

Growing Up in Scotland – 2009 – Topic Research Findings

Growing Up in Scotland (GUS): Non-resident Parent Summary Report

The Growing Up in Scotland Study

The Growing Up in Scotland study (GUS) is an important longitudinal research project aimed at tracking the lives of a cohort of Scottish children from the early years, through childhood and beyond. The study is funded by the Scottish Government and carried out by the Scottish Centre for Social Research (ScotGen). Its principal aim is to provide information to support policy-making, but it is also intended to be a broader resource that can be drawn on by academics, voluntary sector organisations and other interested parties. Focusing initially on a cohort of 5,217 children aged 0-1 years old (birth cohort) and a cohort of 2,859 children aged 2-3 years old (child cohort), the first wave of fieldwork began in April 2005.

Background to Report

This document is one of a series that summarise key findings from the third sweep of the survey which was launched in April 2007. It presents key findings from the Growing Up in Scotland study (GUS) report *Non-resident Parents*.

This report uses data from the Growing Up in Scotland study (GUS) to explore the prevalence of, and issues related to, non-resident parenthood in Scotland. Findings in this report are based on data from interviews with the cohort child's main carer across the first three years of GUS, with most of the detail on contact taken from year 3, at which point data is available on 4,193 children in the birth cohort (who were aged about 2 years and 10 months at the time of the interview) and 2,332 children in the child cohort (who were

aged about 4 years and 10 months at the time of the interview). Interviews for years 1 to 3 were carried out between April 2005 and May 2008. Growing up in Scotland does not seek the views and experiences of non-resident fathers, which, although of interest, would require a separate study involving a different research design.

The GUS sample is a particularly rich resource, and, as a population sample differs from many child contact studies where samples are drawn from court records, lawyers caseloads, from clients of family support organisations, or clinical samples, which due to the nature of the sample, may not be representative of all families negotiating contact with a non-resident parent.'



The dynamics of non-resident parenthood

Family transitions

- For the majority of children in GUS, family situations have been relatively stable since birth; just 11% in the birth cohort and 17% in the child cohort had experienced their father leaving or entering the household since birth. Relative stability was also the case, though to a lesser extent, for children with a non-resident father; 77% having not lived with their father since the study began and 66% having not lived with them since birth (birth cohort).
- The overall proportions of children with a non-resident father have remained steady at 21% (birth cohort) and around 26% (child cohort) between years 1 and 3 of GUS. Children with a non-resident parent often lived with other adults as well as the resident parent: 29% (birth cohort) and 34% (child cohort) of children with a non-resident parent at sweep 3 lived with either a step-parent or a relative in addition to their mothers (9% and 17%, respectively, living with a step-parent).

Family income and employment status

- Stepfamilies' household incomes, though higher than those of lone parent families, were lower on average than couple families consisting of both natural parents; 68% of lone parent families were in the lowest income group, in contrast to 36% of stepfamilies and 13% of couple families containing two natural parents.
- Employment status also differed by family type: for children whose fathers had left the household and who had previously had at least one parent in full-time employment, only 30% remained in that position, with almost half of this group now living in a household with no parent in employment (birth cohort).
- Stable employment status was more likely among families who previously had neither parent in employment and still had no parent in employment since the father had left. And again, although lone parent families who re-partner fare far better than lone parent families in terms of having at least one adult in either full- or part-time employment, they are still more likely to have no parent in employment than those in couple families containing both natural parents.

Patterns of contact

- 65% of birth cohort children (aged just under 3) and 67% of the child cohort children (aged just under 5) have contact with their non-resident parent in year 3 of GUS.
- Non-resident fathers were more likely to have contact with their child if the mother was a lone parent than if she had re-partnered; 67% in the birth cohort having contact if the mother remained a lone parent, compared with 44% of those who had re-partnered.
- Fathers are more likely to have contact with their children if the mother perceived that the father had been happy about the pregnancy than with those whose mothers perceived him to be unhappy.
- Of the children who have contact with their non-resident father, most have frequent contact. Face to face contact takes place at least once a week for over three-quarters of the children in both cohorts, and at least once a month for over 90%.
- Several factors affect the nature of contact. The child was more likely to stay overnight frequently with the father the younger the mother was at the birth of the child; if the father pays maintenance; and if the father had lived with the child at some point in the past.
- In addition, two-thirds of non-resident fathers who see their child at least once a week also contact them weekly by phone, text, email or letter. However, a third of non-resident fathers, in the birth cohort, who see their child less often than once a month, contact them in this way at least once a week.

Negotiating contact, decision making, and managing conflict over contact

- Socio-demographic factors did not appear to have any influence on conflict between the resident and non-resident parent, with the exception of employment status: those with no-one in the child's household in employment had a higher conflict score indicating a more conflictual relationship than those in households with at least one parent working part-time or full-time.
- Higher conflict parents showed other negative parenting characteristics. Parents who had a higher conflict score were less likely than those with a lower score to have

reported the non-resident parent being 'very interested' in the child: the latter having a mean conflict score of 17.6, compared with 21.4 for those who were not very interested and 23.7 for those fathers who were not at all interested.

- Higher conflict parents were less likely to report the non-resident parent making a regular financial contribution to the child's maintenance at year 1. Interestingly though, whether the non-resident parent was in contact at all at year 1, and the frequency of that contact, was not significantly related to level of conflict at Year 3.
- The majority of families had made arrangements for contact informally between the two parents, with just 5% going through the courts to negotiate arrangements. As may be expected, respondents who had been to court over contact arrangements were far more likely to report having a bad or very bad relationship with the other parent, particularly in the birth cohort. The non-resident parent's reported lack of interest in the child increased the likelihood of going to court. These findings are based on interviews with the main carer, usually the mother.
- For most families, contact arrangements held a large degree of stability over time and for over three-quarters of all the children with a non-resident parent, arrangements had always been the same.
- Non-resident parents had most influence in decision-making in the child's life in the areas of health, education and schooling, and discipline, with less influence in the more routine aspects of life, such as the food the child eats and childcare. Non-resident parents who had regular weekly contact and who made regular financial contributions were more likely to have some influence in these everyday matters. The socio-economic status of the resident parent did not affect the amount of involvement the non-resident parent had in decision making.

Further information on the Growing Up in Scotland Study can also be found at: www.growingupinscotland.org.uk

If you wish further copies of this Research Findings or have any enquiries about the GUS project, please contact:

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The research findings and the main report can be viewed on the Internet at:

<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Research/by-topic/children-and-young-people/publications>

The site carries up-to-date information about social and policy research commissioned and published on behalf of the Scottish Government. Subjects covered include transport, housing, social inclusion, rural affairs, children and young people, education, social work, community care, local government, civil justice, crime and criminal justice, regeneration, planning and women's issues. The site also allows access to information about the Scottish Household Survey.



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