

Child maintenance

Does the public support the current system?

The child maintenance system in Britain has evolved considerably over the three decades during which the British Social Attitudes survey has measured attitudes on this topic. This chapter analyses how far public preferences reflect the current policy position and the extent to which they vary among different sections of society.

Broad support for payment of child maintenance

A clear majority support the payment of child maintenance by the non-resident parent although views vary regarding how separated families should agree this.

- 83% think that, when a couple with a child under 18 split up, the non-resident father should always make maintenance payments to support the child.
- 42% think the best approach is for separated parents to agree child maintenance arrangements between themselves. And 25% think this should be done with the help of a government agency.

Many think family circumstances should affect arrangements

Views regarding the payment of child maintenance vary according to the particular circumstances of separated families, including parents' incomes, the presence of new partners or children, and the level of contact between the non-resident parent and the child(ren). More than half express views that do not align with certain elements of the current system, although there are signs public preferences have aligned with current policy.

- 64% think the amount of maintenance a non-resident father pays should depend on the income of the mother with care (this is not currently the case). However, this proportion has declined by 10 percentage points since 2010.
 - When a mother and her child(ren) move in with a new partner, 60% think the non-resident father should continue to make maintenance payments (this is currently required, at the same level as before). 37% supported this in 1994 (when the system did not require this).
 - Fewer than half (45%) think that child maintenance arrangements should not be affected, if a mother does not allow a non-resident father to have contact with their child (child maintenance arrangements are not currently affected if the resident parent has prohibited the child's contact with the non-resident parent).
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Men, women and those living with children have distinct views

Views about child maintenance vary between men and women and depend on whether someone lives with children. Women are more sympathetic to the situations of mothers, and men to those of fathers. Those living with children tend to favour a requirement to pay child maintenance.

- 67% of women think that maintenance payments from the father should continue when a mother with care moves in with a new partner, compared with 51% of men.
 - Men are less likely than women to think that child maintenance payments should continue if the father has a child with someone else (72% think this, compared with 81% of women).
 - Those living with children are more likely to say that maintenance payments should continue if the mother moves in with a new partner (67%, compared with 56% of those not living with children).
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Authors

Hannah Morgan

Senior Researcher, The National Centre for Social Research

Introduction

The organisation and payment of child maintenance affects an increasing number of families in Britain, as the number of lone parent families continues to grow. Since the inception of the British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey in 1983, the proportion of lone parent families has increased substantially; from 13% in 1981 (Office of National Statistics, 2013) to almost one quarter (22%) of families with dependent children in 2020 being lone parent families (Office for National Statistics, 2020). Moreover, across their life-times, a somewhat larger proportion of families will experience this status. Using data from the Understanding Society survey, researchers at the University of Sheffield calculated that, over a six-year period, 32% of families with children had been single parent families at some point (Rabindrakumar, 2017). The payment of child maintenance also matters to those families where separated parents have re-partnered or remarried, and thus are no longer classified by official statistics as lone parent families. While the payment of child maintenance is therefore relevant to a wide range of families, it should be acknowledged that not all lone parent families will be eligible, including those where a parent has been widowed or where the father has not been identified.

The current system of child maintenance, which began with the passing of the Child Support Act in 1991 and the subsequent establishment of the Child Support Agency (CSA) in 1993, has evolved considerably over the past three decades. While the 1993 scheme took account of the incomes of all relevant parties, including the parent with care¹ and any new partners, the 2003 scheme was streamlined to consider just the income of the non-resident parent – a practice that has been maintained ever since, and against which we consider the public's views in this chapter.

Schemes opened in 1993 and 2003 are now closed to families who currently have dependent children, who need to apply under the scheme introduced in 2012. This scheme differs most markedly from those that preceded it in that it seeks to encourage families to negotiate their own family-based child maintenance arrangements outside of a statutory scheme, giving them more leeway in deciding if and how much child maintenance the non-resident parent should pay in such instances (House of Commons Library, 2021). To incentivise separated parents along these lines, in 2014 the government introduced application fees, collection fees and enforcement charges for parents who elect to use the Child Maintenance Service, when a family-based arrangement has not proved possible (Department for Work and Pensions, 2013). The Department for Work and Pensions has estimated that, in 2019-2020, 44% of the 2.4 million separated families in the UK did not have any child maintenance arrangements

¹ The 'parent with care' refers to the parent who has the main day-to-day care of the child, and therefore receives the child maintenance payments. The 'non-resident parent' refers to the parent who makes the child maintenance payments.

in place (Department for Work and Pensions, 2021).

Given the 2012 Child Maintenance scheme has been in place for a number of years and the increased prevalence of separated families in Britain, it is timely to consider how far the assumptions underpinning the scheme reflect the preferences of the public, some of whom are (or will ultimately be) its recipients. To this end, we included a detailed set of questions on the BSA 2020 survey to measure preferences for the organisation and payment of child maintenance and, where time series data exists, how these have evolved over time. As detailed in the technical details, because of the pandemic BSA had to be conducted differently in 2020. Whereas hitherto it had been administered face-to-face by interviewers who knocked on randomly selected respondents' doors, this time it was completed online by a sample of respondents who were (randomly) invited to do so by post. This change brings a risk that any differences in attitudes between BSA 2020 and earlier years may be wholly or partly a consequence of the change of methodology rather than a real change in attitudes. However, the 2020 data have been carefully weighted to try and ensure that this risk has been minimised.

