

Working Paper Number 6

**ENCOURAGING AND MAINTAINING
PARTICIPATION IN THE FAMILIES AND CHILDREN
SURVEY: UNDERSTANDING WHY PEOPLE TAKE
PART**

Encouraging and Maintaining Participation in the Families and Children Survey: Understanding why people take part

A study carried out on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions

BY

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Contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	V
1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	1
2 INTRODUCTION	7
2.1 Background.....	7
2.2 Objectives of the research.....	8
2.3 Sample design.....	9
2.3.1 Sample design and selection.....	10
2.4 Conduct of the research.....	10
2.5 Data analysis.....	11
2.6 The structure of the report.....	12
2.7 Overview of FACS survey procedures.....	12
3 UNDERSTANDING FACTORS AFFECTING PARTICIPATION	15
3.1 Factors affecting initial participation.....	15
3.1.1 Encouraging factors.....	17
<i>Interest</i>	17
<i>Personal fulfilment</i>	17
<i>For the 'greater good'</i>	17
<i>Survey procedures</i>	18
3.1.2 Coercive factors.....	19
<i>Lacking choice</i>	19
<i>Guilt/obligation</i>	20
<i>Avoiding judgement</i>	20
3.1.3 Factors extraneous to the survey.....	20
3.1.4 Similarity and diversity.....	21
3.2 Factors ensuring continued participation.....	21
3.3 Additional longitudinal features	22
3.3.1 Additional encouraging factors.....	24
<i>Personal fulfilment</i>	24
<i>Greater good</i>	25
<i>Survey procedures</i>	25
3.3.2 Additional coercive factors	25
3.4 New factors: Reassurance.....	25
3.5 Similarity and diversity	26
4 FACTORS AFFECTING REFUSAL/ NON-PARTICIPATION	27
4.1 Lack of understanding/information	29
<i>Survey</i>	29
<i>Status</i>	29
<i>Disillusionment</i>	30
4.2 Bad past experience	30
4.3 Lack of commitment to FACS.....	31
4.4 Factors extraneous to the survey.....	31
4.5 Similarity and diversity	31
4.6 Recall of refusal.....	32
4.7 Opt-out / refusals to this study.....	32
5 FUTURE STRATEGIES	35

5.1	Aims of strategies to achieve continued response.....	35
5.2	The current approach.....	36
5.2.1	Informing.....	36
	<i>Recommendations for informing respondents.....</i>	<i>38</i>
5.2.2	Securing participation.....	38
	<i>Feeling valued</i>	<i>38</i>
	<i>Relevance of individuals to the survey</i>	<i>39</i>
	<i>The importance of the research.....</i>	<i>39</i>
	<i>Understanding the longitudinal component of the research.....</i>	<i>40</i>
	<i>Recommendations about securing participation.....</i>	<i>40</i>
5.2.3	Reassurances	40
	<i>Introducing the research</i>	<i>41</i>
	<i>Feeling safe with the interviewer in the home.....</i>	<i>41</i>
	<i>Confidentiality.....</i>	<i>42</i>
	<i>A manageable commitment.....</i>	<i>42</i>
	<i>Recommendations for reassurances.....</i>	<i>43</i>
5.3	Understanding and dealing with refusals.....	43
5.3.1	Refusal to recontact question	43
5.3.2	Refusal to the interviewer on the doorstep.....	44
5.3.3	The recontact exercise.....	44
	<i>Recommendations for refusals.....</i>	<i>45</i>
5.4	Summary of recommendations	45
APPENDIX A	FIELDWORK DOCUMENTS.....	49
APPENDIX B	FACS FIELDWORK DOCUMENTS.....	63
APPENDIX C	REASONS FOR REFUSAL TO TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY	72

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1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

The Families and Children Survey (FACS) is an important government survey sponsored by the Department of Work and Pensions and the Inland Revenue. The survey, now in its fourth year, follows families with dependent children over time to see how their circumstances change. Since 2001 the survey has covered all families with dependent children, previously it only included lower income families. One of the aims of FACS is to provide data that will measure the impact of government policies on reducing child poverty and promoting work incentives.

