

Impact case study (REF3b)

Institution: University of York
Unit of Assessment: 20, Law
Title of case study: Child Support Policy and Practice
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>Christine Skinner (submitted under UoA:20 Law) has produced research with colleagues over an eighteen-year period that has impacted significantly on the development of child maintenance law and practice throughout the period 2008-13. Through various methods, her body of work and research expertise have informed the radical re-design of the UK child maintenance system, with a shift from a coercive, administratively imposed system to one that stresses parental negotiation and agreement. Equally, her work has directly influenced the development of a support infrastructure to underpin the new system's implementation. These impacts in turn benefit separating parents and the well-being of their children (estimated at 30% of all UK dependent children).</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>There are three research projects that underpin the impacts described in this case study. The ESRC's <i>Population and Household Change Programme</i> funded the first project in 1995. A team of York researchers, including Skinner (Research Assistant, 1995; PhD student 1996-98; Research Fellow, 1990-00; Lecturer, 2000-08; Senior Lecturer, 2008 - present), carried out path-breaking empirical research on child support. The Child Support Act 1991 had introduced a new system of child maintenance in 1993. However, the new system had been designed without the benefit of adequate research on parents' attitudes and behaviour towards child maintenance. Both the Act itself and its implementation were controversial and compliance with the new regime was very low. Skinner and her colleagues conducted the first ever national survey of 600 non-resident fathers, estimating the population size and describing patterns of maintenance payments and contact arrangements. They also carried out a qualitative study of fathers' willingness to make maintenance payments. In combination, these studies demonstrated, somewhat counter-intuitively, that it was because fathers cared about maintaining their role as fathers that they became reluctant to pay maintenance. The Child Support Act's failure to recognise this, they argued, was its fundamental flaw. Skinner had sole responsibility for the qualitative study of fathers' willingness to pay maintenance. Additionally, she (with Bradshaw and Stimson) planned the survey. Skinner designed the survey sections dealing with child maintenance, the Child Support Agency, informal financial support, debts and financial settlements.</p> <p>The Department for Work and Pensions commissioned the second research project in the run up to its re-design of the child support system. By 2006, the Government had signalled that it wanted a re-design. Skinner (with York colleagues, Bradshaw and Davidson) was lead researcher on a comparative project on child maintenance schemes in 14 countries. This research confirmed that private agreements between parents about child maintenance were advantageous. It also suggested that the UK compared unfavourably with other countries in terms of the effectiveness and economy of its regime.</p> <p>The third project took place following the legislative changes of 2008. The Department for Work and Pensions commissioned PriceWaterhouseCoopers in 2009 to conduct a qualitative enquiry into willingness to pay child maintenance among 67 parents without agreements. Skinner acted as a research consultant on this project, advising on research design, analysis and findings. She also co-authored the final report. This research extended her earlier research and confirmed its finding that the quality of family relationships is crucial to the making of financial commitments towards children.</p>
<p>3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Bradshaw, J., Stimson, C., Skinner, C. and Williams, J. (1999) <i>Absent Fathers?</i> (London: Routledge). The original ESRC research was peer reviewed at grant stage. It was a major study and the first study to achieve a large sample of non-resident fathers from among the general population. (<i>Available on request</i>) Skinner, C and Davidson, J (2009) 'Recent Trends in Child Maintenance in 14 Countries' <i>International Journal of Law, Policy and the Family</i>, 23: 25-52. DOI:10.1093/lawfam/ebn017. This

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is based on research that was peer reviewed at grant stage and is published in a peer-reviewed, international journal. It was the largest study of its kind, comparing systems across 14 countries.

3. 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, 2011) <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20120716161734/http://www.childmaintenance.org/en/pdf/research/Main-Report-Vol-I.pdf>. This project was peer reviewed at grant application stage.

