

# **Child Support Data Collections in Australia, 2000–2023**

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In memory of Ann Harding

## Contents

<b>Tables .....</b>	<b>v</b>
<b>Figures.....</b>	<b>v</b>
<b>Acknowledgments .....</b>	<b>vi</b>
<b>Executive Summary .....</b>	<b>vii</b>
<b>1. Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2. Scope, Aims and Research Questions.....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>3. Data Map .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>4. Data Items.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>4.1 Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey.....</b>	<b>6</b>
4.1.1 Data Coverage .....	7
4.1.2 Strengths .....	7
4.1.3 Limitations.....	7
<b>4.2 Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) .....</b>	<b>8</b>
4.2.1 Data Coverage .....	8
4.2.2 Strengths .....	10
4.2.3 Limitations.....	10
<b>4.3 Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children (LSIC).....</b>	<b>10</b>
4.3.1 Data Coverage.....	11
4.3.2 Strengths .....	11
4.3.3 Limitations .....	11
<b>4.4 Family Characteristics Survey (FCS) .....</b>	<b>12</b>
4.4.1 Data Coverage.....	12
4.4.2 Strengths .....	14
4.4.3 Limitations .....	14
<b>4.5 Child Support Reform Study (CSRS).....</b>	<b>14</b>
4.5.1 Data Coverage .....	15
4.5.2 Strengths .....	19
4.5.3 Limitations.....	19
<b>4.6 Longitudinal Study of Separated Families (LSSF) .....</b>	<b>19</b>
4.6.1 Data Coverage.....	20
4.6.2 Strengths .....	21
4.6.3 Limitations.....	21
<b>4.7 General Population of Parents Survey (GPPS)—2006 &amp; 2009.....</b>	<b>21</b>
4.7.1 Data Coverage .....	22
4.7.2 Strengths .....	22
4.7.3 Limitations.....	22

<b>4.8 Survey of Recently Separated Parents (SRSP)—2012 &amp; 2014 .....</b>	<b>23</b>
4.8.1 Data Coverage .....	24
4.8.2 Strengths .....	24
4.8.3 Limitations.....	24
<b>4.9 Looking Back Survey (LBS)—2009 .....</b>	<b>24</b>
4.9.1 Data Coverage .....	24
4.9.2 Strengths .....	24
4.9.3 Limitations.....	24
<b>4.10 Caring for Children after Separation (CFC)—2003, 2005 &amp; 2006 .....</b>	<b>25</b>
4.10.1 Data Coverage.....	26
4.10.2 Strengths .....	27
4.10.3 Limitations.....	28
<b>4.11 Negotiating the Life Course (CFC)—2003 &amp; 2006 .....</b>	<b>28</b>
4.11.1 Data Coverage.....	28
4.11.2 Strengths .....	28
4.11.3 Limitations .....	29
<b>4.12 Enterprise Data Warehouse (EDW).....</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>5. Mapping Data Items to Data Sources .....</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>6. Discussion.....</b>	<b>35</b>
6.1 Data Coverage, Recency, and Impact .....	35
6.2 Data Gaps .....	36
6.3 Future Directions.....	37
<b>7. Conclusion.....</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>8. References .....</b>	<b>38</b>

## Tables

Table 1. Potential Sources of Child Support Data (N=12 datasets).....	4
Table 2. Data Items by Data Sources—Child Support Arrangement and Compliance .....	31
Table 3. Data Items by Data Sources—Child Support Arrears and Bargaining.....	32
Table 4. Data Items by Data Sources—Child Support Periodic/Non-periodic payments .....	33
Table 5. Data Items by Data Sources—Satisfaction with and Perceived Fairness of Child Support .....	34

## Figures

Figure 1. Child Support Data Map.....	5
Figure 2. HILDA Longitudinal Design, Sample Sizes and Timeline .....	7
Figure 3. LSAC Dual Cohort Cross-Sequential Design, Sample Sizes and Timeline.....	8
Figure 4. LSIC Dual Cohort Cross-Sequential Design, Sample Sizes and Timeline .....	11
Figure 5. Family Characteristics Survey and Family Characteristics and Transitions Survey.....	12
Figure 6. CSRS Cross-sequential Research Design, Sample Sizes and Timeline .....	15
Figure 7. Longitudinal Study of Separated Families Longitudinal Design .....	20
Figure 8. General Population of Parents Survey Pre- /Post-Design, Sample Sizes and Timeline.....	22
Figure 9. Survey of Recently Separated Parents Pre- /Post- Design, Sample Sizes and Timeline....	23
Figure 10. Caring for Children after Separation Longitudinal Design and Sample Sizes .....	26
Figure 11. Negotiating the Life Course Longitudinal Design, Sample Sizes and Timeline.....	28

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# Executive Summary

This report seeks to (a) provide a summary of child support data collections conducted between 2000 and 2023; (b) map each dataset at the variable level to assess data coverage; (c) describe some of the strengths and limitations of each dataset; (d) identify any obvious data gaps in these collections; and (e) offer an overall assessment of the suitability for future research and policy development in child support.

Eight key research questions guided this data mapping exercise:

- RQ1. Which Australian datasets contain ‘child support’ data?
- RQ2. Which child support data items are covered in these datasets?
- RQ3. What are the key strengths and limitations of each dataset?
- RQ4. To what extent do the various datasets overlap?
- RQ5. Are some datasets of greater value for child support policy than others?
- RQ6. Which datasets appear to have had the most impact on child support policy?
- RQ7. Are there any obvious data gaps in these collections for child support policy?
- RQ8. Which datasets—if any—might be viable options for future work?

Twelve potential sources of child support data were identified: (a) three longitudinal studies funded by the Australian Government; (b) eight surveys; and (c) one administrative dataset.

- ***Longitudinal studies funded by the Australian Government:***
  - Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey
  - Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC)
  - Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children (LSIC)
- ***Surveys:***
  - Family Characteristics Survey (FCS) [Australian Bureau of Statistics]
  - Child Support Reform Study (CSRS) [Australian National University]
  - Longitudinal Study of Separated Families (LSSF) [Australian Institute of Family Studies]
  - General Population of Parents Survey (GPPS) [Australian Institute of Family Studies]
  - Survey of Recently Separated Parents (SRSP) [Australian Institute of Family Studies]
  - Looking Back Survey (LBS) [Australian Institute of Family Studies]
  - Caring for Children after Separation (CFC) [Australian Institute of Family Studies]
  - Negotiating the Life Course (NLC) [Australian National University & University of Queensland]
- ***Administrative data:***
  - Enterprise Data Warehouse (EDW) [Services Australia]

## Key Points

- Child support data are captured by a complex patchwork of disparate data collections based on a wide mix of research designs.
- At present there is no best single source of reliable, contemporary child support data—particularly for understanding the demography and relational dynamics for those who transfer child support privately (i.e., Private Collect, or self-administering cases).
- HILDA, LSAC and LSIC longitudinal datasets are three sources of data spanning childhood into young adulthood. However, each provide limited insights for different reasons into long-term trends and changes in child support.
- The quarterly/annual snapshot administrative data from data.gov.au (based on DSS data from Child Support Extract Dataset, which are taken from the Services Australia Enterprise Data Warehouse) look to be the most recent population-level data available on child support. It is noteworthy different administrative analytic rules are used by DSS and Services Australia. Detailed mapping of the administrative data is beyond the scope of the present report; that mapping is best conducted by the data custodians within government.
- All eight ad hoc surveys containing child support data were derived from national random samples, which are best placed for informing national child support policy because they are generally representative of the generally population. Three quarters ( $n=6/8$ ) were conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies.
- Over 125 data items on child support have been collected over the last two decades across the 11 in-scope datasets that include information about child support. The ANU Child Support Reform Study collected the most comprehensive set of child support data ( $n=79$  items), followed by (b) the AIFS Caring for Children after Separation ( $n=36$  items); (c) the ABS Family Characteristics Survey ( $n=34$  items); (d) the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children ( $n=30$  items); and (e) the AIFS Longitudinal Study of Separated Families ( $n=24$  items).
- Child support compliance, method of assessment, and method of collection have been the main foci of child support research over the last two decades.
- Specifically, the most common data items across the 11 in-scope datasets were:
  - whether there was any arrangement for child support ( $n=11$  datasets)
  - direction of payment (i.e., who is the paying parent) ( $n=11$  datasets)
  - method of assessment ( $n=9$  datasets)
  - method of collection ( $n=9$  datasets)
  - the expected amount ( $n=8$  datasets)
  - the actual amount paid/received ( $n=9$  datasets)
  - compliance—quantum ( $n=8$  datasets)
  - compliance—timeliness ( $n=6$  datasets)
  - number of eligible children ( $n=6$  datasets)
- Widespread use of national random samples, longitudinal or quasi-experimental designs, and detailed questions on child support in tandem with many other socio-economic and socio-emotional questions, characterise most of the datasets. However, many of these datasets only

have a small number of child support questions—as might be expected given the broader economic, developmental, research, or policy foci of the various studies.

- Given (a) the disparate nature of child support data, (b) the large number of government inquiries into family law and child support and subsequent responses by government, and (c) numerous audits of child support by the Australian National Audit Office, a forward-looking integrated data collection plan for child support policy in Australia is needed. Such a plan would facilitate evidence-based decision-making and the development of more informed and responsive child support policies, especially as new policy challenges emerge.
- It is hoped this data snapshot will encourage the use of some of the datasets described—not just by government but by researchers more broadly—and improve child support data collections and analysis into the future.
- There is a strong argument for conducting a new specialised child support data collection—to be repeated annually or biennially—that could also be used to collect information on parenting time, family dynamics, and information on the costs of children living across more than one household.

## **Data Gaps**

Some obvious data gaps in these collections for child support policy to be explored in the future include:

- The size and composition of the self-administration group
- The composition of the Private Collect population
- Child support compliance among the Private Collect population
- Knowledge of how child support operates
- Financial abuse, coercive control, and the so-called ‘weaponization’ of child support
- The ability of child support policy to respond to economic shocks

# 1. Introduction

Good policy requires accurate and reliable data. Child support policy is no exception. Despite child support being one of the largest administrative systems in Australia, and one of most reviewed areas of public policy,<sup>1</sup> data on the operation of the scheme remains piecemeal. This apparent data vacuum leads to ongoing claims in some quarters that the child support system is broken, unfair, and weighted heavily against fathers or mothers (e.g., Christensen, 2017; P. Hanson, 2021; N. Hanson, 2023; Valentish, 2019).

Specifically, paying parents (mostly fathers) typically claim they are paying too much; they shouldn't have to pay child support when they are denied access to their children (i.e., 'no-see, no-pay'); and child support is essentially a form of spousal support. By contrast, receiving parents (mostly mothers) tend to claim child support payments do not occur or are irregular; do not cover the costs of raising children; old debts are not pursued; and the system can be manipulated to minimise or avoid paying child support or can be used to control or harass receiving parents. These and other claims need to be tested with reliable, representative data. On the value of reliable data, the Ministerial Taskforce on Child Support (2005) recommended that:

The Department of Family and Community Services [now the Department of Social Services] should undertake or commission periodic updates to research on:

- a) the costs of children;
- b) the circumstances of payers and payees;
- c) the interaction of the Child Support Scheme with related policy on tax, income support, family payments, and family law;
- d) the impact of the Scheme (in combination with effective marginal tax rates) on workforce participation;
- e) compliance amongst CSA collect and private collect payers; and
- f) community perceptions of the fairness and effectiveness of the Scheme and of the way it is administered (p. 36, Recommendation 29.1).

Early annual publications by the Child Support Agency,<sup>2</sup> *CSA Facts & Figures* 1998–99 through 2008–09, provided important information for child support policy. However, CSA ceased to produce this report after 2009. The Family Characteristics Survey by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in 2003 and 2009/10 were the best early sources of data on child support arrangements. Although child support data were collected in 2003, the data was not published due to concerns they did not align

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<sup>1</sup> See e.g., Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs (2003), chaired by the Honourable Kay Hull; Ministerial Taskforce on Child Support (2005), chaired by Professor Patrick Parkinson; Australian Law Reform Commission (2011) chaired by Professor Rosalind Croucher; Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs, chaired by the Honourable George Christensen MP (2014); Joint Select Committee on Australia's Family Law System (2019), chaired by the Honourable Kevin Andrews MP; and Australian Law Reform Commission (2019) chaired by the Hon Justice SC Derrington.