As a panel survey it is important that the data obtained continue to be representative of all families with children. In particular, it is important to ensure that respondents continue to participate year-on-year, so that changes in individual's circumstances can be tracked and reasons identified. FACS currently employs a number of strategies that are designed to help to minimise panel attrition. For example, currently panel members are sent a summary of survey findings, advance letters and are offered an incentive payment of £10 for taking part in a further interview. This research sought to explore the reasons why people (continue to) participate in FACS or to withdraw their co-operation from the survey, and to inform the development and refinement of panel maintenance strategies.

The study involved the use of depth interviews and group discussions with a range of different FACS respondents. Five distinct types of respondent were included in this study:

- panel respondents interviewed in consecutive waves who were still agreeable to taking part in wave 4 (Groups A);
- panel respondents interviewed in previous rounds who gave their permission to be re-contacted but who then refused (to the interviewer) to participate in a wave 3 interview (Group B);
- panel respondents who refused in a previous round of the survey, but who were interviewed again in wave 3 as a result of an opt-in exercise (Group C);
- first-time interviewees at wave 3 who agreed to re-contact (Group D); and
- first-time interviewees at wave 3 who did not agree to re-contact (Group E)¹.

The research took place across five areas of England: London, Newcastle, Bristol, Portsmouth and the West Midlands. Eight group discussions were conducted with respondent types A and D, and 17 depth interviews were carried out with respondents in groups B, C and E. Interviews were tape recorded, with respondent consent. The findings of this research are based on analysis of verbatim transcripts. Further details of the research design are contained in Chapter 2.

¹ The FACS sample design includes a booster sample every year that refreshes the panel and enables changes at the aggregate level to be examined. The booster sample is represented in Groups D and E.

Factors affecting participation

A wide range of factors was found to influence the decision to initially participate in FACS. These fall into three main groups: those that encourage participation; those that appear coercive and those that are unrelated to the survey itself.

Encouraging factors included: interest in the subject matter or the survey process; the perception that there was something to be gained by taking part; the feeling that by participating in the survey the respondent was doing something for the greater good; and the survey procedures themselves made people feel they wanted to take part.

Coercive factors included a feeling of a lack of choice about participating, feelings of guilt or obligation to take part and a desire not to be thought of badly if one declined to take part.

Factors unrelated to FACS itself included: the respondents' circumstances at the time of interview; apathy or a feeling that agreeing to take part is perceived as being easier than saying no; and whether the respondent is the kind of person who will take part in anything.

No one group of factors was pivotal in determining whether respondents decided to first take part in FACS, rather participation was often the result of a combination of influences. However there was evidence to suggest that some factors were more influential for certain types of respondent than for others. Notably only respondents in groups A and C reported thinking that they felt they had to take part, whilst the expectation of a tangible reward for taking part was a factor for respondents in groups B and C only. Further details of the factors affecting initial participation are contained in Chapter 3.

Factors ensuring continued participation

Following an initial interview, respondents are approached again in subsequent years to take part again, if they have agreed to be re-contacted. The decision to continue to participate in FACS can be influenced to some extent by the respondent's initial reasons for participating, such as interest in the survey topic, thinking the survey is important and so on, but also by the previous interview experience. Furthermore the longitudinal nature of the survey enhanced some of the initial reasons for participation. For example, personal fulfilment in future years of participation was derived from a feeling of commitment to the survey, by a desire to show that the respondent's life had changed or improved since the last interview, or by feeling valued or important which was enhanced by the fact the respondent was asked to take part again and had not been forgotten. The latter point was particularly apparent among respondents in Groups A, B and C. Furthermore the incentive payment also contributed to the personal fulfilment derived from taking part in FACS in subsequent years, as it added to the sense of feeling valued or appreciated.

