

LSAC data on the circumstances and characteristics of families with child support entitlement

Stream: Growing Up in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC)

Author: Ibolya Losoncz
Senior Analyst,
Family Payments and Policy Branch,
Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs
PO Box 7788, Canberra Mail Centre ACT 2610

Email: Ibolya.losoncz@facsia.gov.au
Ph: 02 6121 2331
Fax: 02 6121 2398

Research paper prepared for the Australian Consortium for Social and Political Research Incorporated (ACSPRI) methodology conference, Melbourne, 10-13 December 2006

**LSAC data on the circumstances and characteristics
of families with child support entitlement**

Abstract

With the steady increase in divorce rates and ex-nuptial births over the last two decades in Australia, the arrangements for ongoing financial support of children in non-intact families continues to be of concern. The purpose of this paper is threefold. Firstly, to demonstrate how the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) dataset can be used to provide an insight into the characteristics and circumstances of separated and/or single parent Australian families and the arrangements they have for financial support of their children. Secondly, to compare the information from three data sources [the LSAC survey, the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey and the Child Support Evaluation Dataset (CSED)] on parents (and their child/ren) with child support entitlements. Thirdly, to compare parent and child characteristics and child support related information, as reported by resident parents, for the following four distinct child support arrangement groups: Private Agreement, Private Collection, Child Support Agency (CSA) Collection and No Agreement. In addition, the paper will identify some of the features of LSAC that have limited the extent to which these topics could be explored, and will suggest some modifications to the questionnaire to increase the reliability of the information collected on the child support arrangements of Australian families and to improve the value of this survey to policy workers in the area.

INTRODUCTION

Background

With the steady increase in divorce rates and ex-nuptial births over the last two decades (de Vaus, 2004), ongoing financial support of children in non-intact families will continue to be a concern in Australia as in most industrialised countries. In Australia, the Child Support Scheme was introduced in 1988 to ensure that responsibility for financial support is accepted as a responsibility of both parents.

Central to the scheme was the administrative assessment of child support liability through application of a formula by the Child Support Agency (CSA)¹. While the CSA collects child support payments from non-resident parents by way of voluntary payments as well as deductions from salaries or tax returns, an increasing number of parents are now making their own arrangements for the direct transfer of child support payments. Further, there is anecdotal evidence of increasing numbers of parents making their own agreements regarding the financial assistance to be provided by the non-resident parent. To what extent these agreements are informed and/or guided by the assessment that all separated parent(s) can seek from the CSA is unknown.

The main data source currently used by FACSIA to report on the circumstances of parents (and their child/ren) with child support entitlement is the CSED, a yearly snapshot of child support case data received from the CSA, matched with Centrelink administrative records held by the Longitudinal Data Warehouse. The CSA has calculated that most (94 per cent) parents who are eligible to seek an *assessment* (i.e. all separated parents with children) do so (Ministerial Taskforce on Child Support, 2005, p.76). However, preliminary analysis of the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) survey suggested that the proportion of parents with a child support entitlement who have reported to have a child support *agreement decided by a CSA* assessment is much lower.

Another unexplored area is the compliance level of all parents with child support obligations. The CSA reports that only 47.2 per cent of the CSA Collect active clients had paid their full liabilities in 2004-05², while an additional 19.2 per cent paid over 75 per cent of their liabilities (Child Support Agency, 2005, p.44). The report also asserts that if Private Collect cases were included, then the proportion of parents paying their full liability would have been 72 per cent. However, the CSA collects compliance data on CSA Collect cases only, which represents less than half of all CSA registered and assessed cases, and while a high compliance rate is assumed for

¹ While child support is a private transfer between separated parents, Government offsets its contribution to the additional costs supporting separated families by reducing Family Tax Benefit (FTB) by a proportion of child support received – the maintenance income test (MIT). When a non-resident parent has earning capacity to pay child support above threshold, the MIT operates by reducing a resident parent's FTB Part A payment by 50 cents for each dollar above the threshold until it drops to base rate. FTB Part A customers are required to take reasonable maintenance action within 28 days to qualify for above base rate Part A.

² The liability and payment amounts used to calculate this figure refer to the 12 months, not for the life of the Scheme.

Non-CSA Collect cases³, there is no real data to establish compliance rates among Private Collect parents or parents who have reached an agreement outside of the CSA.

Another potential existing data source to obtain more information on parents with child support entitlements is the ABS survey report Family Characteristics, Australia, June 2003. Unfortunately, the data from the 2003 Family Characteristics Survey substantially (by 40 per cent) understates the number of people entitled to child support when compared with the administrative data from the CSA and, as such, cannot be used for analysis/research.

The rationale for this research comes from the recommendations in the Report of the Ministerial Taskforce on Child Support, 2005 which placed a strong emphasis on directing FACSIA to undertake or commission research on the circumstances of child support payers and payees. The recommendation also stated that FACSIA should be in a position to provide expert advice to Government about the operation of the scheme independently of the data provided by the CSA.

Objectives

The objectives of this paper are threefold:

1. To evaluate the extent to which the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) dataset can be used to provide an insight into the characteristics and circumstances of separated and/or single parent Australian families and the arrangements they have for financial support of their children;
2. To compare the information from three data sources [the LSAC survey, the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey and the Child Support Evaluation Dataset (CSED)] on parents (and their child/ren) with child support entitlements; and
3. To compare parent and child characteristics and child support related information, as reported by resident parents, for the following four distinct child support arrangement groups: Private Agreement, Private Collection, Child Support Agency (CSA) Collection, and No Agreement.

³ Family Tax Benefit (FTB) recipients who have 30% care or more for their child must take reasonable action for maintenance. If reasonable action to obtain maintenance is not taken, only the base rate of FTB Part A is payable in respect of the child.

METHODOLOGY

Data sources

LSAC

Data for this project is from the first wave of the LSAC. LSAC, or the *Growing Up in Australia*, is a nationally representative large sample size longitudinal survey study which sets out to examine Australian early childhood development to inform social policy debate for two cohorts of children. Data for this study comes from the first wave of the survey.

The main phase of the wave1 interviews took place from March until November 2004. Children in the infant cohort were born between March 2003 and February 2004 and the majority of infants were aged 4 to 13 months. Children in the 4 year old cohort were born between March 1999 and February 2000 and the majority of children were aged 4 years 4 months to 5 years 2 months. Only one child per family is included in the survey, even in cases where more than one target child in a family was sampled. There are 5,107 records in the infant dataset and 4,983 records in the child (4 year old) dataset.

Although the LSAC survey was primarily designed to analyse early childhood development and thus the sampling unit is the study child, the sample was selected to be representative of *families* of infants and 4 year olds and so it is appropriate to use the LSAC data for analysis of family and parental characteristics⁴ (Baxter, Gray, Alexander, Strazdins & Bittman, 2006).

Parents (and their children) with child support entitlement were identified from the Non-Resident Parent Section of the survey. To identify parents with a potential child support entitlement we have selected all parents with a child/infant who has at least one parent living elsewhere (excluding cases where the other parent is not known, or doesn't know about the child or the child is the result of rape). The final weighted sample comprised 840 cases for the child group (i.e. parents with a potential child support entitlement for the 4 year old study child), and 523 cases for the infant group (i.e. parents with a potential child support entitlement for the less than 1 year old study child).

HILDA

HILDA is a nationally representative large sample longitudinal survey of Australian households. The primary objective of HILDA is to provide supporting data for research into income, labour market and family dynamics. Data for this study comes from the third wave of the survey, collected largely between August 2003 and March 2004. This wave comprises 7,096 households and 12,728 individuals.

Parents with a child support entitlement were identified from the Family Formation Section of the survey. To identify a comparable set of parents with a potential child support entitlement we have selected all parents with a 4 year and less than 1 year old child who has another parent(s) living elsewhere (excluding cases where children

⁴ In Wave1, detailed information is only collected about parents who live in the same household as the study child.

were adopted). The final weighted sample comprised 56 cases for the child group (i.e. parents with a potential child support entitlement for a 4 year old child), and 24 for the infant group (i.e. parents with a potential child support entitlement for a child younger than 1 year old).

CSED

The CSED is a point in time dataset developed by FACSIA, linking extractions from the CSA Client Research Unit Data and extractions from the FACSIA Longitudinal Data Warehouse (when available), for research, analysis and modelling of policy directions and proposals. The dataset used for this study consisted of CSA cases that were current at 30 June 2004.

To identify a comparable set of parents with a potential child support entitlement we selected all CSA payee customers with a 4 year and less than 1 year old child. The final population comprised 54,212 cases for the child group (i.e. parents with a child support entitlement for a 4 year old child), and 22,104 for the infant group (i.e. parents with a potential child support entitlement for a child younger than 1 year old).

Variable and group description

All the information reported from the survey is based on the resident parent's response only. Further, all analysis will be presented separately for the child and the infant cohort, due to the potentially different circumstances around separation, especially length of time between separation and interview, and subsequent differences in the child support arrangements made by these two cohorts.

Demographic characteristics

Demographic characteristics analysed in this paper include; gender, age, marital status, country of birth, ATSI origin, highest educational attainment, employment status, tenure and yearly gross income of the eligible parent, as well as marital status of parents prior to separation and the age of child when the parents stopped living together.

Child support related variables

Child support related variables reported in this paper include; expected and transferred child support liabilities, the difference between the two, whether this difference occurred by agreement between parents and additional assistance received from the other parent.

Other relevant variables

Other relevant variables analysed in this paper include; how far apart the child and the non-resident parent live, time since child last saw his/her other parent, frequency and duration of usual contact with other parent, frequency the child stays overnight with his/her other parent, as well as the extent of contact and hostility between parents (i.e. disagreement about basic child-rearing issues, involving the other parent in major decisions about the child, and level of anger and hostility).

Child support arrangement groups

All of the above variables will be compared for the following four groups, developed using the child support arrangement in place as reported by the eligible parent:

- ***Private Agreement***
Resident parents with a private child support agreement and collection method;
- ***Private Collect***
Resident parents with an assessment by the CSA or Court but with payment made directly between the parents;
- ***CSA Collect***
Resident parents with an assessment made by the CSA or Court and collection by the CSA; and
- ***No Agreement***
Resident parents with a child support entitlement but without a formal child support or private child maintenance agreement on child support.

For further details on the construction of these groups refer to Appendix A.

Statistical analysis

Means and frequency distributions of the above variables on all groups will be presented and compared with each other in a tabular format, occasionally supported by descriptive charts. All our results from the LSCA and HILDA surveys are weighted using the relevant weight variables included in the dataset (LSAC – each cohort survey and population child weight, HILDA – responding person survey and population weight).

RESULTS

Population size and basic characteristics of parents with potential child support eligibility from available datasets

Our estimation and analysis of the number of parents with child support eligibility and their basic demographic characteristics found a considerable difference between the three available datasets (LSAC, HILDA⁵ and CSED) for both cohorts.