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

Skinner's research has had two primary impacts. First, it influenced the radical re-design of the child support system through the Child Maintenance and Other Payments Act 2008. Second, it informed further reforms made to this system under the Welfare Reform Act 2012. These impacts occurred by way of three different methods:

Method 1: Establishing a foundational principle for policy re-design

The Child Support Act 1991 is widely regarded as having been a major policy failure. In 1999 Skinner (with Bradshaw, Stimson and Williams) published research with a key finding that became a foundational principle in the subsequent re-design of the system. Skinner and colleagues demonstrated convincingly that the Child Support Act was failing, in large part, due to its failure to recognise the deep connections between non-resident fathers' financial commitments to their children and their social and emotional bonds with those children. The core finding that later provided the foundation for the radical re-design of the Child Support System was as follows:

"The results of this research show that no child support scheme has a prospect of success unless it is based on negotiation between the parents, which is recognised as fair, and the perception of fairness on the fathers' part depends more than anything on their ability (and the former partners' willingness) to have shared parental responsibility for their children... What is needed is a service that enables these fathers and mothers to work out arrangements for child support, contact and other matters that concern them." (1999: 249)

This core finding was acknowledged and confirmed two years later by research commissioned by the Department for Work and Pensions. Referring to the summary of findings of the ESRC's *Population and Household Change Programme* [Source 1, p. 108], Wikeley *et al* reiterated the York research's basic message that negotiation between the parents that is recognised by them as being fair is crucial to rates of compliance with child support law [Source 1, pp, 107; 159; 161]. This principle became central to the eventual re-design of the system. Although it took until 2006 for the Government to signal that it was ready for radical reform, the report that set out the re-design recommendations focused centrally on the core message that parents should be able to take responsibility for making their own arrangements. Citing Wikeley *et al* (who, in turn, had cited the York research), Sir David Henshaw stated:

"Parents who are able to should be encouraged and supported to make their own arrangements. Such arrangements tend to result in higher satisfaction and compliance and allow individual circumstances to be reflected." [Source 2: p. 5]

This core principle was then carried into the Government's White Paper:

"The Government has accepted Sir David's principal recommendations. Based on these it has established four new principles for the reform of the child maintenance system, [the second of which is to] ... promote parental responsibility by encouraging and empowering parents to make their own maintenance arrangements wherever possible..." [Source 3, p. 6]

The new child support system was eventually introduced through the Child Maintenance and Other Payments Act 2008. It reflected the core message of the original York research, embedding the principle of promoting and supporting parental arrangements about child maintenance.

Method 2: Commissioned Research Feeding Directly into Policy Change

Skinner also conducted two further research projects that had been commissioned by policy makers directly to inform policy design and development. The first of these – a comparison of child maintenance systems in 14 countries - was commissioned in 2006 by the Department for Work

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and Pensions to help it undertake the “far-reaching and ambitious” re-design of the child support system [Source 5, p. 5]. The significance of the York research report to the proposed re-design of the system was noted in the Government’s summary of responses to its consultation:

“The report [by Skinner and colleagues] illustrated how the UK’s child maintenance system performs in an international context and drew out potential lessons and policy implications across areas such as private maintenance arrangements, enforcement, administration, and the disregard of child maintenance payments in benefits calculations.” [Source 5, p 90]

The second research project was commissioned in 2009 by the new agency that had by then replaced the Child Support Agency. The Child Maintenance and Enforcement Commission asked a research team from PriceWaterhouseCooper (including Skinner as the academic consultant) to undertake research that would help it understand the behaviour of parents with no formal child maintenance arrangements in place. This research helped the Government understand how more parents could be encouraged to make private agreements. It recommended a range of supportive services that tackled separated family relationships and the practical and emotional consequences of relationship breakdown. In January 2011 the new coalition Government published a Green Paper with proposals to further strengthen the new child support system:

“Central to our approach to reform is an integrated model of relationship and family support services, which helps parents make their own, lasting arrangements.” [Source 8, p. 5]

The Government cited Skinner’s research in its response to the consultation submissions [source 9, pp. 1, 14, & 17], and in the Minister’s public discussion of the proposals [source 10]. In 2012, the government’s proposals were legislated through the Welfare Reform Act. The new policy framework gave due recognition to the complex range of needs with which separating parents may require help before they can focus upon making child maintenance arrangements. Five new ‘Supporting Separated Family Guides’ were produced to offer this support and advice to separating parents. On the last page of each of these guides it is noted that the main sources of research used to write them included Skinner’s work with PriceWaterhouseCooper [source 12].

Method 3: Research Expertise Leading to Academic Consultancies

In addition to producing excellent research on child maintenance, Skinner has also been invited on numerous occasions, as a direct result of her research experience and expertise, to act as an expert consultant.