Coercive factors such as a perceived lack of choice about participating and guilt or obligation also acquired longitudinal dimensions. For example, the perception that there was no choice about whether to take part again now had an additional element – that of feeling that having taken part once there was no option other than to carry on. Likewise feelings of guilt or obligation now encompassed a sense that by

dropping out now the respondent would be letting people down (either herself, the research team or other respondents). Further details are contained in Chapter 3.

Factors affecting refusal or non-participation

Four main reasons were identified as influencing the decision to withdraw co-operation from the survey.

- 1) Disillusionment because initial expectations about participating in the survey had not been met, or lack of information or understanding about the survey or the respondent's status. The latter point was particularly apparent amongst respondents in group E, suggesting that it is closely related to the re-contact question.
- 2) An unpleasant past experience such as not liking the interviewer, the circumstances in which the interview took place or the content of the interview (particularly the financial questions) was a reason for refusal. Discomfort with financial questions was more apparent amongst the predominantly higher-income groups D and E.
- 3) A lack of commitment to the survey.
- 4) Extraneous factors, unrelated to FACS itself, such as (temporary) personal difficulties at the time the interviewer called.

Further details are contained in Chapter 4.

Future panel maintenance strategies

This study has shown that whilst the current procedures go some way to informing respondents about the survey, securing the respondent's co-operation and providing reassurance about the confidentiality and legitimacy of the survey there is more that needs to be done to maximise continued co-operation and engender a FACS respondent identity.

Informing respondents

Providing information to respondents about the purpose and nature of the research is important in securing respondents' initial and continued co-operation in the survey. At present information is provided both in written format, through the letter and the summary leaflet, and orally by the interviewer. However this information needs to address individual respondent's needs. FACS respondents are diverse and this research has found that they have different information needs and levels of understanding about the research process. Information dissemination strategies need to be modified to take account of this diversity – to speak to all respondents. The challenge will be to provide the right amount of information, so as to avoid overloading respondents. Current documents used to communicate with respondents, such as advance letters and summary leaflets should be reviewed to ensure they provide clear and relevant information. New methods of communicating with respondents should also be considered such as a website and a survey information leaflet. Finally a FACS logo should be introduced which could be used to brand all survey documents.

Securing participation

There are four key requirements to securing (ongoing) participation. First respondents need to feel valued and appreciated. Additional methods of showing

our appreciation need to be developed, for example by sending thank you letters after each interview.

Second, respondents need to feel that the survey is relevant to them. Currently the materials given to respondents do not represent the diversity of families covered by the survey and how different types of respondents are relevant and important. In particular, since the survey has been expanded to cover higher income families it will be important to demonstrate how they are relevant to its aims and objectives.

Third, respondents need to feel that the research is important. Survey materials need to illustrate how survey findings are used and the impact they are having on government policy.

Finally it is important that respondents understand the longitudinal nature of the survey. This is for two reasons: so that they understand why the same questions are asked each year and that they are irreplaceable.

Reassurance

Reassurance about participating in the survey can be communicated in a variety of ways. Firstly, respondents need to feel confident that the interviewer is legitimate. In addition to the interviewer ID card and advance letter currently used, we recommend that the following: where respondents are agreeable, the interviewer makes initial contact by telephone; the respondent is provided with a named contact at NatCen who they can contact if they have any queries; and that they are able to check with the local police station to verify the bona fides of the survey and the interviewer.

Secondly, respondents need to feel safe and comfortable with the interviewer in their home. Communicating the legitimacy of the interview is important. However this research also found that interviewer characteristics can impact on respondents' feelings of safety. Conventional wisdom that the continuity of interviewer is important in panel survey may not always be the case and consideration needs to be given to the practicalities of being able to identify respondents who would prefer a different interviewer and to providing one if necessary.

Thirdly, it is important that respondents feel that taking part in FACS is a manageable commitment. The interviewer plays an important role in communicating this. However further information needs to be provided to respondents about what the survey involves year-on-year and it will be important to strike a balance between providing enough information to inform but not at the expense of people declining to take part.