Child (4 year old) cohort

Basic demographic profiles of child support eligible parents from the three available datasets are presented in Table 1. The estimated number of parents in Australia with a potential child support eligibility (for a 4 year old child) was much higher in the HILDA survey (68,146) than in the LSAC survey (42,673). We are not aware of any apparent reasons for such a large difference⁶ in the estimation of the study population between the two datasets. The data collection periods for the two surveys closely over-lapped and the counting rules for selecting parents from the datasets with potential child support eligibility was identical. The number of parents with child support eligibility in the CSED was found to be in between the two surveys (54,212).

This result is contrary to our expectations. We expected the number of parents with potential child support liability to be similar in the two surveys, while the number of parents assessed to have a child support eligibility by the CSA to be somewhat lower (as not all parents with a child support eligibility would seek an assessment from the CSA). One possibility for such a large difference between the two surveys is the relatively small number of observations of the study population (i.e. 59 cases) in the HILDA survey. On the other hand the size of the weighted population in the HILDA survey makes more sense, in relation to the population in the CSED, than the much smaller weighted population size in the LSAC survey.

Analysis of basic demographic characteristics of the study population from the three datasets (see Table 1) also found a considerable difference between the three datasets. While the LSAC survey and the CSED presented a relatively similar distribution in terms of gender, age, and country of birth, the HILDA survey seemed to over represent, relative to the other two datasets, male respondents as well as respondents between the ages of 25-34 years and those born in Australia. The proportion of those with Indigenous origin was very similar in the three datasets as well as the proportion of those indicating that they were also paying child support for children living elsewhere. Interestingly, Indigenous parents represented a relatively large proportion of parents with child support eligibility (approximately 8 per cent) compared to their prevalence in the general population (2.4 per cent) (ABS, 2001). Marital status was not entirely comparable between the three datasets due to definitional differences between a separation and a de facto relationship (see Table 1).

⁵ Results from HILDA should be treated with extreme caution due to the extremely low sample size.

⁶ Compared to the Census both surveys are somewhat over-representative of dual parent families. Specifically, LSAC under represents single parent families. The size of this discrepancy is reduced somewhat through the weighting process, but gaps of 2.9 (child cohort) and 1.2 (infant cohort) percentage points still exist.

Gross annual income for the study population was only available from the two surveys. Analysis of the two surveys found the income of the HILDA study population to be more polarised. That is, the proportion of those with a weekly income below \$400 per week or \$700 or more per week is approximately 10 percentage points higher, for both instances, in the HILDA survey than in the LSAC survey⁷. Correspondingly, the proportion of those with a weekly income between \$400 and \$599 per week was found to be much higher in the LSAC survey (35.9 per cent) than in the HILDA survey (21.8 per cent).

Infant (0 year old) cohort

The difference between the three datasets on the (population weighted) number of parents with potential child support eligibility for the infant cohort was not as large as the difference observed for the child cohort. Furthermore, the observed differences seem to make more sense. The highest population number again was reported in the HILDA survey (29,961). Numbers were somewhat lower in the LSAC survey (24,898) and in the CSED (22,104). The considerable difference in the size of the estimated population between the two surveys could be due to the relatively small sample size of the study population (i.e. 24) in the HILDA survey. Also, the relatively smaller population size in the CSED makes sense, as not all parents with child support eligibility would seek an assessment from the CSA.

When we examined basic demographic characteristics of the study population from the three datasets (see Table 2) we found a similar distribution between the three groups⁸. Not surprisingly, males accounted for less than two per cent of our study population in all three datasets. While the LSAC survey and the CSED presented a relatively similar age distribution of our study population, in the HILDA survey we found respondents between the ages of 25-34 to be under represented, while respondents over the age of 35 were over represented, relative to the other two datasets. Similarly to the child cohort, the proportion of those born in Australia appeared higher in the HILDA survey. Given the small sample size in HILDA, these differences may simply be due to chance. Indigenous parents represented an even larger proportion of parents with child support eligibility (over 10 per cent) than in the child cohort. Also, they accounted for a higher proportion of all parents with child support eligibility in the two surveys than in the CSED, possibly indicating that those with an Indigenous origin are less likely to seek an assessment from the CSA.

Gross annual income for the study population was only available from the two surveys. When comparing these two surveys, the income of our study population was found to be higher in the HILDA dataset. The proportion of those with a weekly income below \$400 per week was 41.9 per cent in the LSAC compared to only 9.2 per cent in the HILDA⁵. Again, this difference may be partly be due to the small sample size used in HILDA.

⁷ It should be noted the self-reported income surveys tend to have a low reliability rate at the lower income end. A significant proportion of respondents reported an amount below the rate of government benefits for a single parent with one child.

⁸ Due to the small number of observations of our study population in the HILDA survey some categories had to be aggregated.

Table 1 **Basic demographic characteristics of the study population (child cohort) in the LSAC, HILDA surveys and CSED**

	LSAC	HILDA	CSED
Population weighted No.	42,673	68,146	54,212
Sample weighted No.	840	56	n/a
	%	%	%
Sex of resident parent			
Female	96.5	85.6	93.1
Male	3.5	14.4*	6.9
Age group (years)			
Less than 24	11.3	9.9*	16.2
25 -29	23.9	36.2	28.6
30 - 34	29.1	35.3	28.1
35 - 39	22.1	10.2*	17.6
40 - 44	9.2	6.4**	7.5
45 - 49	3.4	1.0**	1.6
50 and over	0.9	1.0**	0.3
Marital status			
Legally married and living with spouse	5.4	2.3**	4.9
De facto	10.7	8.0*	9.4
Divorced/separated from legal marriage	46.4	42.5	n/a
Never legally married and currently not de facto	36.6	47.1	n/a
Divorced/separated from legal marriage or from de facto	n/a	n/a	64.6
Never legally married or de facto and currently not de facto	n/a	n/a	17.4
Widowed	0.5	0.0**	0.1
Missing / cannot be determined	9.4	0.0**	3.6
Country of birth			
Australia	82.2	89.8	82.2
Overseas			
Main-English-speaking	6.3	5.4**	6.8
Other	11.5	4.8**	11.1
Indigenous status			
Indigenous	7.8	8.4*	7.3
Non-indigenous	92.2	91.6	80.0
Missing	0.0	0.0	12.7
Also pay child support for any children living elsewhere			
Yes	2.3	3.5**	3.9
No	97.7	96.5	96.1
Yearly gross income of respondent and partner (if any) (\$/week)			
Less than \$299 ^a	7.6	10.4*	n/a
\$300 - \$399 ^a	17.2	21.9*	n/a
\$400 - \$499	19.4	9.4*	n/a
\$500 - \$599	16.5	12.4*	n/a
\$600 - \$699	10.9	10.4*	n/a
\$700 - \$799	4.6	13.9*	n/a
\$800 - \$999	6.9	7.6**	n/a
\$1,000 - \$1,499	6.5	11.4*	n/a
\$1,500 or more	4.7	1.4**	n/a
Don't know/Refused/Missing	5.7	1.3**	n/a

Source: LSAC, Wave 1; HILDA, Wave3, Release 4; CSED, 2004

(a) Below the rate of government benefits for a single parent with one child.

* Estimate has a relative standard error of 25% to 50% and should be used with caution.

** Estimate has a relative standard error greater than 50% and is considered unreliable for general use.

Table 2 **Basic demographic characteristics of the study population (infant cohort) in the LSAC, HILDA surveys and CSED**

	LSAC	HILDA	CSED
Population weighted No.	24,898	29,961	22,104
Sample weighted No.	523	24	n/a
	%	%	%
Sex of resident parent			
Female	99.6	98.3	98.7
Male	0.4	1.7**	1.3
Age group (years)			
Less than 20	11.9	13.7**	12.4
20 - 24	26.6	32.4*	33.8
25 -29	24.4	16.3**	24.9
30 - 34	20.3	9.8**	17.5
35 - 39	9.6	26.2*	8.7
40 and over	7.2	1.7**	2.6
Marital status			
Legally married and living with spouse or de facto	3.1	3.9**	3.7
Divorced/separated from legal marriage	27.5	25.9*	n/a
Never legally married and currently not de facto	69.0	70.3*	n/a
Divorced/separated from legal marriage or from de facto	n/a	n/a	53.1
Never legally married or de facto and currently not de facto	n/a	n/a	43.0
Widowed	0.4	0.0**	0.2
Country of birth			
Australia	85.1	79.0	85.9
Overseas	14.9	21.0*	14.1
Indigenous status			
Indigenous	12.4	15.8*	9.5
Non-indigenous	87.6	84.2	85.4
Missing	0.0	0.0	5.1
Also pay child support for children living elsewhere			
Yes	2.9	3.5**	4.8
No	97.1	96.5	95.2
Yearly gross income of respondent and partner (if any) (\$/week)			
Less than \$300 ^a	11.8	2.3**	n/a
\$300 - \$399 ^a	30.2	6.9**	n/a
\$400 - \$499	27.7	41.7*	n/a
\$500 - \$599	12.3	26.1*	n/a
\$600 - \$699	6.7	11.7**	n/a
\$700 – or more	7.2	11.2**	n/a
Don't know/Refused/Missing	4.2	0.0	n/a

Source: LSAC, Wave 1; HILDA, Wave3, Release 4; CSED, 2004

(a) Below the rate of government benefits for a single parent with one child.

* Estimate has a relative standard error of 25% to 50% and should be used with caution.

** Estimate has a relative standard error greater than 50% and is considered unreliable for general use.

Child support arrangement groups

Child support arrangements for both cohorts are presented in Table 3. When parents with a potential child support eligibility were asked if they “have either a formal child support or private child maintenance agreement with the child’s other parent”, less than three-quarters indicated that they had such an agreement. Indicating no agreement was higher in the infant cohort (31.4 per cent) than in the child cohort (24.9 per cent). The surprisingly high proportion of child support eligible parents who reported not to have an agreement raises some significant concerns regarding the design of the LSAC questionnaire and the extent it can reliably report on the child

support arrangements of separated and single parents. This topic will be addressed further under the *Discussion and Implications, LSAC questionnaire* section, p. 27.

Of the respondents who reported having an agreement, 73.8 per cent of the child cohort and 65.4 per cent of the infant cohort reported that their arrangement was decided by the CSA, while 21.0 per cent of the child cohort and 30.5 per cent of the infant cohort reported that their arrangement was decided by an agreement with the other parent.

In the child cohort payments were equally likely to be received through the CSA or directly from other parent (44.4 per cent and 44.0 per cent respectively), while in the infant cohort payments were twice as likely to be received directly from the other parent than through the CSA (62.4 per cent and 30.4 per cent respectively). This may be partly attributable to the shorter time since separation in the infant cohort.

Based on the child support arrangement in place, as reported by the eligible parent, we identified four distinct groups⁹;

- ***Private Agreement***
Resident parents with a private child support agreement and collection method;
- ***Private Collect***
Resident parents with an assessment by the CSA or Court but with payment made directly between the parents;
- ***CSA Collect***
Resident parents with an assessment made by the CSA or Court and collection by the CSA; and
- ***No Agreement***
Resident parents with a child support entitlement but without a formal child support or private child maintenance agreement on child support.