The data collected enable us to explore not only people's overriding preferences for the organisation and payment of child maintenance, but the extent to which these are influenced by a range of circumstances common among separated families, including parents' re-partnering and differences in income levels. Finally, using the wealth of demographic information collected on the survey, we are able to examine how far views are held consistently across all sections of society, and to what extent individual characteristics such as sex, age and the presence of children in the household, may affect attitudes.

Does the public support the current system?

We begin by examining whether the public supports the idea that, when parents separate, the non-resident parent should provide financial support, including by paying child maintenance, to the parent with care – the premise on which the child maintenance system is founded but which current statistics demonstrate does not consistently happen in practice. We will firstly discuss the public's attitudes to scenarios where the mother is the 'parent with care' and the father is the 'non-resident parent'. This is the most common allocation of roles among separated families in Britain today, with mothers being the parent with care in 89% of cases (Department for Work and Pensions, 2021). Later in the chapter we will discuss attitudes to scenarios where the father is the 'parent with care' and the mother is the 'non-resident' parent.

We asked respondents to:

Imagine a situation where a child is living with its mother and has contact with its father who lives at a separate address. Who do you think is responsible for providing support for the child?

The answer options provided and the proportions who selected each in 2020, and when the question was previously asked in 2010, are presented in Table 1. The majority view, expressed by almost eight in ten in 2020, is that the mother and father are equally responsible for supporting the child. The remaining minority primarily take the view that the mother has a greater responsibility for supporting the child, with some child maintenance from the father. Very few people advocate the father not paying any child maintenance or take the view that it depends on the family's individual circumstances. Interestingly, the view that the mother and father are equally responsible for supporting the child has become more prevalent over the past decade, increasing by six percentage points since 2010.

Table 1 Views on who is responsible for supporting a child who lives with mother and has contact with their father who lives at a separate address, 2010 and 2020

	2010	2020
	%	%
The mother is fully responsible for supporting the child with no child maintenance from the father	3	1
The mother has a greater responsibility for supporting the child, with some child maintenance from the father	16	15
The mother and father are equally responsible for supporting the child	73	79
The father has a greater responsibility for supporting the child through child maintenance, with some support from the mother	5	3
The father is fully responsible for supporting the child through child maintenance, with no support from the mother	1	1
It depends	1	*
<i>Unweighted base</i>	3297	1981

Source: 2020 BSA online survey

In a similar vein, since 1994 we have regularly asked respondents to:

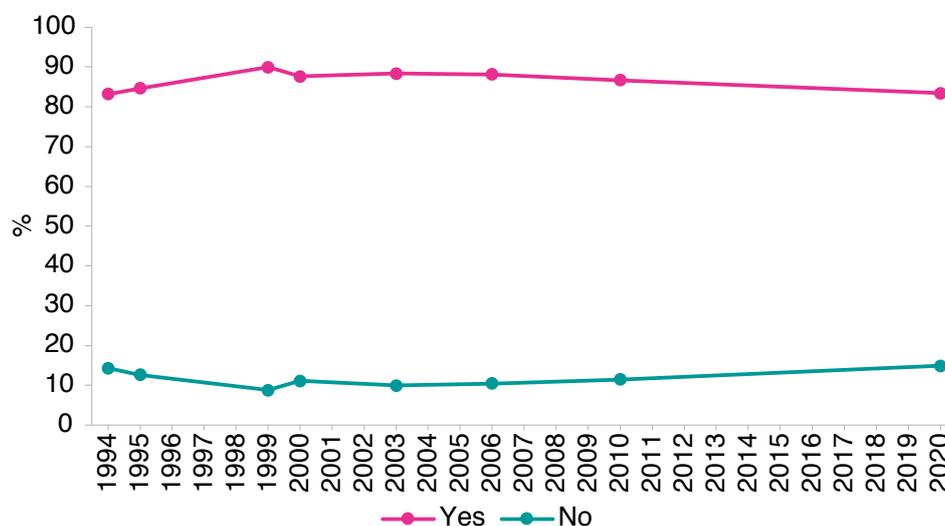
Imagine an unmarried couple who split up. They have a child at primary school who remains with the mother. Do you think that the father should always be made to make maintenance payments to support the child?

In the 2020 survey, we amended the question wording to specify a child of 'up to 18 years of age', bringing the question in line with current child maintenance policy. Instead of an unmarried couple,

we asked half of the respondents to imagine a couple who were ‘married, or in a civil partnership’ and half to imagine a couple who were ‘not married, or in a civil partnership’. This reflects contemporary routes to single parenthood, which are somewhat more diverse than those in the early 1990s when these questions were first developed (Letablier and Wall, 2018).

