:** The ADLS report (2013) points to good examples – such as the information provided by ALSPAC – which include information about how the data will be used and by whom, how it will be stored, confidentiality assurances including how respondents can withdraw consent and, importantly, some concrete examples of how data linkage has benefitted our learning in the past. Good information is seen as key, and certainly the BHPS team attribute low levels of consent partly to poor written information.
* **There is variation in how consent is recorded:** This often appears to be a function of the requirements of the data holders, some of which have changed over time. Most current studies ask for written consent for data linkage either on paper or electronically. Respondents are often given a copy to keep for their own records. Some older studies (e.g. FACS) asked for verbal consent, recorded electronically. And there are a couple of recent examples (e.g. Understanding Society and the FRS) where DWP have accepted a verbal consent process in order to allow for the potential to collect this in a telephone survey mode. It varies whether one consent form is used for all data sources, or whether separate ones are used. If one form is used, it is important to ensure that consent for each is fully understood and recorded.
* **There is variation in the wording of the consent questions:** Again, this in part depends on the requirements of different data holders, some of which have changed over time. Life Study will need to adhere to the stipulations of data holders – and perhaps the ADRN – in terms of how the questions are phrased. However, it is important to learn from cognitive work carried out by a number of researchers into respondents’ understanding of the consent questions. A review by NatCen Social Research (Gray, 2010) reported on a range of work done to test respondents’ understanding of consent questions. Across current and past studies, there is inconsistency in the level of information provided to respondents about which data they are providing access to and the potential future users of those data for research purposes. A number of studies have very specific and separate questions for each dataset which will be accessed (e.g. Understanding Society), the content of which is often stipulated by the data holder. It achieved a consent rate of between 68 per cent (for health data) and 78 per cent (for education data). Others (e.g. UK Biobank) use very broad questions on the basis that it is not possible to anticipate all the ways in which the data might be used in the future. There is some evidence (e.g. from the Scottish Health Survey) that consent rates are higher if separate questions are asked for each dataset. And there are some concerns over whether the broader questions actually constitute respondents giving fully informed consent.

## Ongoing consent in longitudinal surveys

There appear to be no clear rules around re-gaining respondents’ consent to data linkage in later waves. Understanding Society has decided that it will check with respondents every three years that they are happy to continue to consent to data linkage. Experimental work with its Innovation Panel found that respondents were more likely to re-consent if they were reminded that they had given consent previously, rather than asking the question without reference to their previous response (Sala et al, 2013). However, for many studies, no time limit is perceived, with respondents being required to actively contact researchers should they wish to withdraw consent. The UK Biobank’s consent question explicitly talks about the long-term storage and use of these data, explicitly asking for continued consent even after someone becomes incapacitated or dies.

Where re-consent is explicitly discussed is in relation to parental consent given on behalf of children. Where this happens, many studies talk about the fact that the consent is no longer valid once a child reaches 16 (or occasionally 18). Some then recontact children to ask for their consent (e.g. Understanding Society, ALSPAC); others let the consent lapse (e.g. FACS). However, the MCS has a more detailed – and more time-limited - ongoing consent procedure regarding children’s data. They ask parents to re-consent every few waves and, when the child reaches 14, start to seek children’s consent to access their health data, in line with the Fraser guidelines and the Gillick competence test.

## Using administrative data to trace respondents

The only study reviewed which mentions using this consent to data linkage to allow them to trace respondents who move between waves is the Southampton Women’s Survey, which uses GP medical records to obtain new addresses. Other studies, where families are selected from Child Benefit records, have asked HMRC for updated address information, but this appears to be without the consent of the families involved.

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1. Birth cohorts and work conducted outside of the UK are covered in the accompanying report by Kathleen Kiernan on Fathers and Partners in National and International Birth Cohort Studies [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Also known as the UK Longitudinal Household Survey (UKHLS). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Life Study will involve both current partners and, if different, biological fathers. This review looks at the inclusion in other studies of both partners and fathers. However, for shorthand, we refer to fathers throughout. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The review includes surveys where the focus of the study is the child or the family. So, in general, it does *not* include household surveys with a general or specific focus not relating to children (e.g., the Family Resources Survey, the Health Survey for England, the Labour Force Survey). So, for example, we do not include studies which have analysed data about fathers from within one of these broader general population studies. However, we *do* include Understanding Society in this review, as it is unique (outside of the birth cohorts) in its attempts to track family members over time, even after they leave the original household. (That is, it is very valuable in what we can learn about retaining contact with fathers over time (inside and outside of the household).) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The methodological interest in any studies involving fathers (rather than fathers as the key focus of the study) made formal search processes problematic, especially in the limited time frame available. What is more, unlike reviews looking at the substantive findings of the research, there came a point in this review that where there were diminishing returns in identifying further examples of smaller-scale studies, many of which employed very similar methods. Indeed, not all the qualitative studies identified in our searches are included in the body of this review. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Understanding Society asks for proxy information about all household members who are not interviewed. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Unconditional incentives are given to all those approached for interview, regardless of their later participation, while conditional incentives are given to respondents upon completion of the interview. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Incidentally, Understanding Society also includes new partners who enter the original household, and tracks them for as long as they live in the household. If they become a parent while in that original household, and then leave, they are also followed. That is, all non-resident parents are followed if they leave the original household. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Consent has been sought from main carers (latterly with assent from children) for linkage to children’s health and education records. Main carers and partners have been asked for consent to link to their health records and to their economic (DWP and HMRC) records (via their national insurance number). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)