Institution: University of York

Unit of Assessment: 22, Social Work and Social Policy

Title of case study: Child Support Research and Policy Impacts

1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)

Research at York undertaken by Bradshaw, Skinner, Corden and Davidson, directly influenced child support policy throughout the period 2008-2013, informing the radical change that abolished the Child Support Agency and returned child maintenance to the hands of parents to make private agreements under the 'Child Maintenance and Other Payments' Act 2008. It also contributed to the decision to disregard child support payments and thus allow child support to increase lone parent incomes and reduce child poverty. More recently our research has contributed to the evolution of policy under the Coalition Government in the 2012 'Welfare Reform' Act, which introduced new 'relationship support' services to improve co-parenting relationships, reduce conflict and improve child well-being.

2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)

The Child Support Act 1991 introduced a new child support policy. The Child Support Agency (CSA) was established to force more separated parents (mainly fathers) to pay child maintenance. But it was set up with hardly any previous research on non-resident fathers and extremely limited understanding about their child maintenance attitudes and behaviours. The policy was strongly resisted and payment rates remained consistently low. There was a long hiatus in policy making while policy makers waited for the CSA to deliver. Eventually the CSA catastrophically failed. The insights from the research at York were debated afresh throughout the extensive review process leading to the radical 2008 Act. There were four main studies:

1. The first ever national survey of 600 non-resident fathers in Britain undertaken by Bradshaw (1993-current Professor), Skinner (1995 Research Assistant, [1996-98 PhD student], 1999-2000 Research Fellow, 2000-08 Lecturer, 2008-current Senior Lecturer), Stimson (Research Fellow to 1998) and Williams (Research Fellow to 2010), 1995 - 1999. Funded by the ESRC as a project in the Population and Household Change Programme. The survey estimated the population size of non-resident fathers, described patterns of maintenance payments and contact arrangements. It demonstrated that fathers' financial obligations were entwined with their social and emotional bonds with children (and the other parent) and were fraught and complex. What mattered most were relationships, but fathers found it difficult to work out the 'proper thing to do' regarding child maintenance. They needed a supportive policy, not ones that stigmatised them as 'feckless'. We highlighted how child support policy was likely to fail as it was out of line with fathers' sense of fairness and the way child maintenance obligations operated in practice.

2. Bradshaw was commissioned by the JRF to review the potential contribution of child support to child poverty reduction as part of its 2006 programme *What will it take to end child poverty in the UK?* His research included comparative research on child support policy in OECD countries and the secondary analysis of the Family Resources Survey to model what a child support disregard would do to child poverty. Skinner and Meyer (2006) also undertook similar secondary analysis of the Family and Child Survey to assess whether child support was helping lone mothers.

3. Then the DWP commissioned us to conduct new comparative research to feed directly into the 2008 Act. An international comparative study of child maintenance systems across 14 countries was conducted by Skinner, Bradshaw and Davidson (2005-2012 Research Fellow) funded by the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP). It extended the original 1999 work done by Anne Corden (1993-current Senior Research Fellow) in our Social Policy Research Unit. The findings confirmed private agreements were advantageous and that although enforcement tools were varied, compliance was difficult to achieve this way.

4. Then two other research projects commissioned by government related to the post implementation phase of the 2008 Act and the development of the 2012 Act. Both involved the collaboration of Skinner as research consultant to advise on research design, analysis, findings, and identification of key insights for policy:

- The DWP commissioned a research consortium (led by the National Centre for Social

Research in collaboration with Skinner and Wikeley) to conduct the first national survey of separated mothers and fathers in the general population (n=1,956) (Wikeley et al 2008:7). Key insights were that parents favoured private agreements, but only if supported by effective information and support services.

The Child Maintenance Enforcement Commission (CMEC) commissioned PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP (PwC) with Skinner as consultant to conduct a qualitative study exploring willingness to pay child maintenance among 67 parents without agreements. This extended Skinner's earlier work (1999) confirming the vital role of emotions and the quality of family relationships in making financial commitments.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