The responses provided in 2020 and in each year in which the question was previously asked are presented in Figure 1. An overwhelming majority of the public in 2020 back fathers making child maintenance payments to support the child, with 83% thinking that this should always happen. Over the past three decades, between eight and nine in ten people have consistently held this view; there is no suggestion that the broadening of the scenario to cover all children under 18 years of age and the different routes into single parenthood has muted this support. Such majority support for the payment of child maintenance reflects the principle underpinning the child maintenance system, that people who want an arrangement should be able to access one. However, in practice, 44% of separated families are estimated not to have a child maintenance arrangement in place (Department for Work and Pensions, 2021) – a proportion that clearly does not align with public views on what should happen when parents separate.

Figure 1 Views about whether a father should always be made to make maintenance payments to support his child, 1994–2020



Source: 2020 BSA online survey

The data on which Figure 1 is based can be found in Appendix table A.1 of this chapter

Since 2013, we have also measured views about the best way for separated parents to make maintenance arrangements. Specifically, we ask respondents:

Of this list of options, which do you think would be the best way for separated parents to make child maintenance arrangements?

Agree child maintenance arrangements between themselves

Agree child maintenance with the help of a government agency

Agree child maintenance with the help of another organisation, such as Citizens Advice

Agree child maintenance with help of courts/lawyers/solicitors

Agree child maintenance another way

In 2020, in recognition of the fact that separated parents might not necessarily succeed in agreeing child maintenance arrangements between themselves, we added a follow-up question, with those who initially selected the response that the best way for separated parents to make maintenance arrangements is to 'agree child maintenance arrangements between themselves' then being asked:

When separating parents cannot agree on maintenance arrangements themselves, should it be a government agency, or the courts that get involved?

As shown in Table 2, the most popular view, expressed by around four in ten, is for separated parents to make child maintenance arrangements between themselves, reflecting the recent direction of government policy as discussed previously. However, considerable minorities favour other organisations performing this function, with a government agency being the most popular choice (selected by a quarter). Indeed, among those who would prefer separated parents to make arrangements themselves in the first instance, more than half think that a government agency should get involved if they cannot agree, while around one third support the courts playing this role. Meanwhile, the balance of the public's preferences has remained remarkably stable over the past seven years, despite the greater encouragement (and incentivisation) since 2012 for separated parents to make maintenance arrangements themselves.

Table 2 Views on the best way for separated parents to make child maintenance arrangements, 2013–2020

	2013	2015	2017	2020
	%	%	%	%
Agree child maintenance arrangements between themselves	43	42	37	42
Agree child maintenance with the help of a government agency	19	24	24	25
Agree child maintenance with the help of another organisation, such as Citizens Advice	19	19	21	17
Agree child maintenance with help of courts/lawyers/solicitors	15	12	13	13
Agree child maintenance another way	1	2	2	1
<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>1167</i>	<i>1234</i>	<i>3143</i>	<i>3426</i>
Views on who should get involved when separated parents cannot agree				%
Government agency				56
Courts				36
Other				4
<i>Unweighted base</i>				<i>816</i>

Source: 2020 BSA online survey

So far then, we have seen that the public overwhelmingly supports the premise of the child maintenance system that non-resident fathers² should provide child maintenance. However, the public is less supportive of the idea that separated families should always try to arrange this themselves, in the first instance.

Inevitably, separated families will experience a range of different circumstances when they first find themselves in that position (including marital status and parental incomes) and subsequently (including re-partnering, the birth of additional children, levels of contact and fluctuations in incomes). We envisaged that attitudes to child maintenance for particular families might vary depending on the circumstances of the separated family, rather than simply reflecting the general standpoints discussed thus far. In the next section, we analyse responses to scenarios about a series of hypothetical families in order to explore how far, and in which circumstances, people modify their views about the payment of child maintenance. Consideration of these data also allows us to assess how far public views chime with some of the current policy assumptions of the child maintenance system, including the importance ascribed to parental incomes, whether the non-resident parent has contact with their child, and additional children as determinants of the levels of maintenance to be paid.

² Public attitudes to non-resident mothers are discussed later in the chapter.

How important are the circumstances of separated families?

Parental income

We turn first to income. While the government encourages separated parents to make child maintenance arrangements between themselves, it provides a calculator that can be used to work out how much it thinks these payments should be.³ (Such calculations are also used if parents decide to go through the Child Maintenance Options service to make their arrangement). These payments are currently calculated as a proportion of the non-resident parent's income. The income of the parent with care is not taken into account, nor is that of any of their subsequent partners – unless they and the parent with care have any additional children for whom the new partner contributes to everyday living costs. This is at odds with the system that existed before 2003, when the incomes of both the non-resident parent and subsequent partners of either parent were taken into account (House of Commons Library, 2021) – a system that was abandoned as it made the assessment of child maintenance liabilities more lengthy and complex.⁴

To assess the extent to which the public thinks the incomes of the parent with care and the non-resident parent should affect child maintenance arrangements, we ask two follow-up questions to the scenario about a couple who split up described earlier in the chapter (and for which data are presented in Table 3). Specifically, we ask:

If he [the father] does make the maintenance payments for the child, should the amount depend on his income, or not?