<sup>2</sup> As noted by the Australian Law Reform Commission (2011, p. 288), when talking with child support clients and the general public, DHS used the terminology 'the Child Support Agency' to refer to the Child Support Program. We also use the language of the CSA at times for brevity. Moreover, as noted by Aleema, Smyth and Vnuk (2020, p. 215, n 5): 'Child support policy and administration has a complex history. The CSA [Child Support Agency] was formed in 1988 as part of the Australian Taxation Office to administer the Child Support Scheme. A decade later, it was moved into the Department of Family and Community Services (now the Department of Social Services ('DSS')) before becoming part of the Department of Human Services (DHS) in 2004. The DSS continues to hold policy responsibility for the Child Support Scheme. However, the DHS no longer exists. In February 2020, Services Australia was established as a new executive agency, responsible for administering the Medicare, Centrelink and Child Support Programs'.

with the CSA administrative data.<sup>3</sup> FCS 2003 data is nonetheless available for researchers to use (in the Confidentialised Unit Record File [CURF]) format with this caveat.

Furthermore, a cursory review of annual reports from Services Australia (and its predecessors, the Department of Human Services and the Child Support Agency) suggest a gradually diminishing publication of child support key performance metrics in recent years. This is not to say there was less data but rather that less information about the operation of the child support system was available to interested readers.

With the recent introduction of both the Child Support Expert Panel, and the Child Support Stakeholder Consultation Group,<sup>4</sup> and the latest raft of proposed family law amendments—notably the Family Law Amendment Bill (No 1) 2023, Family Law Amendment (Information Sharing) Bill, and the Family Law Amendment Bill (No 2) 2023—now is an opportune time to map the possible sources of existing child support data for current policy work, and prior to commissioning any new data collections (e.g., the proposed Evaluation of Separated Parents).

It is noteworthy that despite the Child Support Scheme being in operation in Australia for over 35 years, no-one has conducted any detailed mapping of available child support and related datasets to date.

## 2. Scope, Aims and Research Questions

This report seeks (a) to provide a summary of ‘child support’<sup>5</sup> quantitative data collections (primary and secondary data) conducted between 2001 and 2023—i.e., over the last two decades or so;<sup>6</sup> (b) map each dataset at the variable level to assess data coverage; (c) describe some of the strengths and limitations of each dataset; (d) identify any obvious data gaps in these collections; and (d) offer an overall assessment of their suitability for future research and policy development in the area of child support. Data from small qualitative data collections (e.g., Cook, McKenzie, Natalier, & Young, 2015; Natalier & Hewitt, 2010) are excluded given that national policy require data that are nationally representative or, in the case of Indigenous Australians, representative of diverse communities. Also excluded are surveys based on non-probability in which the rigour of the study cannot be assessed.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> It is unclear why there was an expectation that data from a national random sample should align with population-level administrative data that does not include self-administration cases (especially as the true size of this group still remains unknown).

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.dss.gov.au/families-and-children-programs-services-the-child-support-scheme/child-support-stakeholder-consultation-group>

<sup>5</sup> Most of the datasets examined include information relevant to child support liability estimates, such as income, parenting time, and the presence of other children in the household. For simplicity, ‘child support’ data in this report refers to questions directly about child support—such as method of assessment, method of collection, and child support compliance.

<sup>6</sup> Other datasets are available prior to the year 2000, but these data were deemed to be out of scope because they are likely to be anachronistic. These datasets include: three early studies conducted by the AIFS, notably *Settling up* (McDonald 1986); *Settling down* (Funder et al, 1989); and the Australian Divorce Transitions Project (Funder, 1997). Small data collections conducted for doctoral dissertations post-2000 have also been excluded: e.g., Hawthorne (2005).

<sup>7</sup> For example, the Financial Abuse and Child Support Study (Cook, Byrt, Burgin, Edwards, Coen & Dimopoulos, 2023) involved the circulation of an anonymous online survey. The National Council of Single Mothers and their Children distributed the survey using their Facebook and Twitter accounts. Cook and colleagues (2023) reported recruitment ads were also circulated widely across the single parent and family violence sectors. The survey sought to investigate separated mothers’ experiences of child support, family violence and financial safety. However, the researchers were unwilling to provide a copy of their survey questions for the present data mapping exercise. There is also no mention of any survey or survey questions in the chapter (Cook, 2019) referred to by the authors. This study is based on a highly select, non-probability purposive sample of separated mothers. Despite the authors asserting ‘we are confident that the results reported here apply to the whole Australian geographic population context’ (Cook et al., p. 81), and their attempt to benchmark the sample with ABS state/territory strata estimates, they themselves note: ‘Culturally, our sample was less diverse than the Australian population, and so cannot be generalised to all single mothers in Australia’ (p. 81). They also note: ‘[o]ur sample has a higher proportion of Agency Collect cases than the Department of Social Services caseload’ (p.

Administrative data collected by Services Australia held in the Enterprise Data Warehouse (EDW<sup>8</sup>) and provided to the Department of Social Services (DSS) for policy purposes are not mapped in this report (see Section 4.12). Detailed mapping of the administrative data is best done by the respective departments given the complexity and multi-level structure of these data. It should also be noted that the ability of most of the data collections draw on samples from the Child Support Agency/Services Australia Child Support Program. This means they are limited in their ability to improve understanding of the self-administration group, which might well be growing.

Eight key research questions guided this data mapping exercise:

- RQ<sub>1</sub>. Which Australian datasets contain ‘child support’ data?
- RQ<sub>2</sub>. Which child support data items are covered in these datasets?
- RQ<sub>3</sub>. What are the key strengths and limitations of each dataset?
- RQ<sub>4</sub>. To what extent do the various datasets overlap?
- RQ<sub>5</sub>. Are some datasets of greater value for child support policy than others?
- RQ<sub>6</sub>. Which datasets appear to have had the most impact on child support policy?
- RQ<sub>7</sub>. Are there any obvious data gaps in these collections for child support policy?
- RQ<sub>8</sub>. Which datasets—if any—might be viable options for future work?

### 3. Data Map

Twelve potential sources of child support data were identified (see Table 1). Dataset 12—Services Australia Enterprise Data Warehouse—is noted here but deemed to be out of scope because mapping it is best left with the Australian Government given the complexities of these data, differing data analytic rules, and the practical challenges of accessing metadata.

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86). Without the use of a national random sample, it is unclear to what extent these data represent the general population of separated mothers—if at all—and can (or should) be used to make national policy recommendations as the authors do. Omission of a ‘Study Limitations’ section, and non-provision of the survey questions, inhibits the ability to assess the study’s rigour.

<sup>8</sup> The Services Australia ‘Enterprise Data Warehouse’ is a repository for structured relational databases derived from customer data collected, used and stored by Services Australia as part of its administration of various programs (such as the ‘Child Support Scheme’).

**Table 1. Potential Sources of Child Support Data (N=12 datasets)**

TITLE	LEAD ORG	YEARS <sup>9</sup>	NO. OF WAVES/ COHORTS	SAMPLING	RESEARCH DESIGN	
<b>LONGITUDINAL STUDIES FUNDED BY THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT</b>						
1	Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey	Melbourne Institute	2001–	23	Probability	Longitudinal
2	Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC)	AIFS	2003–	10	Probability	Longitudinal <sup>10</sup>
3	Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children (LSIC)	DSS	2008–	13	Non-probability	Longitudinal
<b>SURVEYS</b>						
4	Family Characteristics Survey (FCS)	ABS	2003, 2009/10	2	Probability	Sequential
5	Child Support Reform Study (CSRS)	ANU	2008–2011	3	Probability	Longitudinal <sup>11</sup>
6	Longitudinal Study of Separated Families (LSSF)	AIFS	2009–2012	3	Probability	Longitudinal
7	General Population of Parents survey (GPP)	AIFS	2006, 2009	2	Probability	Sequential
8	Survey of Recently Separated Parents (SRSP)	AIFS	2012, 2014	2	Probability	Sequential
9	Looking Back Survey (LBS)	AIFS	2009	1	Probability	Cross-sectional
10	Caring for Children after Separation (CFC)	AIFS	2003, 2005, 2006	3	Probability	Panel
11	Negotiating the Life Course (NLC)	ANU/UQ	2003, 2006	2	Probability	Longitudinal
<b>ADMINISTRATIVE DATA</b>						
12	Enterprise Data Warehouse	Services Australia	2000–	N/A	Population admin data	Longitudinal & Sequential
	–CSA Facts & Figures annual publications	CSA	2002/03–2007/08	N/A	Population admin data	Sequential
	–Child Support Extract Dataset (CSED) (previously Child Support Evaluation Dataset)	DSS extract	2004– [point-in-time end of quarter]	N/A	Population admin data	Longitudinal & Sequential
	–Data.gov.au (based on CSED) <sup>12</sup>	DSS extract	2018–	N/A	Population admin data	Sequential

Figure 1 overleaf sets out the above sources of child support data according to year(s) in which the data were collected. Sample sizes and the respective research design of each collection are included. (Detailed content of each data source is described in the next section.)<sup>13</sup> The four thick vertical red lines depict where major family law changes have occurred. These lines have been added to help situate the various datasets with major legislative changes because many of the studies seek to investigate post-reform change.

<sup>9</sup> Only the years for which child support data were collected and reported are captured here. Some data collections included other waves/cohorts but no child support data were collected in these. For example, the ABS Family Characteristics and Transitions Survey in 2006–07 and 2011–2012 did not collect child support data.

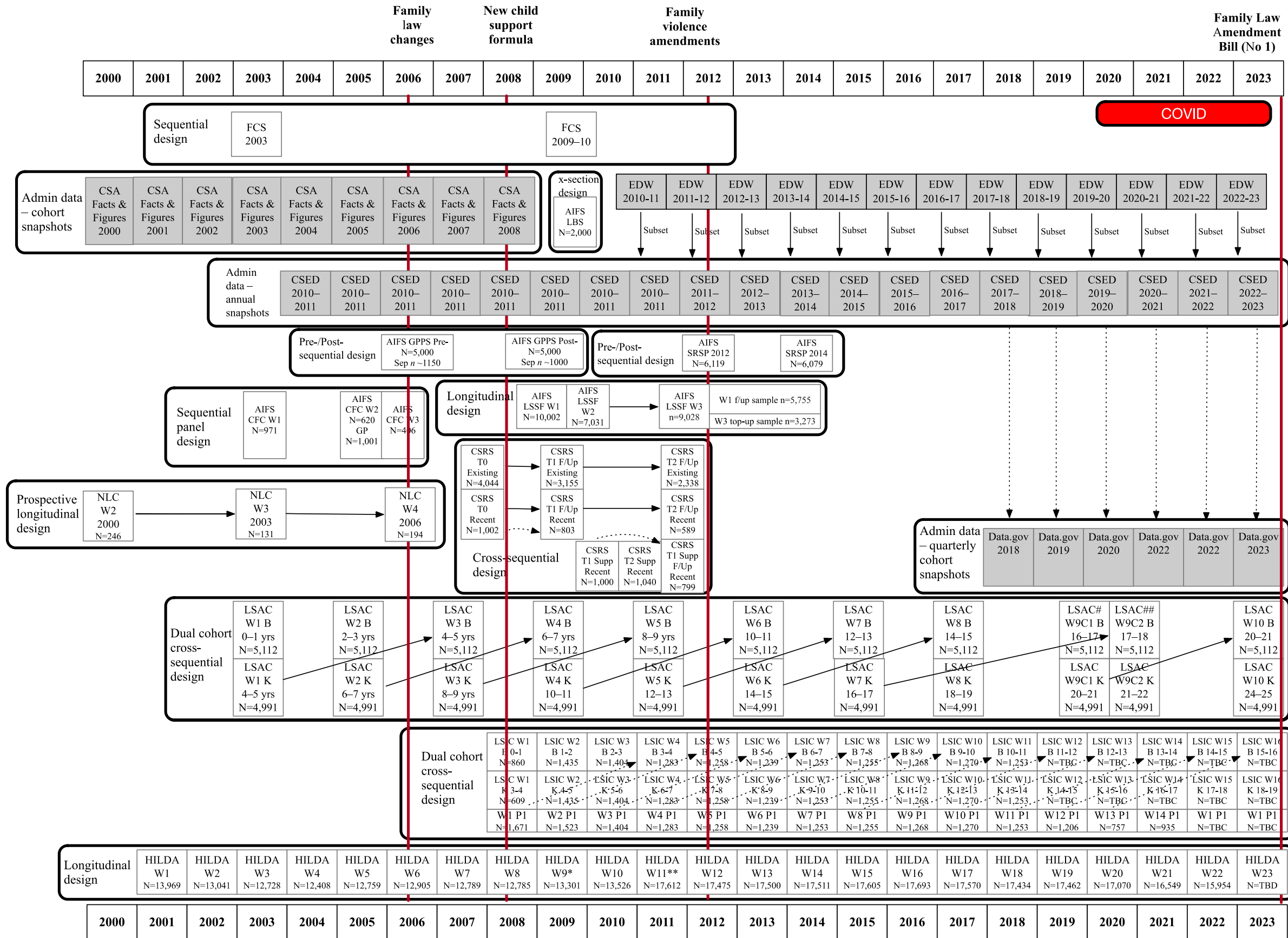
<sup>10</sup> For the technically inclined, this is a multiple cohort cross-sequential design.