Finally, it is important that the interview is an enjoyable experience, or at the very least not an unpleasant one. Consideration needs to be given to the content and length of the questionnaire. Long, repetitive interviews containing what are seen as intrusive, unnecessary and sensitive questions will discourage respondents from participating again.

Dealing with panel refusals

Respondents can withdraw their co-operation in the survey in two ways: at the re-contact question asked at the end of each year's interview, and to the interviewer (or NatCen HQ) when contact is made the following year. The re-contact question was found to be problematic: the question is viewed as being open-ended and vague. Respondents are uncertain what they are agreeing to and this can lead to refusals. The purpose and wording of this question should be re-considered. Refusals on the doorstep could be for circumstantial reasons, such as personal problems or illness.

In advance of wave 3 a re-contact exercise was undertaken among both respondents who had not agreed to re-contact at the end of the wave 1 interview and those who had refused at wave 2 (either to the interviewer or to NatCen HQ). These respondents were asked to take part again in the survey at wave 3. Group C contained respondents who agreed to be interviewed again, having been contacted as part of this exercise. The findings of this research indicate that such a re-contact exercise should be continued, as refusals at one point in time do not necessarily indicate a refusal to take part in the survey ever again. Re-contact may also demonstrate an interest in the respondent, which may actually encourage them to take part again. It also provides an opportunity to reassure respondents about the survey and to provide further information about its purpose and uses. Further details of future panel maintenance strategies are contained in Chapter 5.

2 INTRODUCTION

2.1 Background

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and the Inland Revenue (IR) are responsible for an important government survey – the Families and Children Survey (FACS). This survey, now in its fourth year, follows families with children to see how their circumstances change. In the past the survey has focused on two main areas.

- **Work incentives** – the extent to which families with children are better-off when they are working than when they are out-of-work and receiving benefits, and how they see these incentives and respond to them.
- **Family welfare** – their family well-being in terms of their accommodation, family health, morale and optimism, and how well or badly they manage to avoid hardship and debt when their incomes are lowest, especially when receiving benefit.

From last year (2001) the survey has been expanded to cover all families with children, irrespective of their income: previously higher income families were screened out, usually on the doorstep. The focus of the survey has also widened, and it is envisaged it will provide data that will measure the impact of government policies on reducing child poverty and promoting work incentives. In particular the survey will focus more on outcomes for children – such as educational attainment, health and behaviour – and the impact poverty has on children.

An important factor in ensuring the robustness of panel survey data is that it continues to be representative of the population group of interest. The Families and Children Survey attempts to tackle this issue in two ways:

- the inclusion of a booster sample every year refreshes the panel and enables changes at the aggregate level to be examined; and
- maintenance of the existing panel, through tracing movers, sending out summaries of results, advance letters and so on, aims to minimise panel attrition and enables change at the individual level to be observed.

The latter point is of particular interest since some of these activities – such as the advance letter and contact between interviews by means of a summary of results - are designed to motivate respondents and make them feel a part of a ‘special group’. Yet how successful are these strategies at enthusing respondents and maintaining their commitment to the survey?

The literature, whilst rich in evidence that demonstrates the impact panel attrition can have on the representativeness and thus reliability of longitudinal data, is less specific about what strategies help to reduce its impact, and why these strategies work. Furthermore it is not clear how generalisable any such findings are.^{2,3,4}

² Laurie H., Smith R., Scott L. (1997) Strategies for reducing non-response in a longitudinal panel survey. Working Papers of the ESRC Research Centre on Micro-social Change. Paper No. 97-12.

Analysis of FACS wave 2 (2000) response data indicated a panel response rate of 83 per cent. Of those panel respondents not participating in wave 2 the majority were refusers (10 per cent of all panel cases), with 5 per cent of panel cases not being interviewed because they could not be contacted (usually because they had moved and could not be traced).⁵ There were no apparent differences between the characteristics of responders and refusers in terms of family type (lone parent or couple) or number of children. However panel movers were more likely to be lone parents and to only have one child.