Do you think the amount of maintenance should depend on the mother's income, or not?

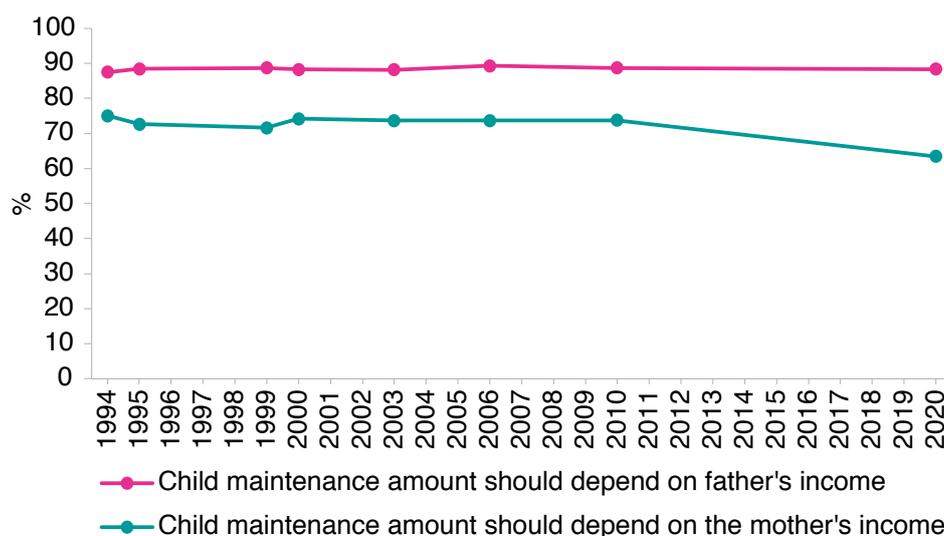
The results obtained in 2020, and on the previous occasions in which the questions were asked, are presented in Figure 2. Quite clearly, a considerable majority of the public (88%) thinks that the amount of maintenance should depend on the income of the non-resident father. This proportion has remained stable since 1994, suggesting a consistent endorsement of the current policy position. However, the proportion thinking that the amount of maintenance should depend on the income of the mother (with care) is somewhat lower, at 64%. Nevertheless, this still means that a considerable majority favour this circumstance being taken into account – a view that does not align

³ This calculator is available at <https://www.gov.uk/calculate-child-maintenance>.

⁴ The complexity of the 1993 formula led to long delays in assessing child maintenance liabilities. This in turn made it difficult to ensure that child support was paid regularly. Because the assessment process was complex, the CSA had less time to help parents understand what they should pay or to chase up non-payment. Key changes were made to simplify the way child support liability is assessed by replacing the complex 1993 assessment formula with a simple percentage of the non-resident parent's income.

with the policy position as it has existed since the introduction of the 2003 child maintenance scheme. Interestingly, however, support for the mother's income being taken into account has declined, having reduced by 10 percentage points between 2010 and 2020. This suggests that views may be shifting, whether or not this represents a change in attitudes will become apparent when further data is collected in future years.

Figure 2 Views on whether the amount of child maintenance should depend on parents' incomes, 1994–2020



Source: 2020 BSA online survey

The data on which Figure 2 is based can be found in Appendix table A.2 of this chapter

Attitudes to parental incomes and child maintenance may reflect different views about the roles of parents with care and non-resident parents. But it may also reflect assumptions about the current norms of the mothers' and fathers' respective incomes, as a result of the gender pay gap. To counter this, we asked respondents whether, and in what ways, the level of child maintenance paid by the non-resident parent should be affected when the parent with care had a higher income. We asked respondents the following question:

Imagine a situation where a child is living with its mother. The mother's income is higher than the child's father's income. In what way, if any, should this affect the child maintenance arrangements?

We then followed this with a comparable question where the roles of the father and mother were reversed. The answer options presented, and the responses provided in 2020 and when these questions were previously asked in 2010, are shown in Table 3.

A number of patterns are evident. In scenarios such as these, where the parent with care has the higher income, over half of the public think that the non-resident parent should pay less maintenance or

should not have to pay any maintenance at all. In situations where the mother is the parent with care, 57% feel that the father should pay less, or no maintenance if the mother's income is higher than the father's. A similar proportion (58%) feel that in situations where the father is the parent with care, mothers should pay less, or no maintenance if the father's income is higher than the mother's. These attitudes suggest that a slight majority hold views that do not align with the policy position as it has existed since 2003, which does not take into account the income of the parent with care when calculating child maintenance payments.