<sup>11</sup> This data set is based on a cross-sequential design.

<sup>12</sup> The data.gov publication uses the CSED unless otherwise stated (e.g., International child support case data are directly provided by Services Australia whereas Maintenance Action Test failure data are from FTB Cognos Instalment data).

<sup>13</sup> Internal research within the Child Support Agency based on administrative data or CSA population sampling are not reported here. Examples include: Silvey & Birrell (2004); commissioned research by Open Mind (various years), and internal research on client satisfaction reported in the DHS Annual Report 2007-08 (DHS, 2008). For example: CSA also undertook additional research to complement ongoing customer service surveys [*Customers Having A Say*], comprising ‘CSA’s national random phone survey of 600 customers in February 2008’.

Figure 1. Child Support Data Map



Notes. \* Fieldwork moved from AC Nielson to Roy Morgan; mode changed from paper-pencil mode to computer-assisted personal interviews; \*\* Top up sample added; # Data for W9C1 collected Oct to Dec 2020; ## Data for 9C2 collected June–Sept 2021.

CFC = Caring for Children after Separation; CSED = Child Support Evaluation Dataset; CSRS = Child Support Reform Study (T0 = Time 0; T1 = Time 1; T2 = Time 2; Supp = Supplementary); EDW = Enterprise Data Warehouse (Services Australia); FCS = Family Characteristics Survey; FCS = Family Characteristics & Transitions Survey; GPP = General Population of Parents survey; HILDA = Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia survey; LBS = Looking Back Survey; LSAC = Longitudinal Study of Australian Children; LSIC = Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children (P1 = Parent 1); LSSF = Longitudinal Study of Separated Families; NLC = Negotiating the Life Course; SRSP = Survey of Recently Separated Parents study.

Six observations warrant mention. First, child support data are captured by a complex patchwork of disparate data collections based on a wide mix of research designs. At present there is no best single source of contemporary data on child support being paid or received by parents or received by non-parental carers.

Second, no reliable, comprehensive data are available for evaluating how the child support system is currently working—particularly for parents who transfer child support privately (i.e., Private Collect cases as well as cases outside of government involvement—i.e., Self-administration).

Third, HILDA, LSAC and LSIC longitudinal datasets are three sources of data spanning childhood into young adulthood. However, each provide limited insights for different reasons into long-term trends and changes in child support.

Fourth, while the ANU Child Support Reform Study provides comprehensive robust data on the impacts of the 2008 child support formula and compliance measures, these data are now a decade old. While the AIFS LSSF longitudinal study also offers some basic insights soon after the introduction of the revised formula, child support was not its focus.

Fifth, the quarterly snapshot administrative data from the Child Support Extract Dataset (previously known as the Child Support Evaluation Dataset, based on data from Services Australia) and from data.gov.au (based on data from CSED and Services Australia) look to be the most recent data available on child support.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, all eight surveys containing child support data were derived from national random samples—of which three quarters ( $n=6/8$ ) were conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies. The latter is not surprising given the pivotal role the Institute played in the early development and evaluation of the Child Support Scheme (e.g., Harrison et al., 1987; Harrison et al, 1990) and the involvement of AIFS staff in the Ministerial Taskforce on Child Support.<sup>15</sup>

## 4. Data Items

This section sets the child support questions within each dataset. (Appendix A summarises each data collection in detail.) Datasets vary in their data coverage, strengths, and limitations.

### 4.1 Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey

The HILDA Survey is a household-based panel study that collects information about economic and personal wellbeing, labour market dynamics and family life (including child support paid and received). Participants ( $N=17,000+$ ) are followed across the life course. The study is funded by the Australian Government through the Department of Social Services. The DSS works with Melbourne Institute on the design and content of the survey; Melbourne Institute is responsible for the management of the survey. The fieldwork company changed in 2009 from AC Nielson to Roy Morgan; the survey also moved that year from pen and paper interviewing (PAPI) to computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI).<sup>16</sup> A top-up sample was added in 2011.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> The data available at data.gov.au may not match data released by Services Australia in its Annual Report and other official publications because of different analytical rules used by Services Australia and DSS.

<sup>15</sup> Three of the eight members of the Taskforce were with, or formerly/subsequently employed by, the Institute: David Stanton, Mathew Gray, and Bruce Smyth.

<sup>16</sup> <https://melbourneinstitute.unimelb.edu.au/assets/documents/hilda-bibliography/hilda-discussion-papers/hdps210.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> <https://melbourneinstitute.unimelb.edu.au/assets/documents/hilda-bibliography/hilda-technical-papers/htec111.pdf>

The data collected in the HILDA Survey are used by leading Australian and international researchers to provide insights into a wide range of economic, social and demographic issues. The HILDA Survey team maintains [an extensive bibliography](#) of all Australian and international research publications known to use or reference data from the HILDA Survey.

**Figure 2. HILDA Longitudinal Design, Sample Sizes and Timeline**

HILDA W1 N=13,969	HILDA W2 N=13,041	HILDA W3 N=12,728	HILDA W4 N=12,408	HILDA W5 N=12,759	HILDA W6 N=12,905	HILDA W7 N=12,789	HILDA W8 N=12,785	HILDA W9 N=13,301	HILDA W10 N=13,526	HILDA W11 N=17,612	HILDA W12 N=17,475	HILDA W13 N=17,500	HILDA W14 N=17,511	HILDA W15 N=17,605	HILDA W16 N=17,693	HILDA W17 N=17,570	HILDA W18 N=17,434	HILDA W19 N=17,462	HILDA W20 N=17,070	HILDA W21 N=16,549	HILDA W22 N=15,954	HILDA W23 N=TBD
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Source: Summerfield et al (2023)

#### 4.1.1 Data Coverage

While child support isn't the primary focus of the HILDA survey, its inclusion is justified by its potential impact on family and household disposable income. In sum, the range and nature of questions about child support is very limited.

Waves 1–9 (2001–2009) examine:

- Whether periodic and/or non-periodic payments are occurring
- The amount of money paid/received for periodic and/or non-periodic financial support
- The number, and age and sex, of children covered by these payments

The remaining waves (Waves 10–23 for the period 2010–2023) include the above plus:

- How the amount of child support is decided (e.g., CSA, court, privately)
- The expected amount of money to be paid/received for periodic child support. [This addition allows for child support compliance to be determined in relation to quantum.]

#### 4.1.2 Strengths

- HILDA has been tracking a large representative group of households for over 20 years. This allows researchers to track changes and developments over time, providing insights into long-term trends.
- The breadth and depth of the data on many topics allows for complex statistical modelling of predictors, outcomes, and moderation and mediation effects. HILDA currently represents the most powerful dataset for measuring financial, socio-economic, and some aspects of family dynamics and wellbeing in Australia.

#### 4.1.3 Limitations

- Limited child support data ( $n=13$  items).
- Data on the level of care of children is limited and are not captured where a parent has less than 50 per cent care (and is only captured for one parent where parents have equal care). This means that all information collected is from the parent with at least 50% care.
- HILDA does not currently collect the method of collection and thus cannot be used to investigate differences in the demography and compliance behaviour of Agency Collect, Private Collect and informal collection (i.e., self-administration).
- Compliance of quantum can be derived but not the timeliness of payments.

## 4.2 Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC)

The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) is a major longitudinal study that follows the development of 10,000 children and young people and their families from across Australia.

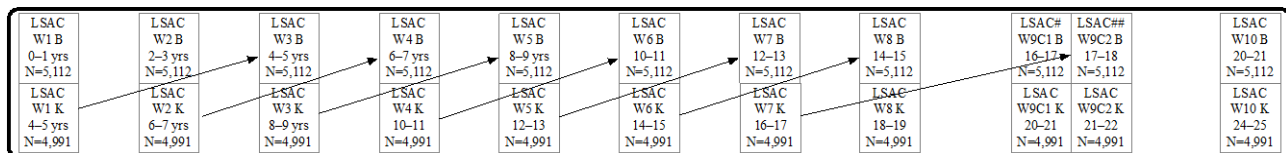
According to the LSAC website:<sup>18</sup>

Data are collected from two cohorts every two years. The first cohort of 5,000 children was aged 0–1 years in 2003–04 [Birth (B) cohort], and the second cohort of 5,000 children was aged 4–5 years in 2003–04 [Kindergarten (K) cohort]. Study informants include the young person, their parents (both resident and non-resident), carers and teachers.

The study links to administrative databases—with participant consent—thereby adding valuable information to supplement the data collected during fieldwork.

The study is carried out through a collaborative effort involving nine leading research organisations, with the Australian Institute of Family Studies serving as the lead organisation.

**Figure 3. LSAC Dual Cohort Cross-Sequential Design, Sample Sizes and Timeline**



Source. The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children—Data User Guide, Release 9.1C2 (Mohal et al, 2023).

### 4.2.1 Data Coverage

#### 4.2.1.1 Wave 1

- Formal/informal arrangement
- Services used to reach arrangement
- Liable amount
- Number of children covered
- Payment method
- Actual amount received last payment and when
- Difference agreed to
- Non-periodic: Buy clothes/toys
- Non-periodic: Medical Dental
- Non-periodic: Extra for school costs
- Non-periodic: Extra to help with rent
- Non-periodic Mortgage/household bills/car expenses
- Non-periodic: Babysitting, help around house (e.g., lawn mowing)

<sup>18</sup> <https://growingupinaustralia.gov.au/about-study>

4.2.1.2 Wave 2.5<sup>19</sup>

- Liable amount
- Number of children covered
- Actual amount
- Difference agreed to
- Non-periodic: Buy clothes/toys
- Non-periodic: Medical Dental
- Non-periodic: Extra for school costs
- Non-periodic: Extra to help with rent

4.2.1.3 Wave 3

- Have an arrangement
- Reviewing arrangement
- Discussing arrangement
- Main reason no arrangement
- Using services to reach arrangement
- Service—CSA
- Service—FRC
- Service—Family Court
- Service—Other
- Method of assessment
- Liable amount and frequency
- Number of children covered
- Method of collection
- Actual amount
- Ever receive child support
- Last payment amount
- When last payment
- Difference agreed to
- Difference due to payments for school etc
- Difference due to payments for services
- Non-periodic frequency: Buy clothes/toys
- Non-periodic frequency: Medical Dental
- Non-periodic frequency: Extra for school costs
- Non-periodic frequency: Extra to help with rent

Parent Living Elsewhere (PLE) – as above but exclude ‘Main reason no arrangement’ but add:

- Frequency of difficulty making payments

4.2.1.4 Wave 4

- Have an arrangement
- Who payer and receiver
- Reviewing arrangement
- Discussing arrangement
- Main reason no arrangement
- Using services to reach arrangement
- Service—CSA
- Service—FRC

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<sup>19</sup> Child support questions for Wave 2 were included in a mail-out survey (LSAC 2.5) sent out after the main surveys were run.