1. Bradshaw, J., Stimson, C., Skinner, C. and Williams, J., (1999) *Absent Fathers?,* London: Routledge. Peer reviewed at grant application stage. A unique survey gaining a sample of over 600 non-resident fathers. To date, it remains the only study to achieve a large representative sample of non-resident fathers from among the general population (i.e. not a sample of CSA clients). It also included in-depth study which developed a conceptual and theoretical framework around fathers' willingness to pay.
2. Bradshaw, J. (2006) *Child Support*. Background Paper for the JRF Report What will it take to end child poverty in the UK? http://www.jrf.org.uk/bookshop/eBooks/9781859355039.pdf later published as peer reviewed article Bradshaw, J. (2006) Child support and child Poverty*, Benefits: The Journal of Poverty and Social Justice*, October, 14, 3, 199-208
3. Skinner, C. and Meyer, D. (2006) 'After all the policy reform, is child support actually helping low-income mothers?' in *The Journal of Poverty and Social Justice*, vol.14, No.3. The article reports the findings of an unfunded secondary analysis of the Families and Children Study. Peer reviewed at publication stage.
4. Skinner, C., Bradshaw, J. and Davidson, J., (2007) *Child Support Policy: an international perspective*, Research Report No. 405, Department of Work and Pensions, Leeds: Corporate Document Services, pp. 211, 2007. Peer reviewed at grant application stage. Only the second study of its kind and the largest, comparing systems across 14 countries.
5. Wikeley, N. Ireland, E. Bryson, C. and Smith, R. (2008) *Relationship separation and child support study,* Department for Work and Pensions Research Report No 503, Norwich: TSO. Skinner was one of two non NatCen employees on the research consortium. She advised on aspects of design, survey instruments, analytical framework, data analysis, interpretation of findings and writing of the final report. Peer reviewed at grant application stage. A unique survey in UK, cited in many policy documents.
6. Andrews, S., Armstrong, D., McLernon, L., Megaw, S., and Skinner, C. (2011) *Promotion of Child Maintenance: Research on Instigating Behaviour Change*, Child Maintenance and Enforcement Commission, Research Report no, 1, Leeds: Corporate Document Centre. http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20120716161734/http://www.childmaintenance.org/en/pdf/research/Main-Report-Vol-I.pdf Peer reviewed at grant application stage. Cited by MP Maria Millar on Radio 4 Woman's Hour 7/3/2011.

All publications available on request

Supporting Grants * peer reviewed

*Bradshaw, J. '*Fathers Apart in Brita*in' ESRC Grant L315253005, 01/01/1995 - 30/04/1997, £103,218.00. Also *ESRC funding for full-time PhD 1995-1998: 'The financial obligations of non-resident fathers and the implications for social policy'.

Bradshaw, J. *'Child Support International Comparisons*' Department of Work and Pensions Grant R02939, 1/5/2006-4/9/2006 £72,447. Further variation to contract: 1/11/2006-16/2/2007, £9,796.80.

National Centre for Social Research Consortium including Professor N. Wikeley and Dr C. Skinner *'Child Support and Relationship Breakdown Survey',* Department of Work and Pensions Grant NatCen ref P2698, 1/11/2006-January/2008, £612,420.

PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP (PwC) '*Promotion of Child Maintenance: Instigating Behavioural Change'*, Child Maintenance and Enforcement Commission Grant PwC Number 4547, 2/3/2009-1/12/2009, £179,896.25. This information demonstrates the extent of the grant and the importance

of the investment in this research area.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

By 1997 when the Labour Government came to power it was clear that the 1991 Act was failing. We had been writing about it[1]. But initially they sought to simplify the old system. However their new system was delayed and then failed to deliver. The Work and Pensions Select Committee published a series of reports. Bradshaw acted as Special Advisor on the DWP Committee Report[2] which concluded that the CSA "a failing organisation which currently is in crisis…consideration be given to the option of winding up the Child Support Agency and plans made for an alternative."

A new chief executive was appointed to the Child Support Agency and undertook an urgent review but his plans involved extra spending and little improvement. So the Secretary of State announced (Hansard 9 February 2006) that there would be a review by Sir David Henshaw to completely redesign the child support system, to report by the summer recess. Our research contributed to the Henshaw review[3]. The 2006 White Paper that followed also referred to our work[4]. Between the White Paper and the 2008 Act Bradshaw and Skinner were active in a series of private, high level, policy seminars involving key ministers (Lord Hunt, Lord Kirkwood). Skinner presented a paper[5] at a Nuffield Foundation seminar. A paper[6] presented by Bradshaw at a seminar run jointly by The Nuffield Foundation and One Parent Families was vital in influencing the commissioning of the international comparative study conducted at York (Skinner et al 2007) the findings of which were fed directly to the Director of the Child Support Division for the operational redesign. There was a consultation that referred directly to the results of our research[7].

The White Paper led to the 2008 Act which abolished the CSA and returned to private agreements; the development of a new Child Maintenance Options service in 2008 offering holistic information and advice services to all separated parents; and the introduction of new 'relationship support' services under the 2012 Welfare Reform Act, which includes an online one-stop-shop web application '*Sorting out Separation*' designed by 'the Family Support Services Expert Steering Group' 2013.

Child maintenance obligations are now recognised by policy makers as being intimately interlinked with family relationships; this has been the consistent message from our research. The policy changes from 2008-2013 affect all separated parents in the population (not just CSA clients) and consequently all of the dependent children who live with one non-widowed lone parent, estimated at 30% of all dependent children in the UK. The move to private agreements and the delivery of new support services under both Acts will have a vital impact on improving parental relationships in separated families and for increasing child well-being.