There is no clear evidence at this stage that panel attrition is introducing bias into the survey data (the panel weights applied to the wave 2 survey data had a negligible effect). However if the response rate among panel cases remained at 83 per cent year-on-year, by wave 6 only 39 per cent of those originally interviewed in wave 1 would have been interviewed at every wave.⁶ Clearly at this stage panel attrition would have an impact on the representativeness of survey data. In terms of the comparability of FACS panel response rates with other panel studies, it is not possible to make such comparisons as different panel studies have different follow-up rules and more crucially, studies such as the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) and the National Child Development Study (NCDS) have different populations to FACS. The important point to note is that all longitudinal studies face problems connected with panel attrition, and as noted earlier, whilst the impact of panel attrition on the representativeness of samples over time is well documented along with the statistical techniques one can use to compensate for its effects, there is very little published research on the reasons why panel respondents decide to remain involved, or not, in the research.

This report, then, outlines the findings of qualitative research commissioned by DWP and IR to understand the factors that influence the decision to participate in FACS, and what strategies would help encourage and secure continued involvement in future waves of the survey.

2.2 Objectives of the research

The main focus of this study was to explore views about participation in FACS, particularly the factors that motivated individuals to participate initially and those that led to continued participation or refusal, in addition to their views about survey practices and instruments. The study was designed to elicit views on:

- the initial approach to panel members and potential panel members, such as the style and content of the opt out and advance letters;

³ Trivellato, U. (1999) Issues in the Design and Analysis of Panel Studies: A Cursory Review. *Quality and Quantity*, 33: 339-352.

⁴ Hill D.H., Willis, R., J. (2000) Reducing Panel Attrition: A search for effective policy instruments. *The Journal of Human Resources*: 36, 3: 416-438.

⁵ For further details refer to: Woodland S., Woodward C. (2002) Families and Children's Survey 2000 (wave 2): Technical Report. National Centre for Social Research: London.

⁶ This is calculated as follows: $83\%(W2)*83\%(W3)*83\%(W4)*83\%(W5)*83\%(W6)$.

- subsequent strategies for maintaining co-operation, such as the frequency of contact and methods of keeping in touch;
- the type and quality of information received by the participant at each point of contact;
- how information is perceived – in terms of the kind of language used, visual presentation and so on;
- strategies for obtaining permission to re-call in subsequent years;
- how interviewers make contact, sell the survey and build rapport with respondents;
- interview length and content; and
- the incentives used, including when and how they are administered.

2.3 Sample design

The ability to draw wider inference from qualitative research depends, to some extent, on the nature and quality of the sampling. The rationale in selecting those to be included in a sample is to ensure diversity of coverage across certain key variables rather than to compile one that is statistically representative of the wider population. Purposive sampling of this kind provides the opportunity to identify a range of factors, influences and experiences underlying the research question.

Understanding the determinants of participation required the involvement of different types of panel members. Broadly, this comprised current participants in the panel, as well as those who had refused to participate in the past. However, these broad categories contained some diversity of experience. Our initial review of response patterns suggested five distinct groups of FACS respondents for inclusion in the qualitative study.

- Group A Panel respondents interviewed in consecutive waves, still agreeable to taking part in wave 4 (that is respondents who have been interviewed in W1, W2 and W3 or W2 and W3).
- Group B Panel respondents interviewed in previous waves who gave their permission to be re-contacted but who then refused (to the interviewer) to participate in the wave 3 interview.
- Group C Panel respondents who refused in a previous round of the survey, but who were interviewed again in wave 3 as a result of the opt-in exercise conducted as part of wave 3.⁷
- Group D First time interviewees at wave 3 who agreed to re-contact.
- Group E First time interviewees at wave 3 who did not agree to re-contact.