- Service—Family Court
- Service—Other
- Method of assessment
- Liable amount and frequency
- Number of children covered
- Method of collection
- PLE up to date
- Last payment for usual amount
- Arrears amount
- Ever received [paid] child support
- Last payment amount [proxy for actual amount]
- When last payment
- Period covered
- When received/paid
- Difference agreed to
- Difference due to payments for school etc
- Difference due to payments for services
- Non-periodic frequency: Buy clothes/toys
- Non-periodic frequency: Medical Dental
- Non-periodic frequency: Extra for school costs
- Non-periodic frequency: Extra to help with rent

Parent Living Elsewhere (PLE) – as above but exclude ‘Main reason no arrangement’ and add:

- Frequency of difficulty making payments

#### 4.2.1.5 Wave 5–8

As above.

#### 4.2.2 *Strengths*

- National random sample of children
- Dual cohort cross-sequential design

#### 4.2.3 *Limitations*

- Dual cohort cross-sequential design: Differences in age can be confounded with interactions between the cohort and when the interview occurred
- Outcomes for particular age child may not hold for children of other ages
- W1: [Participant assumed to be receiver]
- PLE: Limited to Parent Living Elsewhere who can be located (contact details obtained from P1 if not previously P2) and agrees to participate.

## 4.3 Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children (LSIC)

The Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children (LSIC) (*Footprints in Time*) follows the development of around 1,700 Indigenous children and their families across urban, regional and remote Australia. The *Footprints in Time* families reside in many urban, regional and remote areas across Australia.

The study seeks to improve understanding of the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, their families and communities and to improve outcomes, policy and programs. It encompasses a wide range of measures (including child support<sup>20</sup>) and follows two groups of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children: those aged 6–18 months (B cohort), and those aged 3.5–5 years (K cohort) in 2008 when the study began. Data are primarily collected via annual face-to-face interviews with Indigenous interviewers. The study is funded by the Australian Government Department of Social Services and conducted under the guidance of the *Footprints in Time* Steering Committee.

**Figure 4. LSIC Dual Cohort Cross-Sequential Design, Sample Sizes and Timeline**

Dual cohort cross-sequential design	LSIC W1 B 0-1 N=860	LSIC W2 B 1-2 N=1,435	LSIC W3 B 2-3 N=1,404	LSIC W4 B 3-4 N=1,283	LSIC W5 B 4-5 N=1,258	LSIC W6 B 5-6 N=1,239	LSIC W7 B 6-7 N=1,253	LSIC W8 B 7-8 N=1,255	LSIC W9 B 8-9 N=1,268	LSIC W10 B 9-10 N=1,270	LSIC W11 B 10-11 N=1,253	LSIC W12 B 11-12 N=TBC	LSIC W13 B 12-13 N=TBC	LSIC W14 B 13-14 N=TBC	LSIC W15 B 14-15 N=TBC	LSIC W16 B 15-16 N=TBC
	LSIC W1 K 3-4 N=609	LSIC W2 K 4-5 N=1,435	LSIC W3 K 5-6 N=1,404	LSIC W4 K 6-7 N=1,283	LSIC W5 K 7-8 N=1,258	LSIC W6 K 8-9 N=1,239	LSIC W7 K 9-10 N=1,253	LSIC W8 K 10-11 N=1,255	LSIC W9 K 11-12 N=1,268	LSIC W10 K 12-13 N=1,270	LSIC W11 K 13-14 N=1,253	LSIC W12 K 14-15 N=TBC	LSIC W13 K 15-16 N=TBC	LSIC W14 K 16-17 N=TBC	LSIC W15 K 17-18 N=TBC	LSIC W16 K 18-19 N=TBC
	W1 P1 N=1,671	W2 P1 N=1,523	W3 P1 N=1,404	W4 P1 N=1,283	W5 P1 N=1,258	W6 P1 N=1,239	W7 P1 N=1,253	W8 P1 N=1,255	W9 P1 N=1,268	W10 P1 N=1,270	W11 P1 N=1,253	W12 P1 N=1,206	W13 P1 N=757	W14 P1 N=935	W1 P1 N=TBC	W1 P1 N=TBC

#### 4.3.1 Data Coverage

- Whether receive any child support
- Whether supposed to receive any child support
- Main reason no child support
- Who is meant to pay
- Who receives child support
- Amount supposed to receive
- Amount actually received
- Method of collection
- Method of assessment
- Service—CSA
- Service—Centrelink
- Service—FRC
- Service—Family Court
- Service—Private lawyer
- Service—Aboriginal family consultant
- Elder/Community leader
- Friend/Family
- Service—Crisis Service
- Service—Other
- Child support important; how money is used
- What do if child support is not paid

#### 4.3.2 Strengths

- Large sample of Indigenous Australian children and families
- Longitudinal
- Large number of services offered (including Elders and Community Leaders)
- Questions about impact of no payment

#### 4.3.3 Limitations

- Non-probability purposive sample (geographic coverage)
- Some groups small

<sup>20</sup> See e.g., Walter & Hewitt (2010).

- Limited questions on child support ( $n=16$ )

## 4.4 Family Characteristics Survey (FCS)

The Family Characteristics Survey was a supplementary survey to the ABS Monthly Population Survey (MPS) which is based on a multi-stage area sample of private dwellings (~30,000 houses flats, etc.) and a list-sample of non-private dwellings (hospitals, hotels, etc.). The ABS FCS series was the first national survey of child support and post-separation parenting arrangements.

The Family Characteristics topic was conducted in 1982, 1992, 1997, 2003 and 2009–10. The content is essentially repeated allowing comparisons over time. The ABS ceased conducting the FCS after 2010.

The Family Characteristics and Transitions Survey (FCTS), introduced in 2006–07 and repeated in 2012–13. According to the ABS (2008), the FCTS:

collected information for persons aged 18 years and over about the family transitions they have experienced in their lives .. (p. 2).

The FCTS, however, contains no child support data (which is why it is excluded from Figures 1 and 5).

**Figure 5. Family Characteristics Survey and Family Characteristics and Transitions Survey**



### 4.4.1 Data Coverage

#### 4.4.1.1 Family Characteristics Survey (FCS), 2003

The 2003 Family Characteristics Survey (FCS) collected a number of items, relating to child support arrangements and payments, for families with children aged 0–17 years who had a natural parent living elsewhere. While the following data items were collected, it was not published by the ABS due to differences with administrative data.

The information collected comprised:

- whether a formal child support arrangement existed—and if, so how many children were covered by formal arrangements;
- the total amount to be paid for period child support;
- whether the payment was made through the Child Support Agency (CSA) or through other arrangements.
- whether an informal child support agreement existed— and if so, how many children were covered by informal (non-periodic) arrangements;
- the total amount to be paid for non-periodic payments.

- whether child support payments had been received in the last 12 months (regardless of the type of arrangement in place); if so, for how many children child support payments were received;
- the amount usually received each month;
- any other forms of child support or maintenance received; and
- whether mediation/counselling or lawyers/solicitors were involved in arranging child support arrangements

4.4.1.2 Family Characteristics Survey (FCS), 2009–10

Family level:

- Whether any CSA child support arrangements for children in family
- Who determined CSA arrangements for children in family (multiple response)
- Number of children in family under CSA arrangements
- Whether family should receive or make payments under CSA arrangements
- How child support was to be received or paid for children in family under CSA arrangements
- Weekly/Monthly amount of child support family should receive under CSA arrangements
- Whether family received any child support in last 12 months under CSA arrangements
- Number of children in family covered by payments received in last 12 months under CSA arrangements
- Weekly/Monthly amount of child support received under CSA arrangements for children in family
- Summary of differences between CSA arrangements and amount received for children in family
- Whether difference agreed
- Whether payments ever made
- Main reason why CSA arrangements for children in family state no money is to be exchanged
- Whether any other child support arrangements for children in family
- Whether all children in family under other arrangements
- Who determined other arrangements for children in family (multiple response)
- Number of children in family under other arrangements
- Whether should receive or make payments under other arrangements for children in family
- Weekly/Monthly amount of child support should receive under other arrangements for children in family
- Whether received any child support in last 12 months under other arrangements for children in family
- Number of children in family covered by payments received in last 12 months under other arrangements
- Monthly amount of child support received under other arrangements for children in family
- Summary of differences between other arrangements and amount received for children in family
- Main reason why other arrangements state no money is to be exchanged
- CSA arrangement recently established or reviewed
- Whether received any in-kind contributions for in last 12 months for children in family
- Types of in-kind contributions received for children in family
- Who determined in-kind contributions received for children in family (multiple response)
- Whether made any in-kind contributions in last 12 months for children in family
- Types of in-kind contributions made for children in family
- Who determined in-kind contributions made for children in family (multiple response)
- Whether received child support in last 12 months for children in family
- Type of child support arrangements for children in family

- Number of children in family covered by child support arrangements
- Total monthly amount of child support should receive for children in family
- Number of children in family covered by child support received
- Total monthly amount of child support received for children in family
- Total monthly amount of child support paid for children in family
- Type of child support received for children in family
- Who determined child support arrangements for children in family
- Number of children in family not covered by a child support arrangements (including in-kind)
- Main reason why no arrangements for (some) children in family who have a natural parent living elsewhere

The above data items are also available at the child level. The data items are more expansive than collected in 2003.

#### 4.4.2 Strengths

- National random sample derived from a multi-stage area sample of private dwellings.

#### 4.4.3 Limitations

- Results only published for 2009/10. Information missing for large number of children in sample (e.g., for around 35% of children with a natural parent living elsewhere, it was either ‘Not known’ whether child has child support arrangements (5%) or the selected respondent was not asked about child support arrangements (30%)).

## 4.5 Child Support Reform Study (CSRS)

This Child Support Reform Study was a large study incorporating longitudinal and sequential data collections designed to evaluate the impacts of the Australian child support reforms of 2008. The cross-sequential designs afford (a) longitudinal analysis (3 waves); (b) sequential analysis (3 cohorts); and (c) cross-sequential analysis (pre- and post-reform comparison vs 2 waves of post-reform comparison). The introduction of the revised child support formula on 1 July 2008 was treated as a ‘natural experiment’. The cross-sequential data are deposited with the Australian Data Archives under restricted access.

The then Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA, formerly FaCS and now DSS) funded the baseline study. The Australian Research Council funded all post-reform waves in collaboration with the then Child Support Agency (now the Child Support Program within Services Australia) and FaHCSIA. The ANU conducted the study.

Large random samples were drawn from the Child Support Agency administrative caseload, which currently represents the best available sampling frame of separated parents with a dependent child in Australia.<sup>21</sup> An initial longitudinal random sample was selected from separated parents registered with the Child Support Agency before the change in formula for calculating child support came into effect on 1 July 2008. This sample was stratified by (a) time since separation (*existing clients*

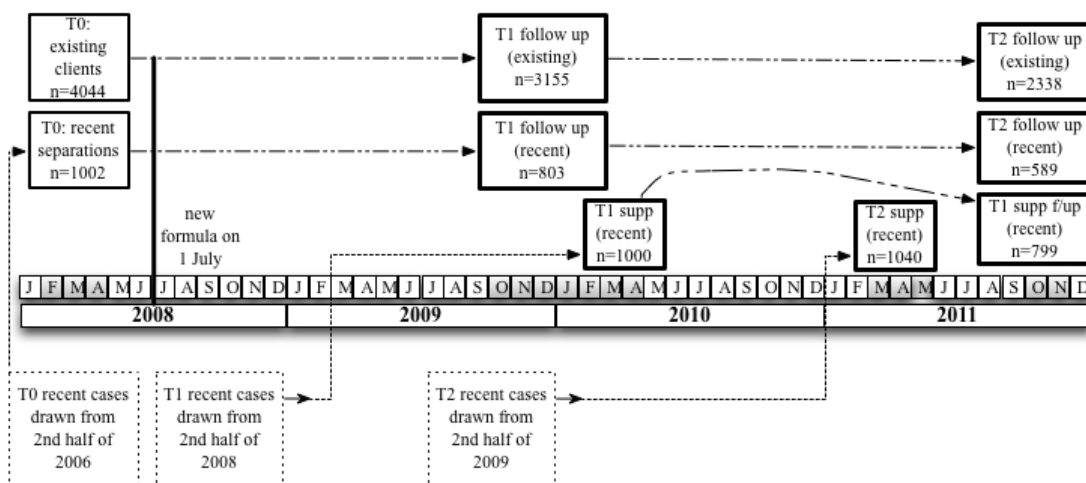
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<sup>21</sup> A small but sizeable group (somewhere between 5% and 20%) of all separated families is estimated to conduct their own child support arrangements (this includes parents electing not to seek child support) outside of the Scheme (see Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs (2003, p.127), Ministerial Taskforce on Child Support (2005, p. 77).

separated prior to 1 July 2006 vs those *recently separated* in the second half of 2006<sup>22</sup>); (b) level of care (sole care vs shared-time<sup>23</sup>); and (c) method of collection (Agency Collect vs Private Collect). This *pre-reform baseline (Time 0) sample* yielded 5,046 separated parents (2,809 mothers, 2,237 fathers) who were interviewed using computer-assisted telephone interviews (CATI) of about 25 minutes duration.<sup>24</sup> Between 20–24 months later (Time 1; 2009–10), 3,958 of these respondents were re-interviewed; and of these respondents, 2,927 (1,671 mothers, 1,256 fathers) were interviewed once again after a further 18–25 months later (Time 2; 2011). These timelines are depicted in Figure 2.