The proportion of resident parents who reported not to have a child support agreement was surprisingly high. Further analysis has found that this group included a considerable number of cases (10) where the respondent was either a grandparent, a relative or a foster parent of the study child (rather than the biological parent), as well as an additional 33 cases where a respondent was in a relationship with the child's other parent even though they were not living together. These cases, as well as an additional seven cases where the separation took place within three months of the interview (indicating that these parents were probably in the process of working out their child support arrangements) were excluded from the No Agreement group.

Additional analysis of this reduced group has found that a quarter (25.1 per cent) of these respondents reported an amount larger than \$0 when asked about the amount of payment they expected to receive from the child's other parent (for the child), or the amount they have actually received from the child's other parent (for the child). This indicates that these respondents have misinterpreted the question (see the further discussion under *Discussion and Implications, LSAC questionnaire*, p. 27) and were therefore excluded from the No Agreement category and from further group analysis.

⁹ For further discussion on the accuracy of distribution of respondents in child support arrangement groups please refer to discussion on LSAC questionnaire on p. 27-28.

Table 3 Child support arrangements for child and infant cohort

	Child cohort		Infant cohort	
	Sample weighted No.	%	Sample weighted No.	%
Child support agreement with other parent				
Yes	601	71.6	345	65.9
No	209	24.9	164	31.4
Refused/Don't know	9	1.0	9	1.6
Not applicable	20	2.4	6	1.1
Total	840	100.0	523	100.0
Child support arrangement was decided by				
CSA	444	73.8	225	65.4
Court	12	1.9	3	0.8
Neither – agreed with other parent	126	21.0	105	30.5
Neither – other	16	2.7	10	2.9
Don't know/Refused/Missing	3	0.5	2	0.5
Total	601	100.0	345	100.0
Child support payments received through				
CSA (or Centrelink)	267	44.4	105	30.4
Directly from other parent	265	44.0	215	62.4
Neither	63	10.5	22	6.4
Don't know/Refused/Missing	7	1.1	3	0.8
Total	601	100.0	345	100.0

Source: LSAC, Wave 1

Estimated population numbers for the four child support arrangement groups are presented in Table 4. The distribution of the four groups within the two cohorts is somewhat different. In the child cohort, the largest group is the CSA Collect group (31.8 per cent), followed by the Private Collect group (23.1 per cent). The remaining parents were nearly equally split between the No Agreement (16.2 per cent) and Private Agreement (15.2 per cent) groups.

In the infant cohort, the largest group is the Private Collect group (24.7 per cent). The remaining parents were nearly equally split between Private Agreement and CSA Collect (approximately 20 per cent each) and No Agreement groups (18.5 per cent).

Table 4 Child support arrangement groups for child and infant cohort

	Child cohort		Infant cohort	
	Sample weighted No.	%	Sample weighted No.	%
Child support arrangement groups				
No Agreement	136	16.2	97	18.5
Private Agreement	128	15.2	107	20.5
Private Collect	194	23.1	129	24.7
CSA Collect	267	31.8	105	20.1
Cannot be determined/excluded	115	13.7	85	16.3
Total	840	100.0	523	100.0

Source: LSAC, Wave 1

The major difference when we compare the distribution of the type of arrangements reported by the child cohort, with that of the infant cohort, is a considerably lower proportion of parents with Private Agreement and No Agreement and a correspondingly higher proportion of parents with a CSA Collect arrangement in the child cohort. There are a number of feasible explanations for this difference. One is that parents of younger children, who are also younger themselves, are less likely to opt for a CSA Collect agreement and are more likely to choose agreements made

between the parents. Alternatively, between cohort differences may relate to the disparate length of time between separation and the interview in the two cohorts. A relatively shorter time in the infant cohort could suggest; limited opportunities for parents to work out an agreement, a tendency to start with Private Agreements, and lower instances of non-compliance to necessitate CSA Collect arrangements.

Characteristics of parents with potential child support eligibility and differences between child support arrangement groups

The demographic characteristics of parents with potential child support eligibility and the distribution of those characteristics within each group are presented in Table 5. Our analysis has found a systematic relationship between type of child support arrangements (i.e. Private Agreement, Private Collect, CSA Collect, and No Agreement) and circumstances and demographic composition of parents.

Private Agreement

Age appeared to be related to Private Agreements in both cohorts. Parents who had their child, for whom the arrangement was made, in their late twenties were more likely to have a Private Agreement than their older or younger counterparts.

Private Agreements were also more likely to be used by resident parents with high educational attainment. However, this relationship was only observable in the child cohort. The lack of an observable relationship in the infant cohort is probably due to the lower proportion of parents with a bachelor degree than in the child cohort.

Similarly to education, employment status only appeared to be related to Private Agreements in the child cohort, where employed respondents were more likely to have a Private Agreement than those unemployed or not in the labour force. Not surprisingly, compared to the child cohort, respondents from the infant cohort were less likely to be employed or be in the labour force, which probably explains the lack of observable relationship in the infant cohort.

Home ownership (either owning or paying off) is also positively related to Private Agreement in the child cohort. Possibly because of the low prevalence of home ownership in the infant cohort, the relationship between home ownership and type of agreement was not evident in the infant cohort.

Parents who have lived together with the child's other parent (either legally married or de facto) are also more likely to have a Private Agreement than those who never lived together. This relationship was more observable in the infant cohort.

In summary, Private Agreements were more likely to be used by resident parents with high educational attainment, employed resident parents and in cases where the parents have lived together.

Table 5 Demographic characteristics of parents with potential child support eligibility by child support arrangement groups

	Child cohort					Infant cohort				
	No Agreement %	Private Agreement %	Private Collect %	CSA Collect %	Total ^a %	No Agreement %	Private Agreement %	Private Collect %	CSA Collect %	Total ^a %
Sex of the resident parent										
Female	92.7	97.5	98.8	96.7	96.5	99.1	100.0	98.9	100.0	99.6
Male	7.9	2.5	1.2	3.3	3.5	0.9	0.0	1.1	0.0	0.4
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Age group (years)										
Under 20	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	16.6	10.8	7.4	12.7	11.9
20 – 24	16.6	11.0	6.8	11.4	11.3	23.8	35.7	32.3	22.3	26.6
25 – 29	21.7	19.6	26.1	28.6	23.9	16.7	22.7	28.3	25.9	24.4
30 – 34	33.1	38.1	26.4	24.9	29.1	24.4	15.8	19.0	25.6	20.3
35 – 39	14.9	21.1	25.8	24.6	22.0	7.8	10.7	5.8	8.8	9.6
40 – 44	7.9	8.3	10.8	7.7	9.2	7.7	4.3	7.1	3.3	5.3
45 and over	5.8	1.9	3.6	2.9	4.4	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.4	1.9
Refused or not answered	0.0	0.0	0.6	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Current marital status										
Legally married and living with spouse	3.6	3.4	3.8	6.8	5.4	1.2	0.8	1.6	2.9	3.1
De facto	12.2	7.7	8.6	12.6	10.7	15.9	34.3	26.0	29.2	27.5
Divorced/separated	37.1	45.6	58.3	43.6	46.4	0.0	0.0	1.4	0.0	0.4
Widowed	0.0	0.5	1.1	0.0	0.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Single ^b	46.1	42.8	27.6	36.9	36.6	82.9	64.9	71.0	67.9	69.0
Cannot be determined	0.0	0.0	0.5	0.0	0.4	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Country of birth										
Australia	79.6	82.9	85.6	80.8	82.2	82.5	86.3	90.1	87.1	85.1
Overseas	20.4	17.1	14.4	19.2	17.8	17.5	13.7	9.9	12.9	14.9
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Indigenous status										
Non-Indigenous	85.6	94.3	96.3	92.9	92.2	81.9	89.3	94.1	90.3	87.6
Indigenous	14.4	5.7	3.7	7.1	7.8	18.1	10.7	5.9	9.7	12.4
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Highest educational attainment										
Bachelor Degree or Higher Advanced Diploma or Diploma	9.4	14.8	14.8	10.4	11.5	10.5	5.5	5.3	4.2	6.2
Trade Certificate and/or Yr12	25.7	19.3	26.6	21.3	23.3	21.8	24.6	39.9	29.8	28.1
Completed Yr 10	36.6	40.2	38.4	48.0	41.9	33.2	50.2	32.6	38.5	41.3
Below Yr 10	26.7	12.4	12.5	14.2	16.3	29.1	16.4	15.1	19.1	18.1
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Sample weighted number of resident parents	136	128	194	267	840	97	107	129	105	523

Source: LSAC, Wave 1

(a) Counting all respondents, including those excluded from group analysis.

(b) Never legally married and currently not de facto.

Table 5 Demographic characteristics of parents with potential child support eligibility by child support arrangement groups (cont.)

	Child cohort					Infant cohort				
	No Agreement %	Private Agreement %	Private Collect %	CSA Collect %	Total ^a %	No Agreement %	Private Agreement %	Private Collect %	CSA Collect %	Total ^a %
Employment status										
Employed	36.4	47.3	47.4	40.1	41.6	16.4	19.1	23.6	24.3	21.5
Unemployed	10.7	5.9	10.0	11.0	10.1	10.8	5.2	13.4	5.3	8.2
Not in labour force	52.8	46.0	42.6	48.9	47.9	72.7	75.6	63.0	70.4	70.1
Unable to determine	0.8	0.8	0.0	0.0	0.4	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Yearly gross income of respondent and partner (if any) (\$/week)										
Less than \$300 ^b	10.6	4.8	6.1	7.4	7.6	16.9	7.3	6.9	9.8	11.7
\$300 - \$399 ^b	26.7	19.2	12.4	15.0	17.2	43.3	34.0	27.9	24.0	30.2
\$400 - \$499	16.4	15.5	19.5	20.9	19.4	19.1	29.7	35.2	31.3	27.7
\$500 - \$599	10.8	25.4	19.2	14.7	16.5	4.5	8.7	14.5	17.9	12.3
\$600 - \$699	5.8	7.7	13.8	11.9	10.9	3.9	7.2	9.3	6.7	6.7
\$700 - \$799	5.7	4.3	5.5	4.2	4.6	3.0	4.6	5.3	6.2	4.2
\$800 - \$999	3.8	5.6	10.1	7.6	6.9					
\$1,000 - \$1,499	10.2	7.3	3.2	7.7	6.5	3.5	2.0	0.0	1.8	2.9
\$1,500 or more	2.3	7.7	3.4	4.8	4.7					
Don't know/Refused/Missing	7.7	2.6	6.7	5.8	5.7	5.8	6.4	0.9	2.3	4.2
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Nature of relationship (historical) with child's other parent										
Were legally married	28.7	43.5	57.8	42.1	41.8	3.4	16.6	15.6	16.2	13.7
Have lived together	40.7	43.8	33.5	48.8	42.3	40.3	55.8	44.5	47.1	48.3
Never lived together	29.4	12.7	8.8	9.2	15.3	56.3	27.6	39.8	36.7	37.6
Don't know/refused	1.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.4
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
How old was child when you stopped living with his/her other parent?										
Never lived together	29.4	12.7	8.8	9.2	15.3	56.3	27.6	39.8	36.7	37.6
Before child's birth	10.1	7.4	6.2	17.4	10.5	32.3	43.9	34.9	43.8	38.0
Less than 12 months	14.7	18.7	12.0	18.8	15.5	11.4	28.5	23.2	18.1	23.2
1 up to 2 years	12.7	24.6	15.9	15.4	14.1	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
2 up to 3 years	13.9	25.9	28.4	18.2	18.8	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
3 or more years	17.9	10.6	28.8	21.1	25.2	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Don't know/refused	1.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.6	0.0	0.0	2.1	1.4	1.2
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Sample weighted number of resident parents	136	128	194	267	840	97	107	129	105	523

Source: LSAC, Wave 1

(a) Counting all respondents, including those excluded from group analysis.