The rationale for including these different types of FACS respondents was to maximise the diversity of survey experience and so to gather the greatest possible range of factors that may influence respondents' decisions to participate in the survey. Groups A and D were included to examine the reasons why respondents

⁷ All those who had not given their permission to be re-contacted at the end of the wave 1 interview or who had refused to take part at wave 2, either to the interviewer or to HQ, were contacted either by telephone or letter and asked if they would be happy to take part in the survey again. Only those cases where agreement was obtained were issued to interviewers.

agree to participate in the survey, either year-on-year (Group A) or when they were first asked to continue their association with the survey (Group D). Group C, by contrast, was purposively selected to allow an exploration of the factors that influenced respondents' decisions to take part in FACS again, having previously withdrawn participation. Finally Groups B and E were included to ensure greater understanding of the reasons why respondents withdraw co-operation from the survey, either after having been involved previously (Group B) or after their first interview (Group E).

2.3.1 Sample design and selection

A combination of group discussions and depth interviews were used to explore the research questions. Group discussions were used with respondent types A and D, and depth interviews with respondent types B, C and E. Ideally, it would have been better to conduct group discussions with all respondent groups since they provide a dynamic environment for respondents to share, compare and assess their experiences and perceptions of FACS. They are also an ideal forum for generating strategies for future change and development. However, our investigation of response rates in previous waves showed respondent types B, C and E to be the most geographically dispersed and it was decided that group discussions would be both impractical and costly. In any case, in-depth interviews with these groups of respondents allowed us to explore in great detail the reasons for refusal (type B and E respondents), and with type C respondents an opportunity to explore the factors that contribute to a respondent returning to the panel.

The sample for group discussions and depth interviews was selected from FACS cases approached to participate in Wave 3. Because of the highly unclustered nature of group B, C and E respondents, the sample for this study was distributed across five areas of England: London, Newcastle, Bristol, Portsmouth and the West Midlands. Eight group discussions were conducted with respondent types A and D. A total of 17 in-depth interviews with respondents B, C and E were conducted, approximately six interviews with each respondent type. The full sample profile is displayed in Table 2.1.

Letters of invitation were sent to all potential participants allowing those who did not wish to participate the opportunity to withdraw. Following this, a screening interview took place by telephone and those selected were invited to participate in the research. Quotas were set at this stage of recruitment to ensure full representation of each of the key sampling criteria in the final sample.

2.4 Conduct of the research

All interviews and group discussions were exploratory and interactive in form, based on a topic guide that was developed in consultation with DWP and IR. This listed the key themes to be covered, and the subtopics within each to be explored. They were all tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The topic guides used for the group discussions and depth interviews were broadly similar. A copy of the topic guides used is included in Appendix A.

Groups were held in the evening. They usually took place in a local community centre. Most interviews took place in respondents' own homes – although a few were interviewed at their place of work. All those who participated in the study were given £15 as a gesture of thanks, which is common with research of this nature. The fieldwork was carried out in January and February 2002.

Table 2.1 – Sample Profile

	Type A	Type B	Type C	Type D	Type E	All
Age						
18-30	3	1	2	3	1	10
31-40	4	3	2	10	2	21
41-50	9	1	2	9	2	23
51+	1	0	0	6	1	8
Family Type						
Lone Parent	11	2	2	1	1	17
Two Parent	6	3	4	27	5	45
Number of children						
1	4	3	3	9	2	21
2	6	1	2	8	2	19
3+	7	1	1	11	2	22
Age of youngest child						
0-5	8	1	1	10	2	22
6-10	1	3	1	5	1	11
11+	8	1	4	13	3	29
Location						
Portsmouth	4	0	0	7	0	11
Worcester/Redditch	5	0	0	9	0	14
Newcastle	2	3	2	3	0	10
Central London	6	2	4	0	2	14
Home counties	0	0	0	0	3	3
Bristol	0	0	0	9	1	10
Total	17	5	6	28	6	62

2.5 Data analysis

Data from the study were analysed using 'Framework', a content analysis method developed at the *National Centre* for qualitative research data. It involves the systematic analysis of verbatim material within a thematic matrix. The key topics and issues emerging from the data were identified through familiarisation with depth interview and group transcripts. A series of thematic charts were then drawn up and data from each transcript were summarised under each topic. Data were then mapped within this set of thematic charts. These then formed the basis for detailed exploration of the charted data, exploring the range of views and experiences, comparing and contrasting individuals and groups and seeking explanations for similarities and differences within the data.