A second cross-sectional sample of recently separated parents was similarly selected at Time 1 drawn from those on the DHS-CSP register that had separated in the second half of 2008 (i.e., post-reform). Successful CATI interviews were achieved for 1,000 parents from this *Time 1 Supplementary Sample* (553 mothers, 447 fathers). This sample was also followed up for re-interview at Time 2 when 799 respondents (427 mothers, 372 fathers) were re-interviewed in 2011, three years post-reform.<sup>25</sup>

**Figure 6. CSRS Cross-sequential Research Design, Sample Sizes and Timeline**



#### 4.5.1 Data Coverage

##### 4.5.1.1 Time 0 – Pre-child support reform baseline (existing customers and new entrants)

- Direction of payment: payer or receiver (who pays more)
- Compliance—timeliness
- Whether child support ever paid regularly
- Whether child support replaced by another arrangement
- Whether other arrangement is formal or informal

<sup>22</sup> To match the supplementary samples, 1,000 recently separated respondents were sampled compared with 4,000 existing clients.

<sup>23</sup> ‘Shared-time’ cases and ‘recent separation’ cases were oversampled to ensure that there were a sufficient number of cases to make analysis of these groups statistically robust. In this article, ‘shared-time’ refers to parenting arrangements where children spent at least 30% of nights in the care of each parent. This threshold was used because the survey was conducted before 1 July 2008, after which the ‘shared care’ threshold changed to at least 35% of nights. For sample selection, information was based on DHS–CSP records just prior to the start of the fieldwork. These data may not have reflected respondents’ actual arrangements at interview.

<sup>24</sup> Respondents without a sufficient command of English were excluded. Other exclusions included: respondents aged under 18 years, respondents who were grandparent carers or non-parental guardians, and respondents registered on the Restricted Access to Personal Information (RACS) list primarily because of safety concerns.

<sup>25</sup> Response rates ranged between 64% and 67%. Time 0 interviews began on 21 February 2008, and ended on 26 April 2008; Time 0 follow-up interviews began on 28 October 2009, and ended on 13 February 2010 (with a break between 14 December and 12 January); Time 1 Supplementary sample interviews began on 20 March 2010, and ended on 16 April 2010; Time 1 Supplementary sample follow-up interviews began on 29 September 2011, and ended on 26 November 2011.

- Nature of other arrangement
- Arrangement still in place
- Whether child support is meant to be paid
- Main reason child support not paid
- Whether child support has ever been paid for eligible children
- Method of assessment
- Extent of influence of CSA assessment on agreement
- Method of collection
- Main reason use Private Collect
- Whether CSA Collect ever used
- Whether ever considered using CSA Collect
- Liable amount
- Actual amount
- Number, sex, age of children covered
- Difference agreed to
- Whether any Prescribed Non-Agency Payments (PNAP)) paid
- PNAPs in lieu of payments (fully or partially)
- Whether both agreed to PNAPs in lieu of payments
- PNAP amount per year
- Whether any Non-Agency Payments (NAP) paid for
- NAPs amount per year
- Who decided NAPs
- Level of satisfaction with amount of child support for children
- Level of satisfaction with amount of child support for Payer
- Level of satisfaction with amount of child support for Receiver
- Level of satisfaction with amount of child support for current partner (if repartnered)
- Whether pay/receive child support for any other children
- Current partner pay/receive child support for other children

4.5.1.2 Time 1 follow-up survey (existing customers and new entrants):

As above excluding:

- Arrangement still in place
- Whether ever considered using CSA Collect

New questions:

[Change module]

- Whether still in Private Collect/Agency Collect since last interview
- Whether the amount of child support was meant to change
- Whether simply agree to keep (paying/receiving) what (paying/receiving) prior to reforms
- Whether child support changes have been good or bad for child or made little difference
- Whether child support changes have been good or bad for respondent or made little difference
- Whether child support changes placed (more / less strain) on your relationship with former partner or had little impact

[Arrears module]

- Whether any outstanding child support arrears owed
- Who in arrears
- Arrears amount

- Age of debt
- Whether considered writing off (or waiving) the debt
- Whether PNAPs reduce amount of child support
- Amount reduced by PNAPs
- Whether shared costs of PNAPs in last 12 months

[Change module]

- Whether had to changes (housing, job, hours worked etc) because of changes to child support or Family Tax Benefit (FTB)
- If changed neighbourhood, had to move to a better neighbourhood
- Whether had to stop or start work because of child support/FTB changes
- Whether had to increase or decrease the number of hours worked
- Whether had been the (receiving/paying) parent
- Level of satisfaction with overall amount

[Bargaining]

- Whether agreed to pay more/receive less to protect contact
- Whether agreed to pay more/receive less to stop fights
- Whether agreed to pay more/receive less because amount unfair
- Whether agreed to pay more/receive less because wanted to
- Whether decision to agree to pay more/receive less because not wanted to upset ex-
- Whether decision to agree to pay more/receive less because felt pressured by ex-
- Whether decision to agree to pay more/receive less because felt intimidated by ex-
- Whether decision to agree to pay more/receive less because concerned for safety
- Whether decision to agree to pay more/receive less because concerned for child's safety
- Whether decision to agree to pay more/receive less because not wanted to have as little as possible to do with ex-partner
- Accurate knowledge of parenting time adjustment
- Accurate knowledge of FTB splitting rule
- How often discussions with (target partner) about money for child had caused conflict in last 12 months

4.5.1.3 Time 2 follow-up survey (existing customers and new entrants):

As above plus:

- Whether would be willing to use a mediation service to try to resolve child support issues
- Whether tried to limit number of nights because it might affect child support/FTB
- Whether tried to increase number of nights to ease cost of child support

4.5.1.4 Time 1 supplementary survey (new entrants only):

- Perception of how well the child support system is generally working for families
- Perception of how well the child support system is working personally
- Direction of payment: payer or receiver (who pays more)
- Compliance—timeliness
- Whether child support ever paid regularly
- Whether child support replaced by another arrangement
- Whether other arrangement is formal or informal
- Nature of other arrangement
- Arrangement still in place [deleted in this follow-up wave]

- Whether child support is meant to be paid
- Main reason child support not paid
- Whether child support has ever been paid for eligible children
- Method of assessment
- Extent of influence of CSA assessment on agreement
- Method of collection
- Main reason use Private Collect
- Whether CSA Collect ever used
- Whether ever considered using CSA Collect
- Liable amount
- Actual amount
- Number, sex, age of children covered
- Difference agreed to

[Arrears module]

- Whether any outstanding child support arrears owed
- Who in arrears
- Arrears amount
- Age of debt
- Whether considered writing off (or waiving) the debt
- Whether PNAPs reduce amount of child support
- Amount reduced by PNAPs
- Whether shared costs of PNAPs in last 12 months
- Whether any PNAPs paid
- PNAPs reduce/increase payments (fully or partially)
- Whether both agreed to PNAPs [deleted in follow-up wave]
- PNAP amount per year
- PNAP specific items
- Whether any NAPs paid for [deleted in follow-up wave]
- NAPs amount per year [deleted in follow-up wave]
- Who decided NAPs [deleted in follow-up wave]
- Level of satisfaction with amount of child support paid/received
- Level of satisfaction with amount of child support for children
- Level of satisfaction with amount of child support for Payer
- Level of satisfaction with amount of child support for Receiver
- Level of satisfaction with amount of child support for current partner (if repartnered)
- Whether pay/receive child support for any other children
- Current partner pay/receive child support for other children

[Bargaining]

- Whether agreed to pay more/receive less to protect contact
- Whether agreed to pay more/receive less to stop fights
- Whether agreed to pay more/receive less because amount unfair
- Whether agreed to pay more/receive less because wanted to
- Whether decision to agree to pay more/receive less because not wanted to upset ex-partner
- Whether decision to agree to pay more/receive less because felt pressured by ex-partner
- Whether decision to agree to pay more/receive less because felt intimidated by ex-partner
- Whether decision to agree to pay more/receive less because concerned for safety
- Whether decision to agree to pay more/receive less because concerned for child's safety

- Whether decision to agree to pay more/receive less because not wanted to have as little as possible to do with ex-partner
- Accurate knowledge of parenting time adjustment
- Accurate knowledge of FTB splitting rule
- Whether receive FTB
- How often discussions with ex-partner about money for child had caused conflict in last 12 months

#### 4.5.1.5 Time 2 supplementary (new entrants only):

As above plus

- Whether would be willing to use a mediation service to try to resolve child support issues
- Whether tried to limit number of nights because might affect child support/FTB
- Whether tried to increase number of nights to ease cost of child support

#### 4.5.2 *Strengths*

- Child support main focus of study—thus comprehensive set of questions ( $n=79$ )
- National random sample of separated parents registered with CSA
- Design, study, and attrition weights (weighted to CSA caseload, for supplied sample, and for attrition)
- Dyadic data – able to identify ex-couple dyads after data collected to analyse responses from both parents in a case
- Individual, case, and dyadic (ex-couple) weights
- Easy to add another new entrant cohort and compare with previous cohorts

#### 4.5.3 *Limitations*

- Data getting old
- Attitudinal questions may no longer reflect scheme participant views
- Excludes self-administration group

## 4.6 Longitudinal Study of Separated Families (LSSF)

The LSSF involved the collection of data from the same group of parents across three waves. It was a national study of 10,002 parents—with at least one child under 18 years old—who separated after the introduction of the family law changes on 1 July 2006 and were registered with the Child Support Agency.

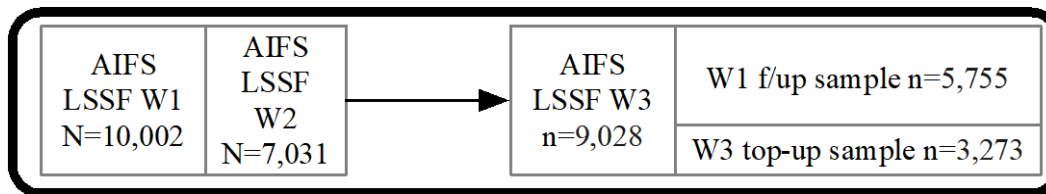
Parents in Wave 1: (a) had separated from the child's other parent between July 2006 and September 2008; (b) were registered with the Child Support Agency in 2007; and (c) were still separated from this parent at the time of the first survey. The W1 survey took place between August and October 2008. Participants had been separated on average for about 15 months.

A second wave of interviews for the LSSF was conducted between September and November 2009 ( $N=7,031$ )—up to 26 months after the time of parental separation.

The third wave of interviews for the LSSF was conducted between September and November 2012. Wave 3 ( $N=9,028$ ) drew on two samples: a 'follow-up' sample ( $n=5,755$ ) comprising separated parents who participated in Wave 1; and a new sample of parents—a 'top-up' sample ( $n=3,273$ ) to

augment the total number of Wave 3 participants due to Waves 1 and 2 sample loss.<sup>26</sup> Parents in Wave 3 had been separated for an average of five years and had lived together for 10 years, on average, prior to separating.

**Figure 7. Longitudinal Study of Separated Families Longitudinal Design**



#### 4.6.1 Data Coverage

##### 4.6.1.1 Wave 1 (2008)

- Whether child support was occurring
- Who the payer was
- Whether child support was being paid for children from another relationship
- The expected amount of child support, and the number of children covered
- The actual amount of child support paid/received
- The timeliness of payments
- Whether child support was collected through the Child Support Agency
- Receipt of FTB
- Perception of fairness about amount currently paid/received —for participant, other parent, for current partner (if relevant).