Skinner also acted as policy advisor to the House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee inquiry into Child Support Reforms (2007). Skinner, helped set the key recommendations of the enquiry, which included calling on the government to introduce holistic support services dealing with all aspects of parenting in separated families, not just child maintenance obligations.
During 2008-2010 the insights on non-resident parents' child maintenance behaviours gleaned from Skinner's research on willingness to pay[8] were delivered directly to the first Chair of the Child Maintenance Enforcement Commission (CMEC replaced the CSA) and the Director of the Child Support Division (2/10/2008). The findings from these studies were key in developing Child Maintenance Options in 2008 which offered holistic information and support services to all separating parents (not just CSA clients) to help them make private agreements.
Skinner's research[9] developed the evidence base further to help policy makers understand how more parents could be encouraged to make private agreements; i.e. through a range of supportive services that tackled separated family relationships and the practical and emotional consequences of relationship breakdown. It confirmed our earlier work at York showing the vital importance of parental and child relationships to willingness to pay. These insights were incorporated into the 2012 Welfare Reform Act which focused upon encouraging co-parenting relationships 'first and foremost' as the basis upon which child maintenance will then flow, rather than the first approach being to use ever stronger enforcement methods[10] Following that, the 'Family Support Service Expert Steering Group' involving Skinner as the sole social policy academic developed a '2020 vision for new relationship support' services to help parents collaborate in the upbringing of their

children (the first manifestation of service being the web application '*Sorting Out Separation')*.Taken together, our research has shifted the policy rhetoric towards a more nuanced understanding of parental behaviour which recognises the importance of relationship factors to willingness to pay[11]).

The 2012 scheme is still being piloted but we believe it is a much better policy thanks partly to our persistent research, scholarship and policy engagement since 1994.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

1. Bradshaw , J. Talk to the House of Parliament all-part Committee on Child support 1996, Bradshaw, J. and Skinner, C. (1999) 'Memorandum to the House of Commons Social Security Committee Inquiry on Child Support', pp133-139 in, Minutes of Evidence 15 September 1999, HC 798-iii, The Stationery Office: London,
   Skinner, C. and Bradshaw, J. (2000) 'Non-resident fathers, child support and contact', Benefits, 27, 5-8
   Bradshaw, J. and Skinner, C. (2000) 'Child support: the British fiasco', Focus, 21, 1, 80-86).
2. The performance of the CSA, Second report 2004-5 Vol 1
3. Corden A, 1999, Making child support arrangements work, Joseph Rowntree Foundation and Australian Child Support Agency, 2005, Child Support Schemes – Australia and Comparisons referenced page 67
4. A new system of child maintenance (Cmnd 6879) referred to our work on child poverty reduction (pages 19 and 20).
5. Skinner, C. (2008) Understanding 'Willingness To Pay' Child Maintenance, presented at private high level policy seminar 'Relationship Breakdown And Child Maintenance: Creating A Successful Child Maintenance System' Chaired by Lord Archy Kirkwood, attended by the Director of the Child Maintenance and Enforcement Commission. Nuffield Foundation, 28 Bedford Square, London, 2.10.2008.3 and the DWP Director of the Child Support Division responsible for the policy redesign under the 2008 Act.
6. Bradshaw, J. (2006) Child Support. Background Paper for the JRF Report What will it take to end child poverty in the UK? http://www.jrf.org.uk/bookshop/eBooks/9781859355039.pdf 7/6/2006
7. DWP (2007) A new System of Child Maintenance, Summary of Responses To Consultation, Norwich: TSO (paras 1.8; B.7; B.8; B.9 and page 95).
8. Wikeley, N. Ireland, E. Bryson, C. and Smith, R. (2008) Relationship Separation And Child Support Study, Department for Work and Pensions Research Report No 503, Norwich: TSO. Cited in many current policy documents.
9. Andrews, Armstrong, McLernon, Megaw and Skinner, March 2011, Promotion of Child Maintenance: Research on Instigating Behaviour Change, CMEC
10. DWP (2011) 'Government's response to the Green Paper consultation Strengthening families, promoting parental responsibility: the future of child maintenance'. Presented to Parliament by the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions by Command of Her Majesty July 2011, London: DWP. Cites Wikeley et al 2008 and Andrews et al 2011.
11. House of Commons (December 2011) Work and Pensions Committee, The Government's proposed child maintenance reforms: Government Response to the Committee's Fifth Report of Session 2010–12 Eighth Special Report of Session 2010–12. London: House of Commons. See Rhetoric Appendix 1; end notes, 2, 4, 5 and 6.
    DWP January 2013: Preparing for the future, tackling the past Child Maintenance – Arrears and Compliance Strategy 2012 – 2017. See rhetoric pages 5 and 8. Cites Andrews et al 2011:8. Explains the 'Sorting Out Separation App' p9: Segmentation model p10).

Letters (2011-12) from the House of Commons, Maria Miller MP Parliamentary Under Secretary of State and Minister for Disabled People' inviting Skinner as academic expert to join the 'Family Support Services Expert Steering Group' and sub groups.