However, the proportion agreeing that the non-resident parent should pay less, or no maintenance in this situation has decreased over time, regardless of the sex of the parent with care (by six percentage points when this is the mother and three points when it is the father). This reflects our previous finding that people place less emphasis on the role of income in determining child maintenance arrangements than they did in the past. Moreover, our theory that people might have different views about the significance of income in determining arrangements, depending on the respective roles of mothers and fathers, is largely disproved by these data, as views are rather similar, regardless of the sex of the parent with care and the non-resident parent.

Table 3 How child maintenance arrangements should be affected if income of parent with care higher than income of non-resident parent, 2010 and 2020

	Mother is parent with care, father is non-resident parent		Father is parent with care, mother is non-resident parent	
	2010	2020	2010	2020
	%	%	%	%
The child maintenance arrangements should not be affected by the [parent with care's] level of income	33	41	33	39
The [non-resident parent] should pay less child maintenance but should provide support in other ways	52	50	43	46
The [non-resident parent] shouldn't have to pay any child maintenance but should provide support in other ways	3	2	8	4
The [non-resident parent] should pay less child maintenance without having to provide support in other ways	7	4	8	7
The [non-resident parent] shouldn't have to pay any child maintenance and shouldn't have to provide support in other ways	1	1	1	1
It depends	3	1	4	1
<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>1700</i>	<i>1981</i>	<i>1597</i>	<i>1983</i>

Source: 2020 BSA online survey

On balance then, the public would prefer parental income to have a greater role in determining child maintenance payments than it does in practice, with a majority believing that the income of the parent with care should be taken into account, and six in ten believing that this should lead to a reduction in child maintenance payments, when it is greater than the income of the non-resident parent (regardless of their sex). However, across the measures examined thus far, it is also clear that there has been a decline in the importance people ascribe to parental income, other than that of the non-resident parent, as a consideration which should determine child maintenance arrangements.

Presence of a new partner or child

Attitudes to child maintenance may also be affected by other financial demands placed upon a non-resident parent – or other potential sources of income available to a parent with care. To ascertain the importance of such considerations, we asked respondents about scenarios where the parent with care starts to live with a new partner, and where the non-resident parent has another child with someone else. While the current child maintenance rules do not allow for a reduction in payments if the parent with care moves in with a new partner, the non-resident parent is allowed to pay less child maintenance if they have another dependent child who does live with them (House of Commons Library, 2021).

Since the early 1990s we have regularly asked respondents, as a follow-up to the questions for which data were presented in Table 2, to:

Suppose the mother now moves in with a new partner. Should the child's father go on paying maintenance for the child, should he stop or should it depend on the new partner's income?

Suppose instead the mother does not (move in with a new partner), but the father has another child with someone else. Should he go on paying maintenance for the first child, should he stop or should it depend on his income?

The pattern of responses is shown in Table 4. In the first scenario, where the mother (with care) moves in with a new partner, almost two-thirds think that the father should continue to make maintenance payments. This reflects the current policy position. A considerable minority, around one third, think that any change should depend on the new partner's income. Interestingly, the balance of opinion has substantially shifted over the past three decades in favour of the father continuing to make maintenance payments and, to a lesser extent, away from the position depending on the new partner's income. This might suggest that the removal of any consideration of the income of new partners of parents with care in the 2003 child

maintenance scheme was reflective of (and perhaps responding to) a shifting public mood. It also provides further evidence of a general decline in the importance ascribed by the public to parental incomes as a consideration which should influence child maintenance arrangements.

Table 4 Views on whether non-resident father should continue to pay child maintenance in different circumstances, 1994–2020

	1994	1995	1999	2000	2003	2006	2010	2020
If the mother moves in with a new partner								
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Continue	37	39	50	50	52	53	55	60
Stop	15	14	12	10	9	9	7	5
Depends on new partner's income	45	45	38	38	37	37	36	35
If the father has another child with someone else								
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Continue	na	na	72	71	71	75	74	76
Stop	na	na	1	2	2	1	1	1
Depends on father's income	na	na	26	27	27	23	24	23
<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>na</i>	<i>na</i>	<i>3143</i>	<i>3426</i>	<i>3272</i>	<i>3240</i>	<i>3297</i>	<i>1981</i>

Source: 2020 BSA online survey

In the second scenario shown in Table 4, where the non-resident father has another child with somebody else, around three-quarters have consistently agreed that he should continue to pay maintenance for the first child, while one quarter take the view that this should depend on his income. In reality, a father in this situation would be required to continue to pay child maintenance for his first child. The public's views continue to reflect the current policy position with regards to the evolving nature of separated families, in thinking that changes in circumstances should not affect the fundamental arrangements regarding child maintenance in place for the first child.

Contact of the non-resident parent

We anticipated that attitudes to the payment of child maintenance might be influenced by the relationship between the non-resident parent and their child, particularly the level of contact they have. The current child maintenance scheme specifies that child maintenance needs to be paid by the non-resident parent, even when they do not have contact with their child. To examine the impact that the relationship between the non-resident parent and their child might have on views about maintenance payments, we asked respondents to:

Imagine another situation where a child is living with its mother. The mother has recently decided not to allow the father to have any further contact with the child. How should this affect the child maintenance arrangements?

