

# Executive Summary

## Fathers and Partners in Life Study: Groundwork, Outcomes and Lessons

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### Introduction

In recognition of the crucial importance of fathers in family life and concern about the lack of relevant data, the Nuffield Foundation and the ESRC co-funded work relating to fathers and partners in the new UK cohort study, Life Study. The baseline for Life Study comprised two components: a Pregnancy Component which planned to recruit more than 60,000 pregnant women and their nominated partners via the maternity units in a set of English NHS Trusts; and a Birth Component, based on a national probability sample drawn from birth registration records for the UK, which planned to recruit 20,000 mothers along with fathers and partners, when the baby was 6 months old.

The work on fathers and partners had two phases.

**Phase 1** was a preparatory stage with both substantive and methodological foci. Firstly, it involved the identification of the key scientific questions and opportunities across the social, behavioural, environmental, and biological domains that Life Study might be best placed to address relating to fathers and, partners. Secondly, it was concerned with assessing how best fathers might be recruited, retained and tracked.

**Phase 2** was concerned with development work for a pilot study to (a) enhance the collection of data from resident fathers and partners and (b) collect data from non-resident fathers, a new element to Life Study which was not included in the original protocol.

The full report provides a detailed account of both phases of the work up to the closure of Life Study in October 2015 and draws out the lessons learnt. This summary provides a selection of key elements that may be useful for informing future studies, with a particular focus on non-resident fathers and the Birth Component of Life Study.

### Advantages of Life Study for studying Fathers and Partners

**Life Study** was to be the first national UK cohort study to commence in pregnancy and, with the advent of additional funding, to have a particular focus on non-resident fathers.

- Commencing in pregnancy would have provided the opportunity to collect data and consider factors before, as well as after, the birth of the child. The collection of biological samples from mothers, babies and fathers/partners would also have provided a focus on the complex and dynamic links between children's biology, their environments and development in pregnancy and during the first year of life.
- Starting a study in pregnancy, as in the Pregnancy Component, and as early as 6 months in the Birth Component would have also permitted the recruitment of fathers in their own right from an early stage in their children's lives. Recruitment

at an early stage may increase the participation of non-resident fathers as more of them are likely to be romantically involved with the mother at that stage, and resident fathers/partners who subsequently leave the home might be more likely to remain involved in the study post-separation.

## **A Focus on Non-resident fathers**

The focus on non-resident fathers was especially important in the context of the UK as a significant minority of fathers do not live with the mother during the pregnancy and or at the time of the birth. Data for 2012 showed that 16.2% of fathers were not living with the mother of the baby at the time of the registration of the birth, comprising 10.6% where the father jointly registered the birth and 5.7% where the mother registered the baby on her own. This type of non-resident fatherhood from such an early stage in a child's life is more prevalent in Britain and the USA than in other Western European countries, where it is of the order of 5% or less.

Yet, in the UK it is very rare for non-resident fathers to be included in surveys during pregnancy or from the outset of their children's lives. These fathers are largely statistically invisible and little is known about the extent to which they maintain a relationship with their children and the form it takes. Collecting information directly from these fathers would allow a greater understanding of their lives and provide a resource to address such questions as to the extent to which lack of co-residence or involvement arises from choice, constraints or contingencies. It would also enable an examination of the role these fathers play in their child's life, including their reactions to fatherhood and what might help or prevent their positive involvement in their child's upbringing and how this impinges on their children's development and well-being.

## **Engagement and Recruitment of Fathers – Reviews of other studies**

Two reports were commissioned to provide information on what could be learnt from UK studies, both quantitative and qualitative, and from national and international cohort studies on which Life Study could draw. Both reports are available on the Nuffield Foundation website.

The review by Caroline Bryson entitled "*Maximising the involvement of fathers and/or partners in Life Study: what can we learn from other relevant UK studies?*" covered a range of surveys and qualitative studies carried out in the UK over the past 20 years. It reported on the methodologies used in these studies for identifying, approaching and engaging fathers and retaining their involvement over time. It also covered the ways in which studies have sought consent from parents and children to access their administrative data with a view to enhancing the survey data.

This review provided examples of successful practice on which the Life Study development work drew, but it also served to highlight a range of challenges that it would face in terms of involving fathers, in particular those who are non-resident. Where parents lived apart, it was clear that: few studies (particularly quantitative surveys) involve non-resident fathers; where they do, the studies very rarely involve interviews with both resident mothers and non-resident fathers from the same families; studies rarely tailor their recruitment approach for mothers and fathers; study designs frequently rely on the mother providing non-resident fathers' contact details to approach them for interview;

and engaging non-resident fathers is particularly challenging which is due in part to recruiting and keeping in touch with non-resident parents (often with the mother as gatekeeper), and partly due to a reticence on the part of non-resident fathers to take part.