(b) Below the rate of government benefits for a single parent with one child.

Private Collect

Age only appeared to be related to Private Collect arrangements in the infant cohort, where parents between the ages of 25 and 34 years were more likely to have Private Collect arrangements than their younger counterparts. Private Agreements were also more likely to be used by resident parents with medium to high educational attainment. In the infant cohort, resident parents with Trade Certificate and/or Year 12 were more likely to have a Private Collect arrangement than parents with Year 10 or below.

Employment status only appeared to be related to Private Collect arrangements in the child cohort, where employed respondents were more likely to have a Private Collect arrangement than those not in the labour force. Probably because of the relatively low employment of resident parents in the infant cohort a similar relationship was not evident.

Home ownership (either owning or paying off) is also positively related to Private Collect arrangements in the child cohort. Possibly because of the low prevalence of home ownership in the infant cohort, the relationship between home ownership and type of agreement was not evident in the infant cohort.

Parents with medium to high income were more likely to have Private Collect arrangements than those on lower income. This relationship was more observable in the infant cohort (see Figure 2). However, this association did not continue into the highest income groups. Parents who were legally married and who stayed together longer after the birth of their child are also more likely to have a Private Collect arrangement in both cohorts.

In both cohorts, Private Collect arrangements are particularly uncommon among Indigenous resident parents, and in the child cohort it was particularly uncommon among resident parents who are currently single.

In summary, resident parents in the Private Collect arrangement group reported relatively high home ownership, Year 12 or above educational attainment, medium to high income level, and in the infant group being legally married prior to separation.

CSA Collect

Parents with a longer interval since separation were more likely to have a CSA Collect agreement. Re-coupling of the resident parent in the child cohort also appeared to be positively related to this arrangement. This may partly be due to higher conflict between parents or increased time since separation—an indicator related to an increase in CSA Collect arrangements.

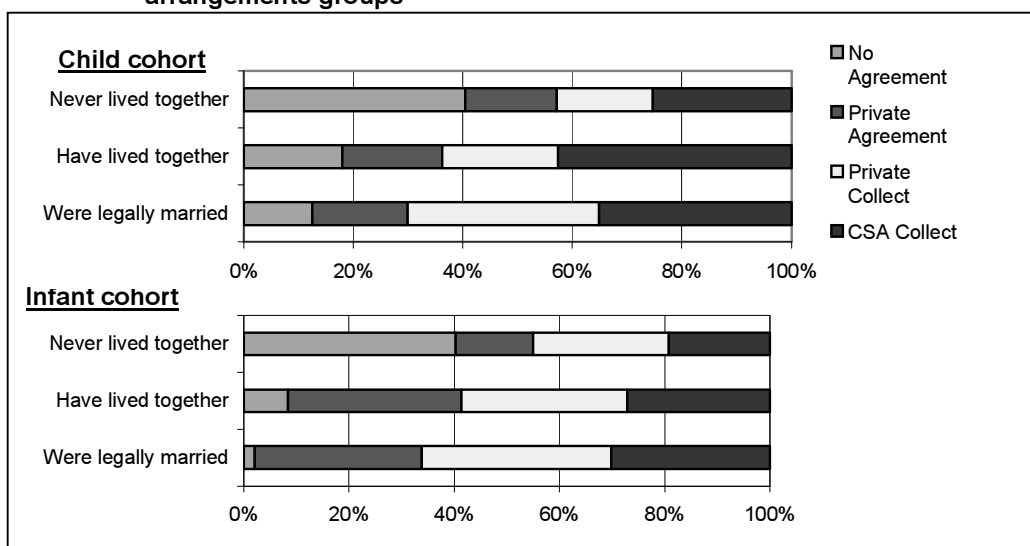
In the child cohort only, resident parents who only completed Year 10 were more likely to have CSA Collect arrangements than those with higher education attainment.

In the infant cohort, resident parents on a medium income level are more likely to have CSA Collect arrangements than those on a lower income (see Figure 2), however, in the child cohort no such relationship was observable.

In the child cohort, de-facto relationship prior to separation is highly related to this arrangement. In both cohorts, parents who stopped living together before the child was born are most likely to have a CSA Collect agreement. Private rental is also most related to CSA Collect arrangements in both cohorts. Age of the resident parent and their employment status, on the other hand, did not appear to be related to this child support arrangement type.

In summary, parents with a longer interval since separation were more likely to have a CSA Collect agreement. This arrangement was found to be highly related to a de-facto relationship prior to separation as well as separation before the birth of the child. Private rental was particularly prevalent among this arrangement group.

Figure 1 Nature of relationship (historical) with other parent by child support arrangements groups



Source: LSAC, Wave 1

No Agreement

Due to the small number of males with potential child support eligibility in the LSAC survey gender related observations need to be treated with caution. However, even with this relatively small sample size we can safely conclude that in the child cohort males are more likely to have no agreement about child support with the child's other parent than females.

In terms of age, there is a relative over-representation of younger parents (under 24 years in the child cohort and under 20 years in the infant cohort) and older (45 years and over in the child cohort and 40 years and over in the infant cohort) parents in the No Agreement group. Parents who never lived together were most likely to not have an agreement. This relationship appeared to be very strong in both cohorts.

Other groups over represented in the No Agreement category are Indigenous parents, (13.4 per cent in the child cohort compared to 7.8 per cent in the total child cohort and 20.2 per cent in the infant cohort compared to 14.9 per cent in the total infant cohort).

In both cohorts, parents with low educational attainment, and those not in the labour force, were also more likely to have no agreement than those with a higher educational attainment. Interestingly, in the infant cohort parents with high

educational attainment also had a relatively high representation in the No Agreement group.

In both cohorts, non-resident parents reporting low income were also more likely to not have an agreement. However, in both cohorts, there is also a sizable proportion of non-resident parents on relatively high income who did not have an agreement (see Figure 2). Private rental was also closely related to having no agreement in both cohorts.

A more detailed analysis of this group has found that there are at least four distinct sub-groups within parents reporting no child support agreement¹⁰. One distinct group (representing about seven per cent of the No Agreement group) are cases where the children spend an equal or nearly equal amount of time with the non-resident parent (i.e. shared care arrangements). Parents in these situations are probably less likely to make a formal child support agreement.

The second group (representing just over 15 per cent of respondents in the No Agreement group) is those of Indigenous origin. These Indigenous resident parents reported very low employment rate and education levels (with only a couple of respondents reporting education above Year 10) and very low income. All of these respondents were on some form of income support and none of the respondents reported home ownership (owning or paying off). Just under half of these respondents have not lived with the child's other parent and those who did, reported a de-facto relationship from which the majority have separated more than a year ago. This tends to indicate that at least for Indigenous parents, this lack of arrangements is a permanent, rather than a temporary, situation. In the majority of these cases resident parents reported a low contact between the child and non-resident parent, and a similarly low contact between parents as well as a relatively high level of hostility.

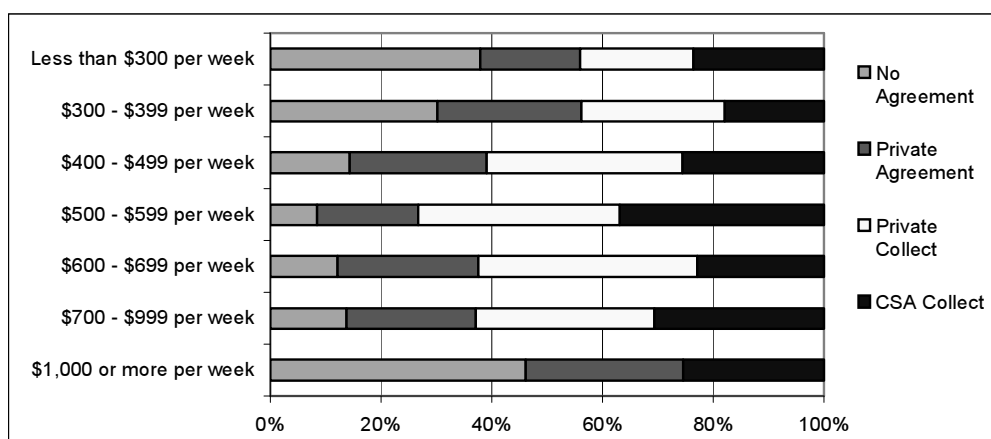
The third group (representing about a third of the respondents in the No Agreement group) is formed of parents with low education level (Year 10 or below), very low employment rate (just over 10 per cent), and relatively low income or home ownership. Compared to others in the No Agreement group these respondents were also much more likely to have been in a de facto relationship prior to separation (as opposed to being married or not living together).

The fourth distinct group (representing just under 15 per cent of the respondents in the No Agreement group) seemed to be the polar opposite of the previous group. These resident parents all had a high education level (Diploma or higher), a relatively high employment rate (well over 50 per cent), considerably higher income than the previous group, and a relatively high home ownership (over 50 per cent). A high proportion of these respondents (well over 50 per cent) reported that they had never lived with the child's other parent. Those who reported living with the child's other parent were more likely to be legally married (as opposed to being de facto). These parents were also considerably older than those in the previous groups.

¹⁰ A more rigorous analysis, such as cluster analysis, to identify sub-groups with distinctive profiles within the No Arrangement group is recommended when more reliable child support arrangement data becomes available from future waves of LSAC.

In summary, resident parents without an agreement are not a homogenous group. It included a sizable group of parents with shared care arrangements. It also included a group of older parents with high educational attainment and income who may have above average means to provide for their children and therefore are less likely to pursue a child support agreement. At the same time, this group had a relatively high proportion of parents with low socio-economic status, many of them of Indigenous origin, reporting low educational attainment and income, and low attachment to the labour force. This raises the concern that a significant proportion of separated families, who are already facing multiple disadvantages, tend not to have an agreement in place to ensure that their children receive the financial support they are eligible to from their non-resident parent.

Figure 2 **Child support arrangements of parents with potential child support eligibility by gross annual income of child support eligible parent and partner (if any) – infant cohort**



Source: LSAC, Wave 1

Child support related variables and differences between child support arrangement groups

Expected child support amount

The mean child support amount to be paid¹¹, as reported by the child support eligible parent, was \$224 per month in the child cohort and \$140 per month in the infant cohort (see Table 6). However, this amount was significantly different for the three¹² child support arrangement groups. In both cohorts, the highest amount was reported by the Private Agreement group (\$350 and \$174 per month respectively), followed by the Private Collect group. Respondents in the CSA Collect group reported the lowest amount in both cohorts (\$181 and \$130 per month respectively). This relatively low amount in the CSA Collect category is largely attributable to the high proportion (44.4 per cent in the child cohort and 49.3 per cent in the infant cohort) of respondents in this group who reported \$50 or less per month as the expected child support amount (see Table 7).