- She was invited to participate in high-level policy seminars organised to inform the Henshaw review of 2006 and subsequent White Paper. These seminars also involved key Ministers, the DWP’s Director of the Child Support Division responsible for the policy redesign, as well as other academic experts [sources 3, p. 94; source 5, pp. 10-11, para 1.8].
- The House of Commons’ *Work and Pensions Committee* appointed Skinner as one of its two Specialist Advisors to help it respond to the White Paper proposals of 2006 [Source 4, p. 7]. She helped to set the key recommendations for its report. The Committee called on the government to introduce holistic support services dealing with all aspects of parenting in separated families, not just child maintenance obligations.
- Skinner was one of two academic consultants within a research consortium commissioned by the Department for Work and Pensions to conduct a further national survey of separated parents’ experiences and views concerning child maintenance (Source 7, p. 7, fn 6). She assisted in the development of the survey instruments and data analysis. She also commented on drafts of the report. This research confirmed that parents supported private agreements, but only if supported by effective information and support services. This research was relied upon in the Green Paper that preceded the 2012 reforms [source 8, p. 20] and cited in the response to the Green Paper consultations [Source 9, pp. 44, 31]. It also directly informed the development of the 5 new ‘Supporting Separated Family Guides’ (noted above) subsequent to the reforms [source 12].
- In 2008, Skinner presented a paper about her research at a private, high-level policy seminar, chaired by a Minister and attended by the first Chair of the new Child Maintenance and Enforcement Commission and the Director of the DWP’s Child Support Division [source 6]. Her findings were key in the development of *Child Maintenance Options*, a service offering holistic information and support to all separating parents (not just CSA clients), helping them to make

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private agreements (<http://www.cmoptions.org>).

➤ In 2011, Skinner was invited by Maria Millar, the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, to join a 'Family Support Services Steering Group' as an academic expert to help inform the reforms being developed under the Welfare Reform Act 2012 [source 11].

Conclusion

Skinner's body of work, by various means, has impacted significantly on a radical change in child support policy. Equally, it has directly informed the subsequent development of a support infrastructure to promote the success of the new legal regime. Child maintenance obligations are now recognised by policy-makers as being intimately interlinked with family relationships. This has been the consistent message of Skinner's research since the original study in 1995.

However, these primary impacts give way to clear secondary impacts. The policy changes since 2008 affect *all* separated parents in the population, not just CMEC clients. The agency tasked with providing information and support to separating parents (*Child Maintenance Options*) estimates that it has already helped one million parents [source 13]. And in turn, of course, the benefit of those impacts will then be felt by the dependent children of non-widowed lone parents (estimated at 30% of all UK dependent children). The policy move to parental agreements and the delivery of new support services are targeted ultimately at the well-being of children.

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

1. Wikeley, N, Barnett, S, Brown, J, David, G, Diamond, I, Draper, T and Smith, P (2001) *National Survey of Child Support Agency Clients* (Department for Work and Pensions: TSO)
2. Sir David Henshaw (2006) *Recovering Child Support: routes to responsibility* (Cm 6894)
3. White Paper DWP (2006) *A New System of Child Maintenance*, Norwich: TSO
4. House of Common Work and Pensions Committee (2007) *Child Support Reform*, (HC 219-1)
5. DWP (2007) *A new System of Child Maintenance, Summary of Responses To Consultation*, Norwich: TSO
6. Skinner, C. (2008) *Understanding 'Willingness To Pay' Child Maintenance*, presented at private seminar 'Relationship Breakdown And Child Maintenance: Creating A Successful Child Maintenance System', Nuffield Foundation, London, 2.10.2008. (copy on file)
7. Wikeley, N, Ireland, E, Bryson, C and Smith, R (2008) *Relationship Separation and Child Support Study* (Department for Work and Pension Research Report 503, Norwich: TSO).
8. DWP (2011) *Strengthening families, promoting parental responsibility: the future of child maintenance* (Green Paper: Cm 7990)
9. DWP (2011) 'Government's response to the Green Paper consultation *Strengthening families, promoting parental responsibility: the future of child maintenance*'.
10. Radio 4 'Woman's Hour' interview on child maintenance reforms (7/3/11) with Maria Miller MP (Parliamentary Under Secretary of State). She cites Andrews et al 2011 as 'PricewaterhouseCoopers' research. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00fi15k>
11. Letters (2011-12) from the House of Commons inviting Skinner as academic expert to join the 'Family Support Services Steering Group' (on file)
12. Child Maintenance Options 5 'family support guides': <http://www.cmoptions.org/en/toolbox/leaflets.asp>
13. DWP Press Release, 8th May 2013: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/child-maintenance-options-goes-from-strength-to-strength>