The responses obtained in 2020, and when the question was previously asked in 2010, are presented in Table 5. Clearly, this is an issue on which the public is divided. Just under half think that, in this situation, the maintenance arrangements should not be affected, while a similar proportion express the view that it should mean the father pays either less or no maintenance at all (albeit, in some scenarios, providing support in other ways). As many as one in five think that the father should not have to make any maintenance payments or support the child in other ways. Although this represents a minority view, it is markedly higher than the proportion who thought no maintenance payments should be paid to a mother, when the father does still have contact with the child. Table 1 showed that only 1% of the public thought that the mother should be fully responsible for supporting the child, with no child maintenance from the father, when the father has contact with the child. Clearly then, for a substantial minority, the non-resident father's level of (allowed) contact with the child makes a difference to people's views on whether he should provide child maintenance. While there is little evidence that views on this matter have changed substantially in the past decade, the attitude of around half do not align with current child maintenance rules, which state that the father is still required to pay child maintenance at the same level even if he does not have contact with the child.

Table 5 How child maintenance arrangements should change if mother does not allow child to have contact with non-resident father, 2010 and 2020

	2010	2020
	%	%
The child maintenance arrangements should not be affected	42	45
The father should pay less child maintenance but provide support in other ways	11	13
The father shouldn't have to pay any child maintenance but should provide support in other ways	13	10
The father should pay less child maintenance without having to provide support in other ways	7	7
The father shouldn't have to pay any child maintenance and shouldn't have to provide support in other ways	16	20
It depends	8	4
<i>Unweighted base</i>	3297	1981

Source: 2020 BSA online survey

Sex of parent

It was also envisaged that the sex of the parent with care and of the non-resident parent might make a difference to attitudes to child maintenance, as people might have different perceptions and expectations of mothers and fathers. In most cases where parents separate, the child lives with the mother, and the father is required to make maintenance payments to support the child. This may lead to people holding more sympathetic attitudes to situations where the mother is the parent with care, as this may be a more familiar scenario.

So far in the chapter, we have focused on the more typical scenario of the mother being the parent with care, and the father making maintenance payments. Now we will address what the public thinks about the less typical situation of the father being the parent with care, and the mother making maintenance payments.

Table 6 shows responses for the various questions we have examined so far and the difference in attitudes between when the mother is looking after the child and when the father is doing so. While even those differences identified as statistically significant are relatively small, it is nevertheless clear that people tend to expect slightly more from non-resident fathers, than non-resident mothers, when it comes to the payment of child maintenance. There is a small but significant difference between the proportion (84%) who think that a non-resident father should always be made to make maintenance payments, and the proportion who say the same of a non-resident mother (79%). Similarly, people are more likely to think that non-resident fathers should continue to pay child maintenance for their first child when they have a child with someone else, or when the mother (with care) moves in with a new partner, than they are when the non-resident parent is the mother. Conversely, people are also slightly more likely to think that the amount of child maintenance paid should depend on the income of the parent with care, when that parent is a father, than when the parent is a mother.

Table 6 Attitudes to the payment of child maintenance, by situations in which sex of parent with care and non-resident parent are reversed

	Child lives with mother; father makes maintenance payments	Child lives with father; mother makes maintenance payments
	%	%
The non-resident parent should always be made to make maintenance payments to support the child	84	79
The amount should depend on the non-resident parent's income	88	89
The amount of maintenance should depend on the income of the parent with care	64	67
If the parent with care moves in with a new partner, the non-resident parent should continue to make maintenance payments	60	56
If the non-resident parent has a child with someone else, they should continue making payments for their first child	76	70
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1981	1981

There could be several explanations for these differences. As discussed previously, in most circumstances where parents separate, the child lives with the mother, and the father makes maintenance payments. This may contribute to people being slightly more sympathetic to the (more unusual) situation where a mother needs to make maintenance payments. Perceptions of the gender pay gap may also have an effect. People may view men as being likely to earn more than women, and so are less deserving of financial support as the parent with care. This theory is supported by our finding that, when the parent with care has a higher income, views about the payment of child maintenance are fairly similar, regardless of their sex.

Marital status

Finally, we envisaged that the original marital status of separated parents might influence perceptions of what should happen in terms of child maintenance. It might be that people expect more of non-resident fathers when they were previously married to the mothers of their children, as this might be seen as representing a greater commitment.

To test this theory, half of the sample on the most recent survey were asked a series of questions about a married couple, while the other half were asked about a couple who were not married (data for the latter set of questions have been presented above, as this is the way in which these questions have traditionally been asked). In practice, we found that the original marital status of separated parents makes little difference to people's attitudes to child maintenance payments, with very few differences that are statistically significant. For example,

we have seen already that 83% think that a father should always be made to pay maintenance for his child when the couple were unmarried; 82% express this view when the couple are married.