¹¹ The question asks “How much per month is child’s other parent supposed to pay you for child?”

¹² The No Agreement group was excluded from this analysis as respondents who reported a larger than \$0 of expected or actual child support amount were deemed to be excluded from the No Agreement group.

A distributional analysis of the three groups within expected child support amount categories found a similar pattern (see Figure 3). That is, Private Agreements were most frequent in higher child support amount categories, however in the infant cohort once the child support liability reached \$400 per month the prevalence of Private Agreements declined considerably (see Table 7). Private Collect arrangements were most common in medium to high child support amount categories, while CSA Collect arrangements featured most highly in low child support amount categories (less than \$20 per month).

Table 6 Monthly child support amount (supposed and actual) by child support arrangements groups^a

	Mean child support amount to be paid ^b (\$/month)	Mean child support amount actually paid in the month preceding the ^c interview (\$/month)	Actually paid as a proportion of the amount to be paid (%)	Actually paid as a proportion of the amount to be paid (%) Cases with \$0 amount to be paid excluded	% of parents receiving within ± 5% the expected amount	% of parents receiving at least 5% more than the expected amount	% of parents receiving less than 95% of the expected amount (by agreement)	% of parents receiving less than 95% of what the expected amount (without agreement)
CHILD COHORT								
Child support arrangement groups								
Private Agreement	\$350	\$302	86.3	86.2	51.4	14.8	20.3	13.5
Private Collect	\$294	\$242	82.3	82.3	59.9	6.3	8.6	24.5
CSA Collect	\$181	\$136	75.1	75.1	68.5	3.4	2.1	25.5
Total	\$224	\$171	76.2	75.25	62.7	6.4	7.4	22.9
INFANT COHORT								
Child support arrangement groups								
Private Agreement	\$174	\$160	91.9	91.9	59.5	23.0	9.8	6.1
Private Collect	\$173	\$170	98.1	98.1	66.1	14.3	6.7	12.6
CSA Collect	\$130	\$88	67.7	67.5	61.8	6.9	6.9	23.0
Total	\$140	\$117	84.2	83.6	64.7	12.0	6.6	16.0

Source: LSAC, Wave 1

- (a) Cases with \$0 amount to be paid are included, unless otherwise indicated.
- (b) For 72 cases in the child cohort and 57 cases in the infant cohort the child support amount to be paid was reported to be \$0. For distribution of these cases refer to Table 7.
- (c) For 253 cases in the child cohort and 123 cases in the infant cohort the child support amount actually paid was reported to be \$0. For distribution of these cases refer to Table 7.
- (d) Figures in the infant cohort to be interpreted with caution due to the large proportion (19.6 per cent) of the “Don’t know” responses for this question owing to data entry error. The data collector is in the process of correcting this error. In the mean time this table needs to be treated with caution as missing values are related to a systematic error rather than missing randomly.

When we compared the expected child support amount in LSAC with child support liabilities in the CSED, we found the mean amount to be considerably lower (\$162 per month for parents with 4 year olds and \$130 per month for parents with 0 year olds) in the CSED. This lower mean was largely attributable to higher frequencies of relatively low (i.e. less than \$50 per month) child support liabilities in the CSED compared to the LSAC survey.

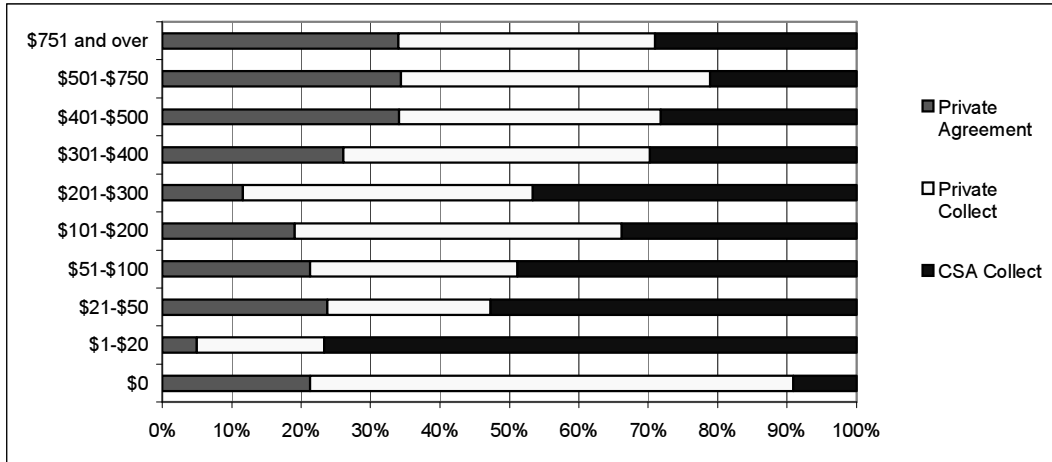
Table 7 Distribution of child support amount (supposed and actual) by child support arrangement groups

	Child cohort				Infant cohort			
	Private Agreement %	Private Collect %	CSA Collect %	Total ^a %	Private Agreement %	Private Collect %	CSA Collect %	Total ^a %
Child Support (\$/month) other parent SUPPOSED to pay for the child								
\$0	1.4	3.0	0.3	8.5	1.1	2.5	1.8	10.8
\$1-\$20	3.8	9.2	28.0	13.6	9.8	10.9	31.4	12.4
\$21-\$50	15.0	9.9	16.1	10.5	13.0	20.7	16.1	11.9
\$51-\$100	7.1	6.6	7.8	5.8	8.1	11.3	6.3	6.3
\$101-\$200	11.4	18.6	9.7	10.7	21.4	21.2	8.9	11.8
\$201-\$300	6.3	15.0	12.2	8.9	8.9	10.8	8.0	7.0
\$301-\$400	10.1	11.4	5.6	6.3	14.3	5.3	7.9	6.1
\$401-\$500	9.1	6.6	3.6	4.3	2.7	5.3	3.5	2.8
\$501-\$750	9.5	8.1	2.8	4.9	0.3	5.4	3.9	2.7
\$751 and over	10.5	7.6	4.3	5.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
No set amount	5.6	0.4	1.2	2.3	11.7	1.3	4.0	6.0
Refused	1.6	0.8	0.0	0.9	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Don't know	5.9	2.5	8.0	9.1	1.3	4.5	7.9	14.8
Not applicable	2.8	0.2	0.5	9.2	7.2	0.9	0.3	7.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.1	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.1	100.0
Sample weighted number of resident parents	128	194	267	840	107	129	105	523
Child Support (\$/month) other parent ACTUALLY PAID for the child in the month preceding the interview								
\$0	13.9	27.3	19.5	33.1	10.0	14.9	23.5	25.3
\$1-\$20	0.0	3.2	27.4	11.3	7.1	6.3	25.2	9.5
\$21-\$50	10.9	6.0	12.0	8.1	9.7	12.7	9.4	7.9
\$51-\$100	9.5	6.6	4.5	5.2	11.7	9.3	3.2	6.5
\$101-\$200	20.6	12.6	7.8	9.6	23.6	23.2	10.2	14.2
\$201-\$300	6.0	10.6	9.3	7.6	6.6	13.9	5.7	6.3
\$301-\$400	10.3	10.0	4.1	6.3	12.0	6.0	4.3	5.3
\$401-\$500	7.3	7.7	4.1	4.7	1.9	2.2	1.9	1.4
\$501-\$750	5.5	6.5	2.0	3.6	1.6	5.4	2.7	2.8
\$751 and over	9.7	5.9	3.4	4.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Refused/ Don't know ^b	6.3	3.4	5.9	5.9	15.7	6.1	14.1	20.8
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Sample weighted number of resident parents	125	193	265	736	107	128	104	473

Source: LSAC, Wave 1

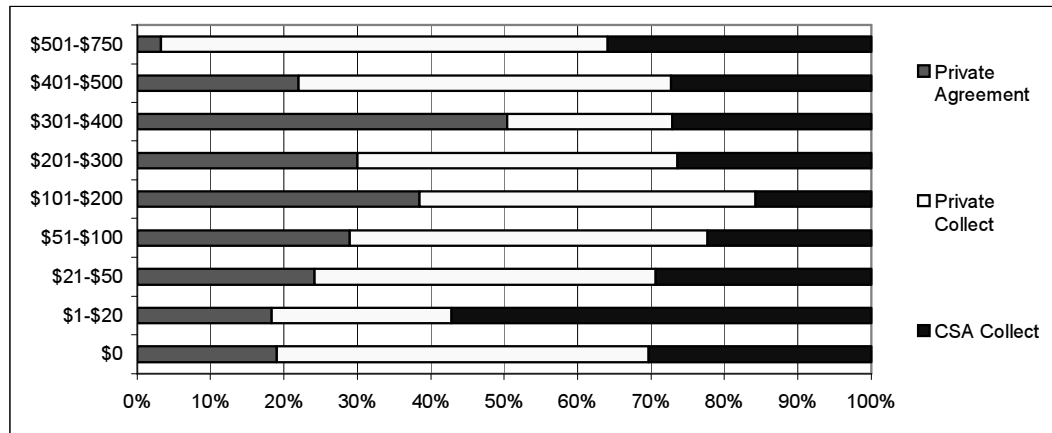
- (a) Counting all respondents, including those excluded from group analysis.
- (b) Large proportion of the “Don’t know” responses in the infant cohort due to a data entry error. The data collector is in the process of correcting this error. In the mean time this table need to be treated with caution as missing values are related to a systematic error rather than missing randomly.

Figure 3 Monthly child support (\$/month) expected to be paid for the child by child support arrangement groups – child cohort



Source: LSAC, Wave 1

Figure 4 Child support (\$/month) expected to be paid for the child by child support arrangement groups – infant cohort



Source: LSAC, Wave 1

Child support amount actually paid

In the child cohort, the mean child support amount actually paid in the month preceding the interview, \$171 per month (as reported by the child support eligible parent) was just over three-quarters (76.2 per cent) of the amount supposed to be paid. In the infant cohort, mean child support amount actually paid in the month preceding the interview, \$117 per month amounted to 84.2 per cent of the amount supposed to be paid. So, while the actual amount paid was considerably lower in the infant cohort, the proportion of the expected amount paid was in fact higher. This tends to indicate that compared to the child cohort, non-resident parents in the infant cohort pay less child support, but are more likely to comply with the expected amount.

In both cohorts, there were significant variations between the different arrangement groups (see Table 6). In the child cohort, the highest amount and the highest

proportion of the expected amount was reported by the Private Agreement group (\$302 per month and 86.3 per cent), followed by the Private Collect group. In the infant cohort the highest amount and the highest proportion of the expected amount was reported by the Private Collect group (\$170 per month and 98.1 per cent) closely followed by the Private Agreement group. In both cohorts parents with a CSA Collect arrangement reported the lowest amount and lowest proportion of the expected amount (\$136 per month and 75.1 per cent in the child cohort and \$88 per month and 67.7 per cent in the infant cohort). Another noteworthy observation is the high proportion (33.1 per cent in the child cohort and 25.3 per cent in the infant cohort) of child support eligible parents who reported receiving \$0 child support for the month preceding the interview (see Table 7).