The review by Kathleen Kiernan entitled *“Fathers and Partners in National and International Birth Cohort Studies”* examined the ways in which national and international birth cohort studies have recruited and retained fathers and the types of information collected. The review focused on large-scale studies started over the last two decades in the UK, Europe, the USA and the Antipodes and covered studies that started in pregnancy, at birth and in infancy. In the international pregnancy studies around two-thirds of fathers were recruited (it was not possible to distinguish resident and non-resident fathers) and high proportions of resident fathers were recruited in the studies started at birth and in infancy. Only three of the studies explicitly included non-resident fathers. The most successful at recruiting and retaining non-resident fathers was the US Fragile Families Study that had a bespoke approach to recruitment that included substantial financial incentives.

## **Questionnaire Development**

The complete questionnaires for mothers, resident fathers/partners and non-resident fathers for the 6 month old contact can be found at the following <http://www.lifestudy.ac.uk/resources>.

### **The Resident Fathers/Partners Questionnaire**

The resident fathers/partners questionnaire included a wide range of topics including: demographics, identity, housing, physical and mental health and lifestyle (smoking, drinking and physical exercise), education, employment, income, parenting, social networks, neighbourhood and environment. The aim was a 45 minute interview. Many of these questions were also included in the non-resident fathers questionnaire, sometimes in a reduced form owing to time constraints.

### **The Non-Resident Fathers Questionnaire**

The questions relating more directly to non-resident fathers were sourced and adapted from a range of studies particularly other cohort and longitudinal studies both national and international, which would have permitted comparative analyses across generations and countries. The target was a 45 minute long interview. Topics relating to the parents living apart included: demographic behaviours around partnership and fertility; contact with the child and contact arrangements; communication and relations with the mother; feelings about being a parent, engagement in activities and involvement in the child’s life including decision making; financial maintenance and other types of contributions.

### **Questions to Mothers about fathers and partners**

If the father/partner was not in the home at the time of the interview or the mother responded that he was not capable of doing an interview then mothers were asked a

small number of demographic questions about the resident partner. The topics included educational qualifications, employment and ethnicity.

All mothers who were not living with the child's father were asked a number of questions about the non-resident father which included: name, sex, date of birth, relationship to baby, travel time to partner's home, and information on family relationships which included partnership status when the baby was born, details of contact and relationship with cohort baby's, interest shown in the baby, whether pays maintenance and friendliness of the parental relationship.

## **Qualitative work with lone mothers on how to contact non-resident fathers**

As part of the intelligence gathering on how best to include non-resident fathers in the Birth component of Life Study Ipsos carried out a qualitative study of a small number of mothers where the father was non-resident to seek their views on how we might obtain interviews with the non-resident fathers.

ONS drew a targeted sample of birth records where the baby had been either solely registered by the mother or jointly registered but the father was living at a different address. Twenty-eight of the 300 sampled mothers opted into the research (a 9% response rate), and 10 of these mothers were interviewed.

This was a very small-scale study with a poor response rate, which affects the generalizability of the findings and needs to be interpreted with caution. Nevertheless there was some consistency in the responses of the mothers who were in contact with the fathers of their children. In situations where there was an on-going, friendly relationship between the mother and father, the mother thought it would be feasible to try to invite the father to take part in an interview, and that in some, if not all, cases the father would take part. This small-scale study also showed that there is a need to be sensitive to different arrangements and relationships and motivations for providing or not providing contact details.

## **The Pilot Study for the Birth Component**

The Pilot Study had two main elements covered in two separate reports prepared by Ipsos MORI. One report focused on the recruitment of the sample via birth registration records and requesting mothers to opt-in to participating in Life Study. The Statistical Offices administered this element. The second report focused on the fieldwork operations carried out by Ipsos MORI for the interviewing of the mothers recruited from the opt-in procedure along with fathers and partners. The reports summarised in the report are Life Study: Birth Component Pilot: *Opt-in fieldwork* and Life Study: Birth Component Pilot: *Face-to-face fieldwork* can be found at <http://www.lifestudy.ac.uk/resources>. Here we focus on the elements relating to fathers and partners.

### **Recruiting the sample**

The key finding from the recruitment report and opt-in procedure was the low opt-in rates by mothers. Of the 4778 mothers contacted about the study, 904 replied giving a

response rate of 18.9%. The vast majority of the sample did not respond 79% (3762). Of the 904 returned questionnaires, 791 of the mothers opted into the survey representing 16.6% of the issued sample.