In a sense, this is unsurprising. There is substantial evidence from earlier BSA surveys that people increasingly view married and cohabiting couples and parents as equivalent, and that the view that marriage is a preferable status to cohabitation is in decline. In 2014, 37% ascribed to the view that, “People who want children ought to get married”, compared with 70% when the question was first asked in 1989 (NatGen, 2016). There is also considerable evidence that alternative family forms are increasingly viewed as acceptable (Swales and Attar Taylor, 2016). There therefore may be reason to believe that in the past, opinions about child maintenance may have been more strongly influenced by the original marital status of separated couples (although we do not have the data available to test this theory). It appears, however, that this is not a significant consideration now.

In summary, the individual circumstances of separated families continue to influence views about the payment of child maintenance – and to a greater degree than is reflected in the child maintenance system. This is particularly the case in situations where the parent with care has a higher income than the non-resident parent, and in situations where the non-resident parent is no longer allowed to have contact with their child. In both cases, just over half of the public thinks that the non-resident parent should pay less child maintenance, a view which runs contrary to current child maintenance policy. Marital status, sex and the presence of other children or partners appears to make less difference. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the importance ascribed to incomes other than that of the non-resident parent, seems to be declining over time, suggesting views may be aligning with current practices in the organisation of child maintenance.

In the final section, we consider whether the views outlined thus far are reflected across all sections of society, or whether they vary on the basis of characteristics that might be expected to influence opinions and beliefs in this area.

Is the public united in its views?

We anticipated that attitudes to child maintenance might vary by a number of demographic characteristics. It seemed likely that younger people would have different views from older people, given that they are less likely to have lived with, or be living with children, or had any experience of the child maintenance system themselves. On a similar basis, we anticipated that the experience of currently living with children might make those in this situation more appreciative of the value of child maintenance payments to separated parents, or more likely to view children as a financial responsibility that is not affected

by changes in circumstances.⁵ We also anticipated that men might have different views from women. Women may be more sympathetic towards the (usual) situation of the mother as the parent with care, whereas men may be more open to considering the needs and changing circumstances of non-resident fathers.

As child maintenance is primarily an issue relating to finance, we might also theorise that attitudes will vary by household income. Those on lower incomes may have a greater appreciation than those with higher incomes of the need for child maintenance to provide for children in separated families. Finally, we know that social attitudes to family and morality often vary between people with different levels of education (Swales and Attar Taylor, 2016) – and we envisaged that such differences might be replicated in the answers to our questions on child maintenance.

In practice, we find that a person's sex and the presence of children in the household most strongly and consistently link with views about the payment of child maintenance, see Table 7. As we expected, women are consistently more sympathetic to the situation of mothers as the parent with care. When asked whether maintenance payments should depend on the mother's income, 39% of women disagreed, compared with 31% of men. In the scenario where a mother with care moves in with a new partner, 67% of women think that maintenance payments from the father should continue, compared with 51% of men. Similarly, when a mother stops her child having contact with the non-resident father, 52% of women believe maintenance arrangements should not be affected, compared with 38% of men.

On the other hand, men appear to be more understanding of the situations likely to be faced by non-resident fathers and to believe these should be taken into account when determining what is required of them in terms of maintenance. When considering the couple who split up with a child under 18 years and the mother is the parent with care, men (20%) were twice as likely as women (10%) to say that the father should not always be made to make maintenance payments. When it comes to a change in family circumstances, men are much more likely than women to think this should affect child maintenance payments. Men (72%) are less likely than women (81%) to think that child maintenance payments should continue if the father has a child with someone else.

⁵ The 2020 survey did not collect information on whether respondents had children. Data on whether respondents lived with children in the household was selected as an appropriate measure of exposure to the financial impacts of living with children and the demands placed upon their parents.

Table 7 Attitudes to the payment of child maintenance, by gender

		Women	Men
		%	%
Should the father always be made to make maintenance payments to support the child?	Yes	88	78
	No	10	20
If he does make the maintenance payments for the child, should the amount depend on his income, or not?	Yes	90	87
	No	9	12
Do you think the amount of maintenance should depend on the mother's income, or not?	Yes	60	69
	No	39	31
The mother moves in with a new partner. Should the child's father go on paying maintenance for the child, should he stop or should it depend on the new partner's income?	Continue	67	51
	Stop	3	8
	It depends	29	41
The father has another child with someone else. Should he go on paying maintenance for the first child, should he stop or should it depend on his income?	Continue	81	72
	Stop	1	1
	It depends	19	27
<i>Unweighted base</i>		1062	910

In a similar vein, people living with children are more sympathetic to the situations facing mothers and have a preference for there always being a payment of child maintenance, rather than it being affected by individual circumstances – although the differences are less pronounced and consistent than those found between men and women. For instance, Table 8 shows that 60% of people currently living with children say that the amount of maintenance should depend on the mother's income, compared with 66% of those not living with children. Those with children in the household (67%) are more likely than those without (56%) to say that maintenance payments should continue if the mother moves in with a new partner.