2.6 The structure of the report

Throughout the report, verbatim passages from transcripts are presented. To preserve the anonymity of respondents, specific details - such as names or places - which might identify respondents, have been omitted or changed.

The report begins by discussing the factors influencing participation, both initial and continued (Chapter 3). In Chapter 4 factors influencing refusals or non-participation in subsequent rounds of FACS are presented. Then in Chapter 5 we discuss strategies for encouraging (continued) participation and make recommendations. In the remainder of this chapter, we briefly describe the survey procedures adopted on FACS, as way of background to understanding respondents' views on these procedures and how they influence their decisions to participate in the survey.

2.7 Overview of FACS survey procedures

The first FACS survey took place in 1999 and was repeated in 2000 and 2001. In 1999 and 2000 the survey involved the identification of lower income families with dependent children⁸ by means of a screening questionnaire. Screening generally took place on the doorstep, using a short paper questionnaire, but in some cases additional information was required to determine eligibility for the survey, which had to be collected using a laptop computer in the respondent's home. Those families included in the survey were:

- all lone parents, irrespective of their income;
- out of work couples (defined as those not in paid work or those working fewer than 16 hours per week) with dependent children;
- those in work receiving Family Credit (or Working Families Tax Credit in 2000);
- those in work whose wages were low enough to qualify for Family Credit (or Working Families Tax Credit in 2000) but who were not claiming it (eligible non-claimants); and
- those in work who had wages above the qualifying levels for Family Credit (or Working Families Tax Credit in 2000), but who might well have qualified if they suffered a dip in income, or had another child, for example.

The sample

The sample came from Child Benefit records and as such all those families selected were sent a letter giving them the opportunity to opt out of the survey. The letter, sent on DWP headed paper, provided some information about the survey, provides reassurance about the confidentiality of the survey interview and explained that an interviewer from the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) would be in contact. If the respondent did not wish to be contacted by the interviewer she should contact either the DWP or NatCen. Only those who did not opt out were contacted by interviewers.

⁸ A dependent child was defined as being any child aged 16 years or younger, or between the ages of 17 and 18 who was in full-time education.

The interview

An interview was sought with the female ‘mother-figure’, where there was one. If there was no female mother-figure present in the household, that is the household contained a lone-parent father, then an interview was sought with him. Having interviewed the mother-figure, if she had a partner living with her a shorter interview was sought with him. The main interview was, on average, about an hour in length, with the partner interview taking an average of 20 minutes to complete.

The main interview covered a range of topics including:

- household composition;
- health (both the respondent’s and that of her children);
- housing;
- education and training;
- work (including details of child care) and activity history;
- job search;
- benefits;
- other income;
- savings;
- Income Support (for those currently claiming it);
- Family Credit or Working Families Tax Credit (details of claims made and knowledge of the tax credit);
- hardship;
- future work plans;
- current and ex-partner history.

The partner was asked about his health, education, work, job search and future work plans.

Permission to recall and the longitudinal nature of the survey

At the end of the interview respondents were asked the following question:

If at some future date we wanted to talk to you again, may we contact you to see if you are willing to help us?

If respondents were agreeable, they were re-contacted the following year and asked to take part in the survey again. This time they received a letter from NatCen, thanking them for their help and informing them that an interviewer would be in touch. Those respondents who have been interviewed at least once are referred to as panel respondents.

Those respondents who were found to be ineligible as a result of the screening procedure in 1999 were contacted again in 2000 and asked to participate in another screening interview, to see whether their circumstances had changed. Where respondents were found to be eligible this time, they were asked to take part in a full interview. Finally, each year the sample is refreshed, to ensure the survey continues to be representative of all families with children. Thus a small, booster sample of new families and in-movers into the originally selected survey areas is drawn every year. These families are sent an opt-out letter, and only those who do not opt out are approached.