##### 4.6.1.2 Wave 2 (2009)

- Whether supposed to pay or receive child support
- Who is payer
- The expected amount of child support
- The actual amount of child support paid/received
- The timeliness of payments
- Whether changes in living arrangements lead to changes in child support amount
- Strategic bargaining: Whether changes in parenting time were made to change CS
- Perception of fairness for participant about amount currently paid/received

##### 4.6.1.3 Wave 3 (2012)

- Whether child support was occurring
- Who the payer was
- The expected amount of child support
- The actual amount of child support paid/received
- Number of children covered
- Method of assessment
- The timeliness of payments
- Whether child support was collected through the Child Support Agency

<sup>26</sup> The top-up sample was drawn from active cases registered with the CSA between 1 January and 31 May 2008.

- Perception of fairness about amount currently paid/received
- Statement about whether can afford to pay child support
- Statement – liability exceeds children’s needs
- Statement – resent paying because can’t control spending by ex-partner
- Statement – resent paying because of amount of parenting time given
- Statement by other parent – paying parent can afford to pay
- Statement by other parent – ex-partner thinks liability exceeds children’s needs
- Statement by other parent – ex-partner resentful because can’t control how money spent
- Statement by other parent – ex-partner resentful given how much parenting time
- Statement by other parent – ex-partner prefer not to pay to make life difficult

#### 4.6.2 Strengths

- National random sample of separated parents registered with the Child Support Agency
- Roughly equal numbers of mothers and fathers
- Panel design
- 3 questions on perceptions of fairness of the amount paid for payers, receivers and current partners.
- Questions on family violence<sup>27</sup> can be cross tabulated with child support data

#### 4.6.3 Limitations

- W1 was collected after the introduction of the revised formula in July 2008. The data are longitudinal, which is both a strength (change over time for individuals) and a weakness (sample attrition and an inability to examine cohort effects).
- No design weights, only sample and attrition weights
- Limited number of questions on child support ( $n=23$ )
- Excludes self-administration group

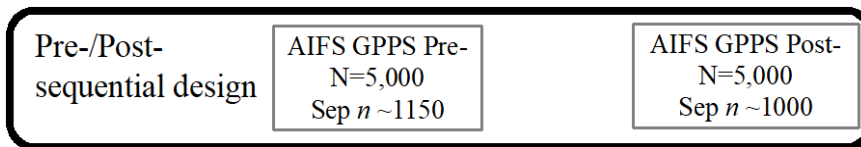
## 4.7 General Population of Parents Survey (GPPS)—2006 & 2009

The GPPS was conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies and was funded by the Australian Government Attorney-General’s Department as part of the AIFS evaluation of the family law reforms introduced in 2006. The GPPS comprises two nationally representative telephone surveys: one conducted in mid-2006 (pre-reform baseline); the other, in early 2009 using a new sample of participants (post-reform group). Each sample comprised ~5,000 randomly selected participants from the general population of parents with at least one child under the age of 18 years and with a landline phone.

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<sup>27</sup> For example, in Wave 1, the following questions were asked: [L7] At any time before or during the separation, did [former partner] ever: (1) ‘Try to prevent you from contacting family or friends’; (2) ‘Try to prevent you from using the telephone or car’; (3) ‘Try to prevent knowledge of or access to family money’; (4) ‘Insult you with the intent to shame, belittle or humiliate’; (5) ‘Threaten to harm the (child/children)’; (6) ‘Threaten to harm other family/friends’; (7) ‘Threaten to harm you’; (8) ‘Damage or destroy property’; (9) ‘Threaten to harm or harm pets’; (10) ‘Threaten to harm themselves’; [L8] ‘Before you separated, were you ever physically hurt by [former partner] in any way?’; [L8a.] ‘Was any abuse or violence ever seen or heard by the children?’.

**Figure 8. General Population of Parents Survey Pre- /Post-Design, Sample Sizes and Timeline**



#### 4.7.1 Data Coverage

##### 4.7.1.1 The 2006 survey

- Whether child support is occurring
- Pay / Receive
- Whether child support is meant to be occurring
- Main reason child support is not occurring
- Method of assessment
- Method of collection
- Compliance—quantum
- Compliance—timeliness<sup>28</sup>

##### 4.7.1.2 The 2009 survey

The 2009 survey examined the above questions plus five questions:

- The expected amount of child support
- The actual amount of child support paid/received
- Reason payments rarely made on time
- Changes in parenting time linked to changes in child support
- Strategic Bargaining: Parenting time and child support linked for financial advantage
- Family violence
- Perception of fairness about amount currently paid/received

#### 4.7.2 Strengths

- 2 large national random samples
- Pre-/post- child support reform design
- Roughly equal numbers of mothers and fathers
- Method of assessment and collection assessed (comparing Agency and Private Collect)
- Not limited to separated parents in the Child Support Scheme caseload. Some information about parents who self-administer
- Questions on use of family violence services<sup>29</sup> can be cross-tabulated with child support data

#### 4.7.3 Limitations

- Limited number of questions on child support ( $n=14$ )
- Data on the amount of financial support and how many children received (periodic and/or non-periodic) support was not collected

<sup>28</sup> Responses on compliance were: ‘Always paid in full and on time’, ‘Paid irregularly or not in full’, ‘No longer paid, a debt is accruing’, ‘Not paid – liability is zero’, ‘Paid, but no amount has ever been set’, and ‘Never paid’.

<sup>29</sup> For example, [RS7] asked: ‘Other than family or friends, have you ever sought any help or advice or used any services to resolve problems in your relationship?’; [RS8a] ‘Where did you go? ... (3) Family violence services....’

## 4.8 Survey of Recently Separated Parents (SRSP)—2012 & 2014

The SRSP 2012 was a computer-assisted telephone interview (CATI) survey of 6,119 parents with children aged under 18 years old who (a) separated between 1 July 2010 and 31 December 2011, (b) were registered with DHS Child Support Program during 2011, and (c) were still separated from the other parent at the time of first interview. Participants had been separated for around 15 months before the main provisions of the 2011–2011 family violence amendments came into effect on 7 June 2012.

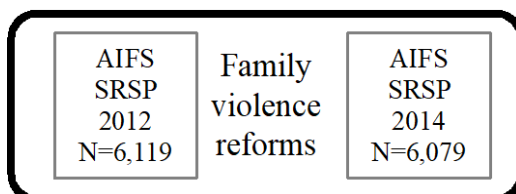
The aim of the SRSP 2012 was ‘to understand how the family law system met the needs of a cohort of separated parents, particularly those affected by family violence, whose separation took place just prior to the 2011–12 [family violence] amendments’ (De Maio et al, 2013, p. 3). Data were collected between 22 August and 30 September 2012. According to De Maio et al (2013):

The SRSP 2012 greatly enhances the evidence base on the operation of the family law system. Design and sampling strategies were used to maintain comparability with the LSSF surveys, so that two large quantitative data sets are now available on the operation of the family law system after 2006.<sup>30</sup> While the LSSF dataset examines, on a longitudinal basis, the experiences of parents who (mostly) separated in 2007 and experienced a newly reformed system, the experiences of the SRSP 2012 parents reflect the operation of the family law system some four years later. The experiences of the SRSP 2012 cohort therefore not only reflect a more settled system, but also policy and programs that were initiated after 2006 and before 2011, such as the establishment of the Legal Partnerships Program, in which publicly funded legal services, including Legal Aid Commissions and community legal centres, were funded to provide legal information and support to clients in Family Relationship Centres. As such, the SRSP 2012 data not only provide evidence about the operation of a more mature post-2006 system, but they establish benchmarks against which the effects of the 2011–12 changes can be measured at a future time (p. 3).

A follow-up survey comprising the 6,079 was conducted between 7 August to 30 September 2014. Participants had separated between 1 July 2012 and 31 December 2013. The experiences of this second cohort of separated parents reflected the operation of the family law system in the 12- to 18-month period following the introduction of the 2012 family violence reforms. Findings from both surveys are compared and reported in Kaspiew et al (2015).

The focus of the surveys was on family violence pre- and post-family violence amendments but the surveys included a small number of child support questions.

**Figure 9. Survey of Recently Separated Parents Pre- /Post- Design, Sample Sizes and Timeline**



<sup>30</sup> Kaspiew et al (2012) write: ‘The sample was stratified by state, gender and payer/payee status. Given the smaller available sample of female payers, all female payer cases in each stratum were selected, and a proportion of male payer cases were randomly selected in order to achieve a geographically proportional sample’.

#### 4.8.1 Data Coverage

##### 4.8.1.1 SRSP 2012

- Supposed to pay/receive
- Who is payer/receiver
- Method of collection
- Forms of family violence experienced (physical, sexual, emotional)
- Compliance–quantum
- Compliance–timeliness
- Perceived fairness of assessed amount

##### 4.8.1.1 SRSP 2014

- As above

#### 4.8.2 Strengths

- National random sample stratified by state, gender and payer/payee status
- Pre-/post-design
- Questions on family violence can be cross tabulated with child support data

#### 4.8.3 Limitations

- No design weights
- Excludes self-administration group

## 4.9 Looking Back Survey (LBS)—2009

The LBS 2009 comprised a national random sample ~2,000 parents with at least one child under 18 years old who separated between January 2004 and June 2005 (i.e., prior to the introduction of the family law reforms in 2006) and who were registered with the CSA in 2007. Parents were interviewed between March and May 2009 (3.7–5.2 years after separation).

#### 4.9.1 Data Coverage

- Whether child support was occurring (pay/receive) (should pay/receive)
- The method of assessment
- Whether child support was collected through the Child Support Agency
- Perception of fairness about amount on separation (pre- child support reform).
- Better off/worse off after 2008 child support reforms
- Perception of fairness about amount after the revised child support formula introduced.

#### 4.9.2 Strengths

The two main strengths of the LBS 2009 are: (a) the national sample of separated parents is representative of those registered with the Child Support Agency (with roughly equal numbers of mothers and fathers participating); and (b) there are data on perceptions of fairness. It also includes questions on family violence which can be cross tabulated with child support data.

#### 4.9.3 Limitations

Child support is not a key focus of the LBS 2009. Thus, minimal questions ( $n=7$ ) were asked about child support. The cross-sectional study design restricts the ability to study causation.

While the method of assessment and method of collection were captured (enabling comparison of Private Collect vs Agency Collect, and potentially self-administration<sup>31</sup>) as well as the direction of payment, data on the amount of financial support and how many children received (periodic and/or non-periodic) support was not collected. Moreover, no data were collected on the level of compliance—quantum or timeliness—or why child support was not being paid.

#### **4.10 Caring for Children after Separation (CFC)—2003, 2005 & 2006**

The CFC involved the collection of data from the same group of parents across three waves. It began as a national study of separated parents with at least one child under 18 years old.

Specifically, Wave 1 comprised a random sample of 971 separated/divorced parents were interviewed in September 2003 about patterns of parent–child contact. The sample of separated parents was drawn from the Electronic White Pages.

The second wave of the Caring for Children after Separation formed the basis for a study of attitudes to child support in Australia (Smyth & Weston, 2005). The study was commissioned by the Department of Families and Community Services (now DSS) to support the work of the Ministerial Taskforce on Child Support (2005).

Two samples were drawn. A fresh general population sample comprising 1,001 individuals (55 per cent women; 45 per cent men) aged 18–64 years living in households with land lines. This sampling frame was stratified by gender and geographical location (urban/rural, State/Territory). The second sample comprised 620 separated/divorced parents (54 per cent women, 46 per cent men) aged between 18 and 64 years. These parents had at least one child under 18 years old. Both random stratified samples produced near equal numbers of women and men from all Australian States and Territories, including city and rural areas. Interviews were conducted between 19 January and 5 February 2005.

The findings from the second wave played a crucial role in shaping the direction of the Ministerial Taskforce on Child Support (e.g., Should an income shares model be adopted? Should the amount of child support be based on children’s ages?). Political decisions are meant to reflect community views.

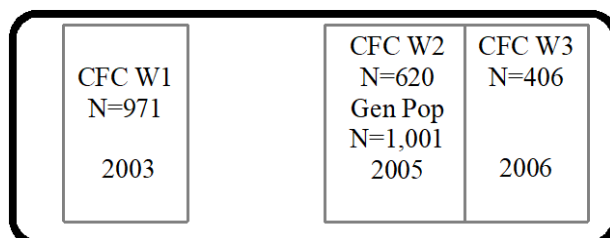
The final wave of the study was a small (N=406) baseline study put in field around the time the family law changes that came into effect in July 2006. Basic data were collected on different aspects of post-separation parenting and the use of family law services. Interviews were conducted between 27 July and 16 August 2006.