When we looked at the distribution of the *number* of child support eligible parents who received less than the expected amount, we found that the differences between groups were less attenuated (see Table 6). In the child cohort, Private Agreement and Private Collect groups had the highest frequency of respondents reporting that they were receiving less than they were expected to (33.8 and 33.1 per cent respectively). However, they were more likely to receive this lesser amount with their own agreement than those in the CSA Collect group. They were also more likely to receive more than they were expected to (14.8 and 6.3 per cent, respectively) than parents in the CSA Collect group. In the infant cohort, Private Agreement and Private Collect groups had the lowest frequency of respondents reporting receiving less than they were expected to (15.9 and 19.3 per cent respectively), and they were also more likely to receive this lesser amount with their own agreement than those in the CSA Collect group. Further, they were also more likely to receive more than they were expected to (23.0 and 14.3 per cent) than parents in the CSA Collect group.

The overall proportion of parents in the child cohort that reported receiving less than they were expected to was somewhat higher than in the infant cohort (30.3 per cent compared to 22.6). The proportion of respondents that agreed to this lesser amount was fairly similar, about a quarter, for the two cohorts.

Analysis, not shown in here, of between group differences of additional assistance received from the other parent shows that in both cohorts Private Agreement parents seemed to receive the most support (in terms of buying clothes, toys or presents for the child; paying extra money for medical or child care expenses; or looking after the child when needed), followed by Private Collect parents. CSA Collect parents were the least likely to receive assistance from the other parent on the measures collected in the survey.

Other relevant variables

This section provides information on the contact between the child and his/her non-resident parent, level of conflict between parents, as perceived by the resident parent, and the extent to which these measures are differently distributed within the four child support arrangement groups.

Contact between the child and his/her non-resident parent

Non-resident parents in the infant cohort are more likely to live close to their children than non-resident parents in the child cohort. As many as 46.8 per cent (compared to 41.6 per cent in the child cohort) lived less than 20 kilometres away, and only 21.2 per

cent lived over 100 kilometres away (compared to 27.3 per cent in the child cohort) (see Table 8).

Also, the proportion of children who have never seen their other parent was considerably lower in the child cohort (9.2 per cent) than in the infant cohort (17.0 per cent) (see Table 8). The main reasons for never seeing other parent were: other parent does not want to see child (32.5 and 38.2 per cent respectively), other parent does not know about child (14.5 and 5.0 per cent), not known who other parent is (10.7 and 19.9 per cent), other parent is overseas (7.1 and 12.2 per cent), and respondent does not want other parent to see child (7.7 and 2.8 per cent).

A further 23.3 per cent of the study children and 13.4 per cent of the infants had last seen their other parent more than a month ago. Main reasons for not seeing their other parent for more than a month included (in descending order): other parent does not want to see child, other parents lives too far away, other parent is overseas, drug, alcohol or violence problems.

On a more positive note, around half of the children (48.7 per cent of the child cohort and 57.1 per cent of the infant cohort) had seen their other parent less than a week ago.

When we examined the relationship between how often children see their other parent and the median number of daytime hours they spend together, we found that children who see their parents less frequently tend to spend longer hours with them for that period. However, once the frequency of visits declines to less than once a fortnight the hours typically spent with the other parent also declines. While children in the infant cohort see their non-resident parent more frequently, the median hours they spend together is considerably lower than in the child cohort. An exception is children who see their non-resident parent every day, where the difference between the two groups is negligible (see Figure 5).

Frequency of overnight stays with the other parent and the number of nights per period is another measure of children's contact with their other parent. The survey found that just under a quarter (22.7 per cent) of the child cohort stayed for overnight at least once a week with their other parent, while an additional 28.8 per cent stayed for overnight at least once a fortnight. As expected, infants were less likely to stay overnight with their non-resident parent than their 4 year old counterparts. Only a quarter of infants stayed overnight with their other parent compared with just under 70 per cent in the child cohort (see Table 8).

When we compared the four arrangement groups we found that in both cohorts parents with Private Agreement or Private Collect arrangements are more likely to live closer to each other (and child) than parents in the other two groups. Also, children in these groups tend to see their non-resident parent more often and are more likely to stay overnight with them than children in the other two arrangement groups. In contrast, parents in the No Agreement group tend to live farthest from each other, and children in this group tend to see their non-resident parent the least frequently. They are also the least likely to stay overnight (see Table 8).

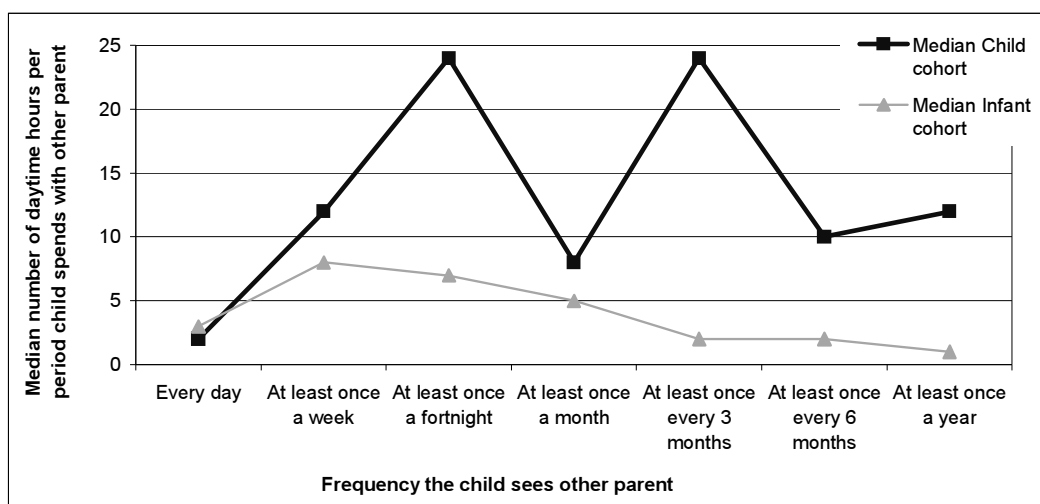
Table 8 Other relevant variables by child support arrangement groups

	Child cohort					Infant cohort				
	No Agreement %	Private Agreement %	Private Collect %	CSA Collect %	Total ^a %	No Agreement %	Private Agreement %	Private Collect %	CSA Collect %	Total ^a %
Distance non-res parent lives										
Less than 5 km	15.3	30.2	27.2	12.4	20.0	14.8	30.7	29.8	22.9	23.4
5 - 19 km	10.2	29.0	25.9	22.2	21.6	13.4	34.3	26.9	19.7	23.4
20 - 49 km	8.3	16.1	13.6	19.8	15.0	12.1	15.5	22.2	21.4	18.7
50 - 99 km	5.8	9.1	12.0	5.7	8.3	4.5	5.6	5.1	10.8	6.0
100 - 499 km	10.7	3.8	9.8	14.3	10.8	18.3	4.8	7.0	8.8	9.4
500 or more km	23.3	6.2	8.2	14.7	12.9	16.6	4.4	4.7	10.1	8.3
Overseas	10.9	1.4	0.0	2.4	3.6	0.0	1.3	3.5	2.2	3.5
Don't know	15.4	4.2	3.2	8.6	7.7	20.2	3.5	0.8	4.2	7.2
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Time since child last saw his/her other parent										
Has never seen parent	21.2	0.9	1.3	7.2	9.2	42.9	1.2	2.8	10.3	17.0
More than 1 month ago	41.1	12.0	9.8	29.9	23.3	20.5	6.3	8.6	26.1	13.4
1-4 weeks ago	7.4	13.8	23.3	23.4	17.9	13.7	11.5	12.3	12.8	12.5
1-6 days ago	16.8	55.0	48.7	29.8	35.2	16.9	55.9	51.4	34.6	37.9
Today	11.9	18.3	16.8	8.3	13.5	3.2	25.2	24.9	16.2	17.6
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Seeking other parent's view when making major decision about child										
Never/Almost never	66.6	35.9	35.5	68.0	52.7	76.4	24.4	30.4	65.0	46.3
Rarely	4.4	15.7	14.6	9.4	10.1	11.0	10.2	10.2	7.6	9.8
Sometimes	9.9	10.8	13.8	6.0	9.5	9.2	14.9	15.0	7.9	12.2
Often	3.5	9.7	13.3	6.4	8.4	2.3	11.5	9.8	7.1	7.6
Always/Almost always	15.6	27.9	22.9	10.3	18.9	1.1	39.0	34.7	11.5	22.6
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Frequency of disagreement between parents about basic child-rearing issues										
Never/Almost never	19.9	25.0	14.3	13.1	18.5	21.7	28.3	25.4	22.3	22.6
Rarely	10.5	22.8	17.6	9.7	13.6	5.0	18.1	24.9	7.0	14.8
Sometimes	13.1	23.1	25.1	22.9	20.6	4.7	28.7	32.3	18.3	21.9
Often	11.2	16.6	24.9	9.9	15.0	15.5	8.1	6.1	13.8	11.5
Always/Almost always	9.4	9.2	7.9	16.3	11.4	10.4	10.2	3.6	20.2	10.2
Don't discuss	35.8	3.4	10.2	28.1	20.5	42.8	6.6	7.7	18.3	18.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Frequency of anger and hostility between parents										
Never/Almost never	18.9	32.0	17.3	16.6	21.7	22.9	30.1	27.8	15.6	24.3
Rarely	14.8	23.0	27.7	16.1	20.3	15.5	35.9	33.7	18.7	25.8
Sometimes	18.1	34.1	34.3	24.4	26.1	12.3	28.1	24.4	29.9	24.4
Often	12.8	8.9	12.6	11.6	10.7	6.8	3.2	5.8	20.3	8.9
Always/Almost always	7.9	2.1	4.3	11.2	7.2	12.9	1.3	3.2	4.7	5.2
No contact	27.5	0.0	3.8	20.1	13.4	28.5	1.3	5.1	10.9	10.4
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Sample weighted number of resident parents	136	128	194	267	840	97	107	129	105	523

Source: LSAC, Wave 1

(a) Counting all respondents, including those excluded from group analysis.

Figure 5 Median number of daytime hours and frequency child sees other parent – child and infant cohort



Source: LSAC, Wave 1

Level of conflict between parents

Next we examined the resident parent’s perception of how parents get along with each other, including the level of contact and co-operation or hostility. Resident parents in the infant cohort reported contacting the other parent more frequently than those in the child cohort. Sixty-six per cent of parents in the infant cohort contacted each other at least once a week either in person or by phone, email or other means, compared to 52.1 per cent in the child cohort; and only 8.7 per cent of respondents in the infant cohort had no contact at all, compared to 16.7 per cent in the child cohort (see Table 8).

Separated parents in the infant cohort are also more likely to get along with each other than parents in the child cohort. As many as 59.1 per cent of resident parents, compared to 47.2 per cent in the child cohort, reported that they get along well, or very well, with the other parent. Also, over half of the resident parents in the infant cohort reported never or only rarely experiencing anger and hostility, compared to 42 per cent in the child cohort. Also, the proportion of parents in the infant group reporting frequent hostility (14.1 per cent) was lower than the proportion reporting it in the child cohort (17.9 per cent) (see Table 8).