### **Characteristics of the sample that opted-in**

The set of mothers who opted in and agreed to be interviewed were far from being a representative sample required for a new nationally representative cohort study. They were highly skewed towards, married, highly educated and affluent mothers, for example 85% of them had a first degree or higher.

### **The interview sample and response rate**

Owing to a range of constraints, of the mothers who opted in to Life Study only 154 were issued for interview by Ipsos MORI and 102 interviews were obtained. Ninety-nine had a resident partner and 49% were interviewed. None of the three non-resident partners had been interviewed by the time the fieldwork period was closed. Consequently, we were unable to evaluate the questionnaire content, timings and modes and whether the survey materials were satisfactory.

### **Approaching the non-resident father via the mother**

At the end of the mother's interview those mothers where there was a non-resident father were asked about whether they would be happy that he be approached to take part in the study.

### **Pathways to a non-resident father interview**

There were three potential pathways to the non-resident father:

1. The non-resident father was present at time of mother interview and interviewer was able to talk to the father at that point.
2. The mother provided contact details for the non-resident father to the interviewer. The details requested were his name, surname, postal address, phone numbers and email addresses.
3. The mother agreed to pass on information to the non-resident father.

The first approach has minimal risk, as the father is fully involved in providing his contact details and agreeing (or not) to the interview. Additionally, his participation will be kept confidential from anyone in the non-resident father's household (unless they are visiting the mother's household with him).

The second approach raises the risk that the letter sent to the father is seen by someone else in his household who may not be aware of the situation, which could be problematic. To obviate this, the letter was worded so that it did not refer to a new baby, and also included a sentence to imply that the letter may have been sent in error. This approach might also evoke annoyance from the father that his contact details have been provided

to Survey Agency without his express permission, which could cause friction between him and the mother of the child.

The third approach whereby the mother agrees to pass on information to the non-resident father has less risk as the father is involved in providing his contact details and agreeing to the interview. The interviewers were instructed to ask the mother to pass the information to the father when she next sees him, and only to post it to him if this was some weeks ahead. There is the risk that this type of approach may not generate many responses.

### **The non-resident father survey materials**

Interviewers were instructed that any approach to the non-resident father should only be made with the informed consent of the mother. Once contact with the father has been made in person, the interviewer had to ensure that the father had read and understood the Participant Information Sheet, which had been specifically designed for participating fathers, which gave details on Life Study.

## **Going forward: Lessons Learnt from Work done for Life Study**

Life Study uniquely combined community based pregnancy studies and a nationally representative sample of births. Studies that start in pregnancy are still relatively rare. A major strength was that it was to collect data across the socio-economic, behavioural, environmental, biological and medical domains, which is a growing trend in studies both nationally and internationally and there is a growing appetite and enthusiasm for cross-disciplinary research in these areas. However, collecting data across this range of domains on fathers is very rare. Only a few studies have collected, for example, biomedical data on fathers with the Dutch Generation R study being the best example. Moreover, and uniquely, Life Study planned to collect data on non-resident fathers, with the role of these fathers in their children's lives currently largely undocumented.

### **Low response rates in Life Study**

The low response rate in the Birth Component was likely to have arisen from the mothers having to opt-in, which is known to have lower response rates than an opt-out procedure. Other studies included in our reviews successfully recruited mothers into cohort studies. Locating a sampling frame that permits opt-out is paramount for the future of nationally and locally representative cohort studies in the UK that commence beyond pregnancy.

### **Birth registers as a sampling frame**

In principle, the use of birth registration as a sampling frame was an excellent approach for studying non-resident fathers in that parents in different partnership settings could be identified at the outset, which would clearly identify parents who were living apart at the time of the birth. Moreover a range of additional data that is collected at birth registration could be linked to the cohort child's record. Unfortunately due to constraints relating to the legal framework for official statistics only an opt-in approach was permitted and the

Life Study experience shows that an opt-in approach is not a viable way of constructing a nationally representative sample of mothers. At the time of closure an alternative approach was being explored to secure access on an “opt-out” basis to the database that holds the NHS numbers of the population (the Personal Demographics Service) and generates the numbers for all new births.

### **Recruitment of mothers**

In all the studies the mother is the primary contact or gatekeeper for the initial contact with the father whether he is resident or non-resident so it is crucial that mothers are informed about the importance of the involvement of fathers in the study so that they can act as an advocate for their participation.