All three waves of the data are held under restricted access with the Australian Data Archives.

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<sup>31</sup> This could also include a tiny group of separated parents who were registered in 2007 with the CSA but who were no longer registered at interview in 2009.

**Figure 10. Caring for Children after Separation Longitudinal Design and Sample Sizes**



#### 4.10.1 Data Coverage

##### 4.10.1.1 Wave 1

- Whether child support is occurring
- Direction of payment: payer/receiver
- Whether child support meant to be occurring
- Main reason no child support is occurring
- Whether regular child support has ever been paid
- Method of assessment
- Method of collection
- Expected amount of child support
- Actual amount paid or received
- Number, age, sex of child covered by child support
- Whether ever any involvement with CSA
- Nature of CSA involvement
- Whether any additional child support paid/received
- Amount of additional child support
- Level of satisfaction with amount paid/received
- Whether any other children also pay/receive child support
- Whether partner pays/receives child support for any other children support (if applicable)
- Accurate awareness of parenting time threshold for reduction in child support
- Accurate awareness of parenting time threshold for FTB splitting
- Reduced child support due to parenting time
- FTB splitting due to parenting time
- Respondent restricted overnights to maximise child support
- Respondent believed other parent restricted overnights to maximise child support
- Respondent tried to get more nights to reduce child support
- Respondent believed other parent tried to get more nights to reduce child support

##### 4.10.1.2 Wave 2

###### 4.10.1.2.1 Separated parent sample:<sup>32</sup>

- Attitudes
  - Perception overall child support system working well
  - Perception of fairness for both parents
  - Whether a father/mother living elsewhere should have to pay child support
  - Whether a father/mother living elsewhere should have to pay child support if on income support
  - Whether most fathers would pay child support without any government involvement

<sup>32</sup> Source: Smyth & Weston (2005) Appendix 1. <https://aifs.gov.au/research/research-reports/snapshot-contemporary-attitudes-child-support>

- Whether amount of child support to be paid on father's, mother's, or both incomes
- Whether the amount should depend on the children's ages
- Amount of clawback if mother on income support
- Whether father has new child should reduce child support
- Whether father has step-children should reduce child support
- Father should keep paying/receiving child support if mother repartners
- Whether child support should cover basic costs or reflect capacity to pay
- Minimum amount of child support
- Cap amount
- Father/Mother still pay if not interested in child
- Father still pay if children move interstate
- Father still pay if children move overseas
- Father/Mother have to pay if stopped from seeing child
- Child support for young adult children
- Parenting time adjusted be permitted
- Number of nights required for parenting time adjustment
- Should child support be reduced where a father has to set-up new housing specifically for his children to stay overnight
- Whether father / mother should be fined if not pay child support
- After separation, main responsibility for financial support of their children should lie with the parents, the government, or both
- Main priority of Scheme: helping children, being 'fair' for both parents, or reducing the Govt expenditure
- Gross or Net
- Anything you'd like to see changed about the Scheme as it currently stands
- Currently paying or receiving any regular child support for any children

General population sample:<sup>33</sup>

Attitudes questions above except first two questions replaced with:

- Whether had heard of the Child Support Scheme or the Child Support Agency
- Whether ever had any contact with the Child Support Agency

4.10.1.3 Wave 3

- Disagreements about money (including child support)
- Level of difficulty to manage these disagreements
- Currently pay/receive any child support
- Is child support meant to be occurring
- Main reason child support not occurring
- Case registered with CSA
- Debt accumulating with CSA
- Method of collection
- Compliance – amount paid in full
- Compliance – amount paid on time

4.10.2 Strengths

- Random stratified (proportionate) sample
- General population and separated parent population
- Extensive child support questions
- Comprehensive set of attitudinal questions about child support by sex in Wave 2

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<sup>33</sup> Source: Smyth & Weston (2005) Appendix 2. <https://aifs.gov.au/research/research-reports/snapshot-contemporary-attitudes-child-support>

- 2 questions on disagreements about child support

#### 4.10.3 Limitations

- Data were not weighted for attrition.
- Only one question on the payment or receipt of financial support for children.
- Dataset old.
- Lack of statistical power by Wave 3

## 4.11 Negotiating the Life Course (CFC)—2003 & 2006

The Negotiating the Life Course study is a longitudinal study undertaken by the Australian Demographic and Social Research Institute, Australian National University and the School of Social Science, University of Queensland. It was designed to map the changing life courses and decision-making processes of Australian men and women as the family and society move from male breadwinner orientation to higher levels of gender equity. Wave 1 was conducted in 1996/1997, Wave 2 in 2000, Wave 3 in 2003, Wave 4 in 2006, and Wave 5 in 2010. The first wave is not examined because it was outside the focal time period (collected pre-2000). Several waves were funded by the Australian Research Council. The data are deposited with the Australian Data Archives.

### Figure 11. Negotiating the Life Course Longitudinal Design, Sample Sizes and Timeline

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Note. N depicts number of separated / divorced parents in each wave.

#### 4.11.1 Data Coverage

##### 4.11.1.1 Waves 2 (2000) and Waves 4 (2006)

- Provides child support for children living elsewhere
- Amount of child support paid
- Partner provides child support for children living elsewhere
- Amount of child support paid by partner
- Receives child support for children living with them
- Amount of child support received
- Partner receives child support for children with them
- Amount of child support received by partner

##### 4.11.1.2 Wave 5 (2010)

- N/A – no child support data

#### 4.11.2 Strengths

- Panel survey allows change over time for individuals to be investigated.

### 4.11.3 Limitations

- Limited number of questions on child support ( $n=6$ )

## 4.12 Enterprise Data Warehouse (EDW)

Within its legislative remit, Services Australia (and CSA) can only collect data to meet its program and administrative needs. Although these administrative data are not intended for research purposes, they can shed light on important trends (e.g., a shift from Agency Collect to Private Collect) and emerging pain points (such as changes in child support compliance, and increases in international debt).

Services Australia collects longitudinal unit-record data about children and their parents from the date of registration for child support (generally shortly after separation) until the relevant child or children turn 18 years of age or otherwise leave the Child Support Scheme. These data are stored in the Enterprise Data Warehouse. The EDW is:

one of the largest government holdings of primary care data in the world. It provides secure data storage, reporting, analytics, and visualisation capabilities. It allows users to access a wealth of data needed for research and policy development. Our staff, related agencies and other health system users, can access, use and share the data.<sup>34</sup>

It is an extremely complex multi-level dataset. Data from the EDW were the basis of published statistics in the early *CSA Facts and Figures* series (various years until 2008).

A subset of data from the EDW is extracted by DSS for policy analysis and reporting purposes under strict privacy provisions. The EDW extraction is used to create the Child Support Extract Dataset (CSED). The CSED, previously known as the Child Support Evaluation Dataset, was initially developed to build on the work of the Ministerial Taskforce on Child Support—primarily to be able to model the distributional impacts of policy tweaks after July 2008. The CSED is the primary source for aggregated data published quarterly on data.gov.au.

It is important to note that Services Australia and DSS use different sets of rules in the treatment of these data. This means reports by each department may not align.

## 5. Mapping Data Items to Data Sources

This section maps data items to data sources to examine the degree of overlaps between sources and which data items have extensive coverage across datasets (e.g., method of assessment; method of collection; compliance—quantum and timeliness) and which data items are sparse (e.g., perceptions of fairness; the level of difficulty making child support payments). Tables 2–5 overleaf set out the dataset-by-data item matrices—for child support arrangement and compliance (Table 2); for child support arrears and bargaining (Table 3); for child support periodic and non-periodic payments (Table 4); and for satisfaction with and perceived fairness of child support (Table 5).<sup>35</sup> Row totals indicate

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.health.gov.au/topics/health-data-and-medical-research/our-data-collections>

<sup>35</sup> The total number of child support items in a study might exceed the number of items listed as original variables because combined items allow for the creation of derived variables (e.g., ‘Expected amount’ and ‘Actual amount’ allow for derivation of ‘Compliance–quantum’).

the number of datasets that contain a particular item, whereas Table 6 provides a summary of the number of data items within each dataset.

**Table 2. Data Items by Data Sources—Child Support Arrangement and Compliance**

Data Item	Longitudinal Studies (n=3)			Individual Surveys (n=8)								Row n
	HILDA	LSAC	LSIC	CSRS	FCS	LSSF	GPPS	SRSP	LBS	CFC	NLC	
1 Any arrangement	W1–	W1–	W1–	T0–2+T1S	03+09	W1	2006	✓	✓	W1+3	W2+4	11
2 Reviewing arrangement		W3–			2009							2
3 Discussing arrangement		W3–										1
4 Using CSA	W10–	W3–	W1–		2009							4
5 Using FRC	W10–	W3–	W1–	T2 + T2S	03+09							5
6 Using Court	W10–	W3–	W1–		2009							4
7 Using lawyers			W1–		03+09							2
8 Using other service		W3–	W1–*		2009							3
9 CS occurring	W1–		W1–	T0–2	2003	W1+3	2006			W1+3		7
10 CS meant to be occurring	W10–		W1–	T0–2+T1S		W2	2006	✓		W1+3		7
11 CS ever been paid/received		W3–		T0–2+T1S	2009					W1		4
12 How child support used			W1–									1
13 Main reason no CS		W3–	W1–	T0–2+T1S	2009		2006			W1+3		6
14 What do if no cs paid			W1–									1
15 Who payer/receiver	W1–	W3–	W1–	T0–2+T1S	03+09	W1–3	2006	✓	✓	W1+3	W2+4	11
16 Ever been in other role (pay/rcv)				T1								1
17 Method of assessment	W10–	W3–	W1–	T0–2+T1S	03+09	W3	2006		✓	W1+3		9
18 Method of collection		W3–	W1–	T0–2+T1S	03+09	W1+3	2006	✓	✓	W1+3		9
19 CSA ever involved										W1		1
20 Ever had contact from CSA										W1		1
21 Nature of CSA involvement										W1		1
22 CSA influence on arrangement				T0–2+T1S								1
23 Reason use Private Collect				T0–2+T1S								1
24 CSA Coll ever used				T0–2+T1S								1
25 Ever consider use CSA				T0+T1S								1
26 Still in PC/CSA				T1								1
27 Expected amount	W10–	W1–	W1–	T0–2+T1S	03+09	W1–3	2009			W1		8
28 Actual amount	W1–	W1–	W1–	T0–2+T1S	03+09	W1–3	2009			W1	W2+4	9
29 No. of children covered	W1–	W1–		T0–2+T1S	03+09	W1+3				W1		6
30 No. children not covered					03+09							1
31 Compliance – quantum	W1–	W1–		T0–2+T1S	03+09	W1+2	2006	✓		W1+3		8
32 Compliance – timeliness		W4–		T0–2+T1S		W1–3	2006	✓		W1+3		6
33 Reason rarely paid on time							2009					1
34 CS occur in last 12 months					03+09							1
35 Last payment amount		W3–										1
36 When last payment		W3–										1
<b>Column Total (n)</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>3</b>	

Note. \* includes Centrelink, Elders, Aboriginal family consultant; # Research team unwilling to provide survey questions.