Resident parents in the infant cohort were somewhat more likely to involve the other parent when making major decisions about their children than those in the child cohort. As many as 30.2 per cent of resident parents in the infant cohort reported always, or almost always, seeking the other parent’s view when making a major decision about the child (such as medical treatment or choice of child care), compared to 27.3 per cent in the child cohort. At the same time, as many as 46.3 per cent of resident parents in the infant cohort, and 52.7 per cent in the child cohort reported never, or almost never, seeking the other parent’s view (see Table 8).

Parents in the infant cohort were also less likely to report conflicts over child-rearing issues. While approximately 10 per cent of parents in both cohorts always, or almost

always, disagree about basic child-rearing issues, as many as 37.4 per cent of parents in the infant cohort never or rarely disagree about child rearing issues, compared to 32.1 per cent in the child cohort (see Table 8).

When we compared the four arrangement groups we found that in both cohorts parents with Private Agreement and Private Collect arrangements tend to contact each other more frequently, are more likely to get along and tend to experience less conflict. They are also more likely to seek the other parent's view when making major decisions about their children and are less likely to disagree about child rearing issues (see Table 8).

In contrast, parents with a CSA Collect arrangement are the least likely to get along well. They are the most likely to report high level of general conflict with the other parent, are most likely to disagree about child rearing issues and are the least likely to seek the other parent's view when making major decisions about their children (see Table 8).

Parents in the No Agreement group tend to be more polarised on the above measures compared with the other three groups. While they reported a high level of general conflict and general disagreement about child rearing issues, as well as a low tendency to seek the other parent's view when making major decisions about their children, there was also a considerable proportion of parents within this group that reported getting along well, contacting each other frequently and seeking the other parent's view when making major decisions about their children (see Table 8).

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Current datasets on Australian child support population

Population estimates of parents with child support eligibility for a 4 year old and for a less than 1 year old child and subsequent analysis of their basic demographic characteristics found considerable differences between the three data sources (i.e. LSAC, HILDA, and CSED). This has important implications for the extent to which the datasets can be used to reliably report on child support customers and their characteristics and circumstances.

LSAC questionnaire

The population estimate of parents with child support eligibility for a 4 year old was found to be particularly low in the LSAC survey. It was only 63 per cent of the estimated population in the HILDA survey even though the data collection periods for the two surveys closely over-lapped and counting rules for selecting parents with a potential child support eligibility from the two datasets were identical. The estimate from the LSAC survey was also considerably lower than the number of parents with child support eligibility for a 4 year old with a CSA assessment in the CSED (79 per cent). Given that not all parents with a child support eligibility seek an assessment from the CSA, we would expect the estimated population to be higher in the LSAC survey than in the CSED. Our results tend to suggest that the LSAC survey seriously underestimates the number of parents with child support eligibility in the child cohort, or in other words, children from families where the resident parent has a child support eligibility are under represented in the LSAC sample even after adjusting for non-response bias.

Analysis of the demographic characteristics of the study population found a considerable difference between the LSAC and HILDA datasets in terms of age and gross annual income. These differences may, to a degree, have contributed to the observed differences of population estimates of separated and single parents. Underestimation of children from separated and single parent families has implications for future research, not only on child support, but also on parenting and child development issues. Additional research/analysis involving benchmarking the LSAC data against other Australian data sources on children whose other parent lives elsewhere is strongly recommended.

Our findings also raise a number of questions regarding the design of the LSAC questionnaire and the extent it can reliably report on the child support arrangements of separated and single parents. Specifically, our analysis found that as many as 24.9 per cent of resident parents with child support eligibility in the child cohort and 31.4 per cent in the infant cohort reported not to have “either a formal child support or private child maintenance agreement with child’s other parent”. This surprisingly high proportion of child support eligible parents without an agreement suggests that respondents may have misinterpreted this question. In fact, when these respondents were asked the amount of payment they expected to receive from the child’s other parent (for the child) as many as 24.3 per cent in the child cohort, and 15.0 per cent in the infant cohort, reported an amount larger than \$0. When these same parents were asked the amount they actually received from the other parent for the last month (for

the child) 12.6 per cent in the child cohort, and 10.7 per cent in the infant cohort, reported an amount more than \$0. From these results it is evident that these parents do have some arrangement in place. However, due to a logical skip in the survey, over one-quarter of the respondents with a potential child support eligibility have not been asked subsequent questions on the type of arrangements they have or whether they have ever sought an assessment from the CSA. We thus recommend rewording question E24/E25 and removing the logical skip of further questions on agreement and collection type currently linked to a negative response.

Another question design issue is related to question E27 (child cohort) and E26 (infant cohort) – *Are payments received through the CSA, directly from other parent or neither?* Our analysis indicates that respondents do not interpret “Neither” consistently. This is not surprising as a ‘Neither’ response for this question could indicate that payments are received through somewhere other than CSA or other parent, or that payments are not received. The relatively large proportion of parents (10.5 per cent in the child cohort and 6.4 per cent in the infant cohort) who responded with ‘Neither’ tends to indicate that this response option is not interpreted consistently. Further analysis of the child cohort found that of those who responded ‘Neither’, 69.7 per cent were expected to receive more than \$0, but only 27.6 actually did. A similar pattern was found in the infant cohort (57.8 and 12.1 per cent). Rewording of the response categories for questions E27/E26 to clarify the issue raised above¹³ is strongly recommended. Further, if some payment is received, but not from the sources indicated in the questionnaire (i.e. CSA or directly from other parent) further information on the source of the payment should be collected.

HILDA

Our statistics comparing the three datasets suggest that male parents with potential child support eligibility for a four year old are possibly over represented in the HILDA survey (14.4 per cent). Incidentally, analysis not presented in this paper found that male parents with potential child support liability are considerably under represented in the HILDA survey. These findings are suggestive of either a sampling bias or a question design issue. Such under/over estimation of particular groups in the Australian population may have implications for future research, not only on child support but also on parenting issues and behaviours of fathers with non-resident children. Therefore, additional research/analysis on benchmarking the HILDA data against other Australian data sources on estimating resident and non-resident fathers is strongly recommended.

CSED

In the LSAC survey a considerable proportion of parents with child support eligibility reported not having a child support agreement with the child’s other parent. (To some degree such a high proportion may be related to an error in the question design, as described above). In addition, of the parents who reported having a child support agreement in place, less than three-quarters reported that their arrangement was decided by the CSA. These findings tend to indicate that the proportion of parents with a child support eligibility whose *current, in-place* arrangements were decided by

¹³ We are aware that question E29/E28 asks the amount received by the respondent, including “Nothing”, however this refers to last month only, which doesn’t necessarily mean that payment in general is not received.

the CSA is somewhat below three-quarters, suggesting that a considerable proportion of arrangements for child support may vary from the assessment made by the CSA¹⁴. The practical implication of this is the likelihood that information held by the CSA on the child support arrangements of child support customers, based on the assessments made by the CSA (such as the amount of child support liabilities) is for some customers different from their on-the-ground arrangement. This difference between child support *assessments made by the CSA* and *actual arrangements made by families* needs to be recognised when reporting on the child support arrangements of Australian families.

Our analysis also discovered a considerable under representation of Indigenous parents with child support eligibility for a less than one year old child in the CSED when compared with the LSAC and HILDA data. This may be related to under reporting Indigenous origin to Centrelink. Alternatively, it may be related to an under utilisation of the CSA by Indigenous customers.

Policy implications

Child support arrangements of Australian families

In general our analysis has found a systematic relationship between type of child support arrangements (i.e. Private Agreement, Private Collect, CSA Collect, and No Agreement) and circumstances and demographic composition of parents¹⁵.

Analysis of the demographic characteristics of parents with child support eligibility in the different child support arrangement groups found that Private Agreements were more likely to be used by resident parents with high educational attainment, employed resident parents and in cases where the parents have lived together.

Resident parents in the Private Collect group had a somewhat similar demographic composition to parents in the Private Agreement group. That is, they reported relatively high home ownership, Year 12 or above educational attainment, medium to high income level, and in the infant group being legally married prior to separation.

Parents with a longer interval since separation were more likely to have a CSA Collect agreement. In part, because of the longer time since separation, resident parents in the child cohort were also more likely to have re-coupled. Being re-coupled could be one of the reasons for having higher conflict between parents in the CSA Collect group (see section on *Contact with other parent*). In the child cohort, parents who reported a de-facto relationship (with the child's other parent) prior to separation and parents who had stopped living together before their child was born were found to be over represented in the CSA Collect group. Private rental was particularly prevalent among this arrangement group.

¹⁴ CSA collects payment data for CSA collect cases only, which represents less than half of all CSA registered cases.

¹⁵ While most of these factors and their effects overlapped with each other, this paper did not attempt to untangle or isolate these relationships.

The proportion of resident parents who reported not having a child support agreement was surprisingly high. This high proportion is partly attributable to a questionnaire design error (as discussed earlier). However, even when we have excluded cases with data reliability issues, together with atypical cases (such as non-biological parents and where a respondent was in a relationship with the child's other parent even though they were not living together) as well as cases where parents were probably still in the process of working out their child support arrangements we found that a considerable proportion of respondents reported not having a child support agreement. That is, regardless of the errors in the questionnaire, the LSAC survey picked up a large proportion (17.1 per cent) of child support eligible parents who reported not having an agreement as well as not receiving or expecting to receive any child support from the child's other parent.

We found that resident parents without an agreement tend to be a "mixed bag". It included a sizable group of parents with shared care arrangements. It also included a group of older parents with high educational attainment and income who may have above average means to provide for their children and therefore are less likely to pursue a child support agreement. At the same time, this group had a relatively high proportion of parents with low socio-economic status, many of them of Indigenous origin, reporting low educational attainment and income, and low attachment to the labour force. This raises the concern that a significant proportion of separated families who are already facing multiple disadvantages tend not to have an agreement to ensure that their children receive the financial support they are eligible to from their non-resident parent.

Our analysis also found that marital status of the parents prior to separation is strongly related to the type of child support agreements made by parents. Parents who never lived together were most likely not to have an agreement, while parents with a de-facto relationship were most likely to have a CSA Collect agreement. Parents who were legally married have opted equally for a CSA or Private Collect agreement. This may have policy implications due to decreasing marriage rates and the apparent link between payment of child support, parental hostility, contact with children and the type of child support arrangements in place.

Expected and actual child support amount

The expected and actually paid average child support amount was much lower in the infant cohort (\$140 and \$117 per month respectively) than in the child cohort (\$224 and \$171 per month). Both of these measures were found to be significantly different for the three¹⁶ groups in both cohorts. In both cohorts, parents with Private Agreement, followed by Private Collect arrangement, reported the highest amount for both measures. Further, in both cohorts, a relatively high proportion (over 44.4 per cent) of parents from the CSA Collect group reported a payable amount of \$50 or less per month.