### **Recruitment of resident fathers and partners**

Given the importance of fathers to children’s development and their greater engagement the inclusion of fathers and partners should no longer be viewed as an add-on but regarded, as is the case in a growing number of studies, as an integral part of the study. Although this is being increasingly recognised, the amount of information collected on fathers and the frequency of contact tends still to be less for fathers than mothers.

The response rates for resident fathers in surveys are typically high with around 80 per cent of co-resident fathers and partners being interviewed. But these are typically face-to-face interviews, with cheaper data collection methods less well-tested. This proportion appears to be reasonably stable across time periods and nations.

### **Recruitment of non-resident fathers**

The preparatory work for Life Study enumerated the gaps in knowledge about non-resident fathers and highlighted the scientific value of including these fathers from the outset of the study. Recruiting and interviewing non-resident fathers is undoubtedly challenging. But few studies have included a bespoke approach to non-resident fathers. The US Fragile Families and Well-Being Study is one exception. This study was of mainly unmarried families in which the fathers were a fully integrated from the outset and the non-resident fathers were followed up in their own right. At birth 89% of co-resident fathers completed the survey compared with 61% of the non-resident fathers. At subsequent sweeps attrition was similar for these two groups of fathers. However, this study spent very substantial amounts of money on financial incentives and in tracing the fathers after the birth. The amounts of money and resources dedicated to fathers in the Fragile Families Study are unlikely to be available to a UK study.

Where there is a less bespoke approach to the recruitment of non-resident fathers the response rates tend to be very low as in the Growing up in Ireland Study and the French Longitudinal Study ELFE. No special incentives or approach was taken to contacting these fathers. The bespoke approach of the Fragile Families Study and the more minimalist approach of the Irish and French studies are two extremes; as yet we have little evidence from studies that have invested in targeting these fathers with more limited resources.



## **Mothers providing contact details on non-resident fathers**

Most of the study designs in this area rely on the mother providing fathers' contact details to approach them for interview. The reviewed reports did not raise any ethical concerns about asking mothers for this information. It was not regarded as problematic largely because the mothers can choose whether or not to provide the information.

## **Proxy reporting on fathers**

Most of the more recent birth cohort studies have included both mothers and fathers who are living together in their survey contacts and given the importance of fathers in family life this ought to become normal practice. Exceptions included Growing up in Scotland (GUS) and the more medical studies that tend to have much fewer contacts with fathers. Inclusion of fathers and partners means that proxy reporting is required less, which is important given that the concordance between mother and fathers reports can vary substantially.

## **Administrative Data and Record Linkage**

Asking for consent from family members to access their administrative records such as health, education, economic (income, employment and benefits) data is an increasingly common practice in surveys with typically high proportions of mothers and fathers providing consent either on their own behalf or on behalf of their young children. However, we lack information on this topic for non-resident fathers. Successful data linkage across a range of domains has the potential to enrich the studies substantively and enhance the potential for cross-disciplinary research. Such linkage can also help in dealing with problems of non-response and attrition that can and do befall longitudinal studies.

## **Modes of data collection**

It was planned to consider using Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) and Computer Assisted Web based Interviewing (CAWI) in later waves of Life Study, as face-to-face interviews are very expensive. The experience of other studies have shown that telephone interviewing has been successful in the ELFE study with 86% of mothers and 79% of fathers/partners responding at the 6-8 week old post birth survey and telephone interviewing is a major mode of data collection in US studies. Postal surveys tend to have lower response rates and decline over time. For example, the Norwegian Mother and Baby Study had response rates of 85% when the child was 6 months old which fell to 73% at the 18 month contact and was 53% by the time the children were 5 years old. It may be that the mode of data collection matters more for fathers and more flexibility in the mode of data collection may be required. For example when telephone interviews were used to contact non-resident fathers in the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children 78% responded as compared with 35% who had responded to an earlier postal questionnaire and the British Family and Children's Survey (FACS) introduced the choice of a telephone or face-to-face interview for partners, to counter falling response rates.

## **Conclusion**

Life Study was to have provided an important opportunity for the collection of data on the role of fathers and partners in children's lives. Innovatively it was to collect information from fathers who were living apart from their children at the beginning their child's lives and from those fathers and partners who would subsequently leave the home. Over 4 in 10 children are likely to have such an experience before reaching age 16 and we have substantial evidence from our other British birth cohort studies that, on average, these children fare less well cognitively and emotionally than those whose parents live together. Yet our knowledge on these families and particularly the roles and impact of separated fathers and social fathers on their children's lives is scant. It is hoped that the work reported here and the other reviews being carried out for the Nuffield Foundation will provide the basis for implementing longitudinal surveys that redress our lack of knowledge about this family dynamic and all its implications for the children, mothers, fathers and partners involved.