**Table 3. Data Items by Data Sources—Child Support Arrears and Bargaining**

Data Item	Longitudinal Studies (n=3)			Individual Surveys (n=8)								Row n	
	HILDA	LSAC	LSIC	CSRS	FCS	LSSF	GPPS	SRSP	LBS	CFC	NLC		
37	Arrears		W4–		T1+T1S						W1+3		3
38	Arrears amount		W4–		T1+T1S								2
39	Age of debt				T1+T1S								1
40	Who in arrears				T1+T1S								1
41	Consider waiving debt				T1+T1S								1
42	Freq difficulty paying [PLE]		W3–										1
43	Receipt of FTB				T1S		W1						2
44	FTB split—change in nights									W1			1
45	Care change linked to cs change						W2	2009		W1			3
46	Strategic bargaining						W2	2009					2
47	Knowledge—parenting time adjustment				T1–2+T1S					W1			2
48	Knowledge—FTB splitting threshold				T1–2+T1S					W1			2
49	Limit nights to keep cs				T2 + T2S					W1			2
50	Ex- limit nights to keep cs				T2 + T2S					W1			2
51	More nights to reduce cs				T2 + T2S					W1			2
52	Ex- more nights to reduce cs				T2 + T2S					W1			2
53	Limit time for cs\$				T2 + T2S								1
54	Increase time for cs\$				T2 + T2S								1
55	Accept less/pay more—child contact				T1–2+T1S								1
56	Accept less/pay to stop fights				T1–2+T1S								1
57	Accept less/pay—amt unfair				T1–2+T1S								1
58	Accept less/pay—choice				T1–2+T1S								1
59	Did so to not upset ex				T1–2+T1S								1
60	Did so because felt pressured				T1–2+T1S								1
61	Did so because intimidated				T1–2+T1S								1
62	Did so because safety concern				T1–2+T1S								1
63	Did so because child safety				T1–2+T1S								1
64	Did so because avoid dealing				T1–2+T1S								1
65	Statement – capacity to pay (x 2*)						W3						1
66	Statement – exceeds child needs (x 2*)						W3						1
67	Statement – resent b/c control \$ (x 2*)						W3						1
68	Statement – resent b/c no time \$ (x 2*)						W3						1
69	Statement - \$ revenge						W3						1
	<b>Column Total (n)</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>0</b>	

**Table 4. Data Items by Data Sources—Child Support Periodic/Non-periodic payments**

Data Item	Longitudinal Studies (n=3)			Individual Surveys (n=8)								Row n
	HILDA	LSAC	LSIC	CSRS	FCS	LSSF	GPPS	SRSP	LBS	CFC	NLC	
70		W1–		T0–2+T1S	2009							3
71		W3–										1
72		W3–										1
73				T0–2+T1S								1
74	W1-	W1–		T0–2+T1S	03+09							4
75				T0–2+T1S								1
76				T0–2+T1S								1
77					2009					W1		2
78										W1		1
79					2009							1
80					2009							1
81				T0–2+T1S	2009							2
82				T1S								1
83				T0–2+T1S								1
84				T0–2+T1S								1
85				T0–2+T1S								1
86				T0–2+T1S								1
87				T0–2+T1S								1
88				T0–2+T1S	2003							2
89				T0–2+T1S	2009							2
90				T0–2+T1S								1
91				T0–2+T1S								1
92		W1–			03+09							2
93		W1–			03+09							2
94		W1–			03+09							2
95		W1–			03+09							2
96					03+09							2
	<b>Column Total (n)</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>

Note. # Research team unwilling to provide survey questions.

**Table 5. Data Items by Data Sources—Satisfaction with and Perceived Fairness of Child Support**

Data Item	Longitudinal Studies (n=3)			Individual Surveys (n=8)								Row n
	HILDA	LSAC	LSIC	CSRS	FCS	LSSF	GPPS	SRSP	LBS	CFC	NLC	
97				T1S						W2		2
98				T1S								1
99				T0–1, T1S								1
100										W1		2
101												1
102									✓			1
103						W1–3	2009	✓	✓			4
104						W1						1
105						W1						1
106				T0–2+T1S								1
107				T0–2+T1S								1
108				T0–2+T1S								1
109				T0–2+T1S								1
110				T0–2+T1S	2009	W1				W1	W2+4	5
111				T0–2+T1S	2009						W2+4	3
112										W1	W2+4	2
113										W2		1
114										W2		1
115				T1+T1S						W3		2
116										W3		1
117				T1								1
118				T1								1
119				T1								1
120				T1					✓			2
121				T1								1
122										W2		1
123				T1								1
124				T1								1
125				T1								1
126				T1								1
	<i>Column Total (n)</i>			<i>19</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>3</i>	

Over 125 data items on child support have been collected over the last two decades across the 11 in-scope datasets that include information about child support. Table 6 below shows that the ANU Child Support Reform Study collected the most comprehensive set of child support data ( $n=79$  items), followed by (b) the AIFS Caring for Children after Separation ( $n=36$  items); (c) the ABS Family Characteristics Survey ( $n=34$  items); (d) the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children ( $n=30$  items); and (e) the AIFS Longitudinal Study of Separated Families ( $n=23$  items).<sup>36</sup>

**Table 6. Total Number of Data Items by Data Source**

	Longitudinal Studies ( $n=3$ )			Individual Surveys ( $n=8$ )							
	HILDA	LSAC	LSIC	CSRS	FCS	LSSF	GPPS	SRSP	LBS	CFC	NLC
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>6</b>

The most common data items<sup>37</sup> across the 12 datasets (as shown in Table 2) were:

- whether there was any arrangement for child support ( $n=11$  data sources)
- direction of payment (i.e., who is the paying parent) ( $n=11$  data sources)
- method of assessment ( $n=9$  data sources)
- method of collection ( $n=9$  data sources)
- the expected amount ( $n=8$  data sources)
- the actual amount paid/received ( $n=9$  data sources)
- compliance—quantum ( $n=8$  data sources)
- compliance—timeliness ( $n=6$  data sources)
- number of eligible children ( $n=6$  data sources)

To sum up: child support compliance, method of assessment, and method of collection have been the main foci of child support research over the last two decades. There are nonetheless some interesting individual data items that warrant consideration in future work.

## 6. Discussion

This data mapping exercise sought (a) to provide a summary of child support data collections conducted between 2000 and 2023; (b) map each dataset at the variable level to assess data coverage and assess potential overlap; (c) describe some of the strengths and limitations of each dataset; (d) identify any obvious data gaps in these collections; and (e) offer an overall assessment of their suitability for future research and policy development in the area of child support.

Administrative data collected by Services Australia held in the Enterprise Data Warehouse (EDW) and provided to the Department of Social Services (DSS) for policy purposes were not mapped in this report. Detailed mapping of the administrative data is best done by the respective departments given the complexity and multi-level structure of these data.

### 6.1 Data Coverage, Recency, and Impact

Twelve potential sources of data were identified (RQ<sub>1</sub>) (see Table 1), with 11 in-scope. In total, 126 child support data items were evident in these datasets, with several key questions common to many datasets (RQ<sub>2</sub> and RQ<sub>4</sub>). Widespread use of national random samples, longitudinal or quasi-experimental designs, and detailed questions on child support in tandem with many other socio-economic and socio-emotional questions, characterised many of the datasets. That said, many of these data sets only had a small number of child support questions—as might be expected given the broader

<sup>36</sup> Both studies were led by Smyth.

<sup>37</sup> ‘Common’ is defined here as being present in at least four different data collections.

economic, developmental, research, or policy focus of the various studies—and/or lacked statistical power.

Have some datasets been of greater value for, and appear to have had a major impact on, child support policy than other datasets (RQ<sub>5</sub>, RQ<sub>6</sub>)? Arguably the largest impact has been Wave 2 of the Caring for Children after Separation study. That study of attitudes to child support—surveying separated parents, and the general population of Australian adults—shaped much of the direction of the Ministerial Taskforce (2005)—and ultimately marked changes to the child support formula.<sup>38</sup> In addition, data from the Child Support Reform Study were given to the Australian Law Reform Commission (2011), led by Professor Rosalind Croucher. Dr Maria Vnuk’s analysis revealed that one in five non-resident mothers had safety concerns. This discovery prompted the ALRC to modify its Terms of Reference to encompass both resident and non-resident mothers. The Child Support Reform Study also produced several hard-hitting papers, which were offered to the Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs chaired by the Honourable George Christensen MP (2014). The CSRS contains a wealth of data for policy analysis, especially about Private Collect cases. Finally, the HILDA data have featured in several reports related to child support policy (see e.g., Fisher, 2015; Natalier et al, 2008; Redmond, 2008; Skinner et al, 2017; Walter et al, 2010).

## **6.2 Data Gaps**

Are there any obvious data gaps in these collections for child support policy (RQ<sub>7</sub>)? DSS’s Child Support Stakeholder Consultation Group is well placed to identify emerging pressure points for which there is little contemporary data. Some obvious data gaps include:

Size and Composition of the Self-administration Group: There is emerging evidence the Child Support Scheme population is shrinking.<sup>39</sup> The reasons for this apparent shrinkage are unclear. One possibility is that an increasing number of parents are opting to self-administer their own arrangements or to forgo child support altogether. Another is that the number and/or demography of the separated parent population is changing (e.g., both parents in the work force, reduced role of FTB), along with socio-economic shifts (e.g., increases in shared-time arrangements).

Composition of the Private Collect Population: Currently, the composition of the Private Collect population remains something of a ‘black box’. This group is likely to comprise a number of important subgroups, including (a) cooperative, well-resourced parents; (b) parents who have experienced or are experiencing family violence and coercive control (including financial abuse); (c) other groups of parents not yet identified.

Child Support Compliance among the Private Collect Population: It is well known that while it is assumed that Private Collect cases are fully compliant, this is unlikely to be the case (see e.g., Smyth et al, 2014). Although several datasets suggest this, several policy and socio-economic changes call for more recent data and analysis.

Knowledge of How Child Support Operates: To what extent do child support payers and receivers understand what counts as ‘child support’? How should the costs of children be shared post-child support transfers? None of the data sources identified in Table 1 on page 3 has explored this question.

Financial Abuse, Coercive Control, and the so-called ‘Weaponization’ of Child Support: This is a major gap in current data collections given the strong policy push by government to address the many and varied form of family violence, abuse and coercive control evident across Australia. Australia’s National Research Organisation for Women’s Safety (ANROWS) and the AIFS have

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<sup>38</sup> The CFC data are drawn on throughout the Taskforce’s report (Ministerial Taskforce on Child Support, 2005).

<sup>39</sup> Two decades ago, it was estimated that at least 85% of all separated parents in Australia are registered with the program (Commonwealth of Australia, 2003, 6.21 p. 127).

led the field here, but more work is urgently needed on the intersection of love, money, and family violence. This is an extremely difficult area to research in terms of methods and research ethics.

**Economic Shocks:** To what extent has the pandemic and the recent cost-of-living crisis impacted paying and receiving parents and have some groups been more affected than other groups? If so, which ones? This is a big question and cuts to the heart of a more fundamental policy question: to what extent should child support policy be able withstand economic shocks (e.g., the GFC, pandemics, wage stagnation, and cost-of-living crisis).

The above issues are some data gaps to be explored. There are likely to be many others.

### **6.3 Future Directions**

Which datasets—if any—are viable options for future work? Figure 1 suggests there are many useful data collections with implications for child support policy. However, many of these data sets are getting old. In an ideal world, there would be an ongoing collection in tandem with ad hoc specialist topic collections as needed. A cheaper and more efficient option would be to add a fresh cohort of 1,000–2000 new entrants to the Child Support Scheme to the Child Support Reform Study. This would allow comparison with earlier cohorts. Finally, the HILDA survey is currently missing the method of collection, which means it cannot be used to investigate Private Collect cases. Including a question about the collection method would significantly enhance HILDA’s values for child support research and policy.

## **7. Conclusion**

Over the last two decades, the collection of child support data in Australia can best be characterised as fragmented and piecemeal. Such fragmentation can be attributed to the diverse foci, emphases, and methodologies employed in various studies. Given (a) the disparate nature of these data, (b) the large number of government inquiries into family law and child support and subsequent responses by government,<sup>40</sup> and (c) various audits of child support by the Australian National Audit Office,<sup>41</sup> a forward-looking integrated data collection plan for child support policy in Australia is warranted. Such a plan would facilitate evidence-based decision-making and the development of more informed and responsive child support policies, especially as new policy challenges emerge.

It is hoped this data snapshot will encourage the use of some of the datasets described—not just by government but by researchers more broadly—and improve child support data collections and analysis into the future.

There is a strong policy argument for conducting a new specialised child support data collection—to be repeated annually or biennially—that could also be used to collect information on parenting time, family dynamics, and information on the costs of children living across more than one household.

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<sup>40</sup> See e.g., Australian Government (2005, 2016, 2021, 2023); Australian Law Reform Commission (2011, 2019); Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs (2003), Ministerial Taskforce on Child Support (2005); Richmond review (2009); Joint Select Committee on Australia’s Family Law System (2019); Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs (2014).

<sup>41</sup> e.g., ANAO (2007, 2009, 2010, 2017).

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