When we compared the expected child support amount in LSAC with child support liabilities in the CSED we found the average amount somewhat lower (93.2 per cent

¹⁶ The No Agreement group was excluded from this analysis as respondents who reported a larger than \$0 expected or actual child support amount were deemed to be excluded from the No Agreement group.

of the average LSAC amount) for the infant cohort and considerably lower for the child cohort (72.5 per cent of the average LSAC amount). This lower average amount was largely attributable to higher frequencies of relatively low (i.e. less than \$50 per month) child support liabilities in the CSED compared to the LSAC survey.

Another area that our research set out to explore is the level of compliance among parents with child support obligations. Our analysis found that the compliance rate among child support customers is relatively low. That is, 30.3 per cent of parents in the child cohort and 22.6 per cent in the infant cohort reported receiving less child support, in the month preceding the interview, than they were expected to. While a quarter of them indicated that they agreed to receive a lesser amount, the remaining three-quarters reported receiving a lesser amount without their agreement.

Further, it is evident from our analysis that, contrary to previous assumptions of high compliance among Non-CSA Collect customers, the proportion of resident parents who are not receiving the full amount of the agreed child support is as high among Private Collect and Private Agreement customers as in the CSA Collect group. However, unlike the parents in the CSA Collect group, parents in the Private Collect and Private Agreement groups were more likely to receive this lesser amount with their agreement.

Analysis of the paid child support amount found that the average amount received in the month preceding the interview (as reported by the child support eligible parent) reached only 76.2 per cent in the child cohort and 84.2 per cent in the infant cohort. These results tend to indicate that while non-resident parents in the infant cohort pay less child support, they are more likely to comply with the expected amount than those in the child cohort.

In both cohorts there were significant between group differences. Specifically, the highest amount and the highest proportion of the expected amount were received by parents in the Private Agreement, followed by the Private Collect group.

Another noteworthy observation is that while only 8.5 per cent of parents in the child cohort, and 10.8 per cent in the infant cohort, reported that they were not expecting to receive any child support, as many as 33.1 per cent in child cohort and 25.3 per cent in the infant cohort reported not receiving any child support during the month preceding the interview.

On a more positive note, 6.4 per cent of parents in the child cohort, and 12.0 per cent in the infant cohort, reported receiving more than the expected amount of child support in the month preceding the interview. This was most likely to occur in the Private Agreement group in both cohorts. Additional analysis not included in this paper has found that parents who paid more than they were expected to, as well as parents who paid less but with the agreement of the resident parent, were also more likely to provide additional assistance in terms of buying clothes, toys or presents for the child; paying extra money for medical or child care expenses; or looking after the child when needed. This topic, as well as the association between compliance and the extent and nature of relationships between children and the other parent and level of conflict between parents, will be examined further in a forthcoming paper on identifying characteristics and circumstances related to high and low level of compliance among the child support customers.

Contact with other parent

There is now an increased emphasis on shared parental responsibility and the importance of both parents remaining actively involved in their children's lives after separation. Thus child support policy can no longer just be concerned with assessing each parent's share of the cost of raising their children and improving compliance with child support obligations. While these are important aspects, they are but a part of a bigger picture of encouraging and continuing the involvement of both parents in the upbringing of their children.

Our analysis has shown that while around half the children/infants had last seen their other parent less than a week ago, as many as 23.3 per cent in the child cohort, and 13.4 per cent in the infant cohort, had not seen their other parent for more than a month. Also, a relatively high proportion (9.2 per cent in the child cohort and 17.0 per cent in the infant cohort) of children had never seen their other parent. Contrary to anecdotal indications of resident parents trying to prevent the other parent seeing their children, the proportion of resident parents reporting that they don't want the other parent to see their children was very low.

About one-third of the children/infants lived more than 50 km away from their other parent. Distance between the residence of the child and the other parent and the frequency the child saw the other parent was clearly related to the child support arrangements made. Parents with Private Agreement and Private Collect arrangements were more likely to live close to their child and to see their child more frequently. Most parents who reported that the other parent lived overseas also reported not having a child support agreement.

Analysis on how well parents get along and frequency of contact with each other found a frequent and relatively positive contact among Private Agreement and Private Collect groups, but a much lower and less positive relationship among CSA Collect parents. This is an expected result given the nature of private Agreement and Private Collect arrangements. Parents in the No Agreement group tend to be somewhat polarised on this measure compared to the other groups. Between group differences were also apparent on the measure of parental involvement (by the non-resident parent) when making major decisions about the child. While approximately 30 per cent of non-resident parents are always or almost always involved, approximately half of non-resident parents have never or were almost never asked to be involved. Parents with a Private Agreement were most likely to seek the other parent's view followed by parents with a Private Collect agreement.

Conflict between parents over child rearing issues and feelings of anger and hostility seems the highest in the CSA Collect group and the lowest in the Private Agreement group in both cohorts. This could have implications for targeted delivery of education and counselling programs to reduce conflict between separated parents.

Between cohort differences

There are some considerable differences between the two cohorts in terms of their characteristics, the details of their child support arrangements and other relevant variables included in this study. These differences are related to a variety of factors, such as; the relatively younger age of the children and their parents in the infant

cohort, the shorter time since separation and opportunity to make an arrangement in the infant cohort, and a possible shift in attitudes to child support in recent years.

Unlike in the child cohort where 3.5 per cent of resident parents were male, almost all resident parents in the infant cohorts were females. Not surprisingly resident parents in the infant cohorts were younger, more likely to be single, had lower educational attainment or engagement with the workforce, had lower income and were less likely to own (either owning or paying off) their home. They were much less likely to have ever lived together or been legally married to the child's other parent, and in cases where they had lived together a much higher proportion had stopped living together before the child's birth.

The mean child support amount supposed to be paid was much lower in the infant cohort (\$140 per month) than in the child cohort (\$224 per month). This may be related to the assumed younger age, lower educational attainment and lower income among non-resident parents in the infant cohort compared to the child cohort. Similarly, the mean child support amount actually paid was considerably lower in the infant cohort (\$117 per month) than in the child cohort (\$171 per month). However, while the actual amount was considerably lower in the infant cohort, when expressed as a proportion of the expected amount it was in fact higher than in the child cohort, indicating that non-resident parents in the infant cohort pay less child support, but they are more likely to comply with the expected amount.

The proportion of children who had never seen their other parent was considerably higher in the infant cohort (17.0 per cent) than in the child cohort (9.2 per cent). On the other hand, infants who see their other parent tend to see them more frequently than those in the child cohort. As many as 63.0 per cent of the infants see their other parent at least once week (compared to 41.5 per cent in the child cohort). While children in the infant cohort see their non-resident parent more frequently, the median hours they spend together is considerably lower than in the child cohort. As expected, infants were less likely to stay overnight with their non-resident parent than their 4 year old counterparts.

Relationship with the other parent seemed to be more positive in the infant cohort. Resident parents in the infant cohort reported contacting the other parent more frequently and getting along with each other better than those in the child cohort. Further, parents in the infant cohort were less likely to report conflicts over child-rearing issues and/or parental hostility in the child cohort.

Limitations of the research project

The use of an existing dataset (LSAC) has somewhat limited the scope to which the topics investigated in this research could be suitably explored. Nevertheless, the analysis provided a good insight into the characteristics and circumstances of separated and/or single parent Australian families and the arrangements they have for financial support of their children. At the same time, this research has informed us of current shortcomings in the LSAC survey and has proposed some modifications to the questionnaire to improve the reliability of the information collected by LSAC on the child support arrangements of Australian families.

One considerable limitation of this research project is that it only reports on a particular subset of parents with a child support entitlement (i.e. parents with an entitlement for a 4 year old and a 0 year old child). Further, our report is based on resident parent's responses only and the subjects of child support received and time spent by child with other parent are typically highly contested areas between resident and non-resident parents. While these particular features of the LSAC survey will limit the value of this study, it has still provided a good description of the different child support arrangements made by Australian parents after separation, and a good indication of some of the general trends in the larger child support population.

Future waves of the survey will allow us to explore how these relationships may change over time. Further, the expansion of LSAC, in future waves, to include interviews with non-resident parents will allow researchers to obtain a more complete and more accurate picture of the experiences and accounts of separating and/or single parent Australian families.

In summary, while LSAC currently has some limitations in terms of estimating the size of the child support eligible population in Australia, the information contained in LSAC was very useful for analysing the characteristics, circumstance and behaviour of separated and/or single Australian parents. It offers a detailed and representative view, as reported by the resident parents, of the arrangements made by separated and single parent Australian families for the on-going financial support of their children. Future waves of LSAC, with some improvements, will provide an even more valuable data source to researchers and policy workers examining the topic of child support and arrangements made by Australian parents to ensure the on-going financial support of their children after separation.

APPENDIX A

Counting rules applied for the development of the four Child Support arrangement groups

Question K1CE25/B1CE24 – Do you have either a formal child support or private child maintenance agreement with child’s other parent, where you should receive payments or income from him/her?

- Yes → Go to Table A1
- No → No Agreement Group
- Not applicable/Don’t know/Refused → Excluded from Group analysis

Table A1 Counting rules applied for the development of the Child Support arrangement groups

	K1CE27/B1CE26 – Are payments received through the Child Support Agency (CSA), directly from other parent or neither?			
K1CE26/B1CE25 – Was this arrangement decided by the Child Support Agency (CSA), a Court or neither?	Through CSA (or Centrelink)	Directly from other parent	Neither	Don't know/ Refused/ Missing
CSA or Court	CSA Collect	Private Collect	Private Collect	Excluded from Group analysis
Neither – agreed with other parent	CSA Collect	Private Agreement	Private Agreement ^a	Excluded from Group analysis
Neither – other	CSA Collect	Private Agreement	Excluded from Group analysis	Excluded from Group analysis
Don't know/ Refused/ Missing	CSA Collect	Excluded from Group analysis	Excluded from Group analysis	Excluded from Group analysis

- (a) After a careful consideration cases in this cell were assigned to the Private Agreement group. The high proportion (over 80 per cent) of respondents in this cell who reported receiving \$0 tends to indicate that these respondents have misinterpreted the response option “neither” to question K1CE27/B1CE26 as not receiving any money from the CSA or the other parent. We assumed that if they were CSA collect customers, then the CSA would in fact have collected some money, and therefore the respondents are most likely to be Private Agreement customers. The over 15 per cent of respondents who have reported to receive some money, but not from the other parent, may have some arrangements to receive money from a third party, such as relatives of the other parent. Again, these customers are most likely to be Private Agreement customers.

REFERENCES

Australian Bureau of Statistics (2001) Population Distribution Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, Cat No 4705.5, ABS, Canberra.

Baxter, J., Gray, M., Alexander, M., Strazdins, L., & Bittman, M. (2006) *Families with young children: Paid employment, caring and wellbeing*. Draft report submitted to FACSIA.

Child Support Agency (2005) *Child Support Scheme Facts and Figures 2004-05*.

de Vaus, D.A. (2004) The changing living arrangements of children, 1946-2001. *Journal of family Studies*, 10, 9-19.

Ministerial Taskforce on Child Support (2005) *In the best interests of children: reforming the Child Support Scheme : report of the Ministerial Taskforce on Child Support*, Canberra.