Table 8 Attitudes to the payment of child maintenance, by whether children in household

		No children in household	Children in household
		%	%
Should the father always be made to make maintenance payments to support the child?	Yes	82	86
	No	15	14
If he does make the maintenance payments for the child, should the amount depend on his income, or not?	Yes	89	87
	No	10	13
Do you think the amount of maintenance should depend on the mother's income, or not?	Yes	66	60
	No	33	40
The mother moves in with a new partner. Should the child's father go on paying maintenance for the child, should he stop or should it depend on the new partner's income?	Continue	56	67
	Stop	6	4
	It depends	37	29
The father has another child with someone else. Should he go on paying maintenance for the first child, should he stop or should it depend on his income?	Continue	75	79
	Stop	1	1
	It depends	24	20
<i>Unweighted base</i>		1475	492

Attitudes to child maintenance also vary by age. Table 9 shows that those aged 55 and over (86%), are more likely than those aged 18-34 (79%) to say that a father should be made to make maintenance payments to support his child. However, older people are more likely to believe the payment of child maintenance should be affected by parental incomes. Sixty-nine per cent of people aged 55+ think that the amount of child maintenance paid should be affected by the income of the mother (with care), compared with 59% of those aged 18-34. Similarly, 86% and 92% of the youngest and oldest age groups respectively think that the income of the non-resident father should affect the level of maintenance paid. When it comes to the presence of a new partner, older people are less likely to think that maintenance payments should continue; 54% of those aged 55+ think this, compared with 61% of 18-34 year olds and 64% of 35-54 year olds. We might therefore speculate that those who are older, while slightly more supportive of the payment of child maintenance overall, may also be more supportive of individual circumstances being taken into account – perhaps because they have gained an appreciation of the nuances of the situations experienced by separated families throughout their lives.

Table 9 Attitudes to the payment of child maintenance, by age

		18-34	35-54	55+
		%	%	%
Should the father always be made to make maintenance payments to support the child?	Yes	79	84	86
	No	20	14	12
If he does make the maintenance payments for the child, should the amount depend on his income, or not?	Yes	86	88	92
	No	13	12	8
Do you think the amount of maintenance should depend on the mother's income, or not?	Yes	59	62	69
	No	40	37	30
The mother moves in with a new partner. Should the child's father go on paying maintenance for the child, should he stop or should it depend on the new partner's income?	Continue	61	64	54
	Stop	6	3	7
	It depends	33	33	39
The father has another child with someone else. Should he go on paying maintenance for the first child, should he stop or should it depend on his income?	Continue	78	76	75
	Stop	1	1	0
	It depends	20	22	25
<i>Unweighted base</i>		435	654	886

Education and income meanwhile appear to make little difference to attitudes to child maintenance. This may be because identity and lived experiences have a greater role to play here, as testified by the linkages between age, the presence of children in the household and, in particular, sex, noted previously.

Conclusions

While there is clear and consistent public support for the payment of child maintenance when parents separate, when it comes to the specific situations likely to face separated families, the views of a considerable proportion of the public, frequently more than half, often do not align with elements of how the child maintenance system operates in practice. Such divergence is most marked in relation to parental incomes, with considerable proportions of people thinking that the incomes of the parent with care and the presence of a new partner to the parent with care should affect the payment of child maintenance. Interestingly though, people's views on these matters are in some respects gradually aligning with how the child maintenance system now operates in practice (with growing support for the assumption that the payment of child maintenance is universal). Not only do the circumstance of separated families inform views, so too do people's own characteristics, most markedly their sex and the experience of living with children. Behind the almost universal support for child maintenance noted at the start of the chapter, we therefore find that the public's attitudes to child maintenance are affected by the family circumstances, evolving over time and, to some degree, rooted in their own experiences.

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Appendix

Table A.1 (Figure 1) Views about whether a father should always be made to make maintenance payments to support his child, 1994–2020

	1994	1995	1999	2000	2003	2006	2010	2020
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Yes	83	85	90	88	88	88	87	83
No	14	13	9	11	10	10	11	14
Don't know	2	3	1	1	2	1	2	2
<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>1167</i>	<i>1234</i>	<i>3143</i>	<i>3426</i>	<i>3272</i>	<i>3240</i>	<i>3297</i>	<i>1981</i>

Source: 2020 BSA online survey

Table A.2 (Figure 2) Views on whether the amount of child maintenance should depend on parents' incomes, 1994–2020

	1994	1995	1999	2000	2003	2006	2010	2020
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Amount of child maintenance should depend on (non-resident) father's income								
Yes	87	88	89	88	88	89	89	88
No	12	10	11	11	11	10	10	11
Amount of child maintenance should depend on the mother (with care)'s income								
Yes	75	73	72	74	74	74	74	64
No	23	25	27	25	25	25	25	35
<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>1167</i>	<i>1234</i>	<i>3143</i>	<i>3426</i>	<i>3272</i>	<i>3240</i>	<i>3297</i>	<i>1981</i>

Source: 2020 BSA online survey

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The National Centre for Social Research
35 Northampton Square
London
EC1V 0AX
info@natcen.ac.uk