

GUS: Sweep 3 Non-resident Parent Report

Louise Marryat, Susan Reid (Scotcen) and Fran Wasoff (CRFR)

Workshop presentation to the GUS3 Launch event, Glasgow, March 2009

Key points

To set the scene with a few points about the dynamics of non-resident fatherhood

GUS is a representative population sample and not a clinical sample-
This report is based on reports of resident parents

My talk now is drawn from the conclusion to the report.

The majority of children in both the birth and child cohorts have lived at all three sweeps with their mothers and biological fathers. However, a significant proportion, about one-fifth of the birth cohort and one-quarter of the child cohort, had a non-resident father at sweep 3. Although non-resident fatherhood is commonly associated with separation and household transitions, this is not the case for the birth or child cohorts, the majority of whom have not experienced parental separation since their non-resident fathers had never lived with them. Most children whose parents live apart (about two-thirds) have current, stable contact with their non-resident parent, whether or not the parents have previously cohabited. Most contact arrangements did not change across sweeps. In light of a non-resident parent's legal parental responsibility to maintain regular contact with their child, an issue of concern about which GUS does not have information is why one-third of children with a non-resident father do not have contact.

Where contact takes place, it is generally frequent, with face to face contact taking place at least once a week in the majority of cases. Contact is most common for previously married parents and least common for parents who have never cohabited. Long travel times for the non-resident parent adversely affects the frequency of contact. Other factors that affect the frequency of contact are the age of the mother and how interested the mother thinks the father is in the child. Contact is least frequent for children of teenage mothers and for children with no siblings.

A recurrent message from research is that contact is most beneficial to children if the level of conflict between their parents is low and if their parents can develop a cooperative post-separation parenting relationship. Most mothers report a very good or fairly good relationship with the non-resident father. The quality of this relationship is associated with higher levels of contact, more frequent contact, the father's greater perceived interest in the child, less conflict, more involvement of the non-resident parent in decision making about the child and their greater exercise of parental responsibilities. It is worth bearing in mind that these findings apply to parents of very young children and it will be of interest to know how parents' relationships and their decision making will evolve as children get older and start school. Since GUS has not been able to interview non-resident fathers, we cannot say how similar are their perceptions of the quality of the relationship with the resident parent.

The great majority of parents (over 85%) are able to arrange contact informally

between themselves with no professional or outside help. A small minority made use of help from lawyers (7% of the child cohort; 4% of the birth cohort), mediators (1%) or other professionals (4%). Only about one in twenty cases where parents live apart involve the courts. That proportion rises to about one in four in cases where the main carer reports that the non-resident parent is not very interested in the child or the parental relationship is very bad. An issue of concern is the high level of contact taking place in the context of high conflict and poor parental relationships, both of which have been associated in the research literature with adverse child outcomes. This merits further examination in subsequent sweeps of this study.

While contact cases that reach the courts are more likely to be at the high conflict end of the spectrum and involving very poor parental relationships, the majority of high conflict cases manage to arrange contact without court involvement. How they achieve this is not known. It is not clear from the data what distinguishes cases that end up involving the courts from those that manage to resolve conflict or disputes without the courts. The picture of child contact that emerges from sweep 3 for both cohorts, a population sample, differs from many child contact studies whose samples are drawn from court records, lawyers caseloads or from clients of family support organisations, or clinical samples.

A high level and frequency of child contact is taking place for a large minority of all children, and the great majority of children whose parents live apart. Most of this across household parenting seems to be negotiated privately by parents without professional support and most parents seem to have adequate parenting relationships, at least as reported by the child's main carer. How these patterns evolve as children get older and as parents' lives may become more complex will continue to be of interest in subsequent sweeps of the Growing Up in Scotland study.

Some questions for policy and practice

- What to do about no contact, where it is desired by the child or mother?
- What to do about contact when it is not desired by the child or mother?
- How best to support the great majority of parents who live apart who do not use the courts/justice system to achieve positive parenting relationships?
- How to minimise any conflict over contact?