Changes to FACS in 2001

In 2001 FACS expanded to become a survey of all families with dependent children. Thus all those families that had been screened out in previous rounds were approached with the view to obtaining a full interview, irrespective of their present circumstances. In addition, all those interviewed in previous rounds (the panel) were contacted again, as well as new (booster) cases being approached for the first time. The latter were all eligible to participate in the survey, irrespective of their income, as long as they had dependent children living with them as part of their household.

Keeping in touch between surveys

In between surveys, as a means of keeping in touch with respondents, a change of address card is sent to encourage respondents to let the research team at NatCen know if they have moved. After the 1999 survey this card was sent with a Christmas card to all respondents. Following the 2000 survey the card was sent with a summary leaflet, which provided details on the findings of the 1999 survey.

Incentives

Panel main respondents receive a £10 Boots voucher as a token of appreciation for their continued involvement in the survey. This is offered at the second and subsequent interviews, and is mentioned in the advance letter sent to respondents.

Copies of the survey documents are contained in Appendix B. Further details about the FACS survey design are contained in the technical reports for each year's survey.

3 UNDERSTANDING FACTORS AFFECTING PARTICIPATION

The FACS survey covers a wide range of families living in different circumstances, with different family structures, incomes, resources and living standards. It is perhaps not that surprising therefore, that there should be considerable diversity in the reasons and motivations for participation in the survey. The decision to take part was generally a result of a myriad of different reasons and not attributable to any single influence. Neither was there any apparent difference in the reasons for participation offered by the various types of respondents included in the study. Rather, a variety of factors were evident in the accounts of each type of participant.

In order to understand why people participate in FACS it is helpful to consider separately the factors influencing decisions to take part initially, to continue participating, or to withdraw co-operation having initially taken part in the survey. In this chapter we consider reasons for participation, both initial and continued. Factors influencing the withdrawal of co-operation are discussed in Chapter 4. This dichotomy, however, is somewhat false since in reality participation or refusal is but the outcome of a process of deliberation, which would likely involve consideration of both sets of factors.

3.1 Factors affecting initial participation

There are three main groups of factors that influence people's decisions to initially participate in FACS:

- those which encourage participation;
- those which appear coercive; and
- those which are extraneous to the survey.

The importance of each of these factors in the decision to initially participate in FACS varies from one respondent to another, and some factors may be much more influential than others. Furthermore, the decision to take part may be affected by factors in each of these groups. For example, a respondent may be interested in the subject (encouraging), feel sorry for the interviewer (coercive), and be able to take part because her partner is available to look after the children (extraneous).

Within each of these main factors are a range of reasons why people decide to take part in their first FACS main interview (see Figure 1). These are discussed further below.

Figure 1: Factors affecting initial participation

<p style="text-align: center;">Encouraging</p> <p>Interest in subject/interview process</p> <p>Personal fulfilment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feeling valued • Reward <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Tangible (e.g. information, financial) - Psychological (e.g. enjoyment) <p>‘Greater good’</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Altruism • Public duty • Making a difference <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Informing government - Helping to improve things / effect change - voicing opinions • Importance of survey (government, national etc.) <p>Survey procedures</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Safety (e.g. re interviewer in home) • Liking interviewer • Flexibility/convenience • Having a choice about taking part • Legitimacy of survey 	<p style="text-align: center;">Coercive</p> <p>Lacking choice</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feeling there was no choice • Fear of saying no (expecting sanctions) <p>Guilt/obligation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulty saying ‘no’ • Empathy for interviewer • Feeling ‘ought’ to take part • Feeling pressured <p>Not wanting to be judged</p>
	<p style="text-align: center;">Extraneous</p> <p>Circumstantial</p> <p>Apathy</p> <p>Non-discernment (e.g. would take part in anything)</p>

3.1.1 Encouraging factors

There are a number of different ways in which respondents may feel encouraged to participate in FACS:

- interest in the subject matter or survey process;
- personal fulfilment;
- doing something for the greater good; and
- survey procedures.

Let us consider each of these in more detail.

Interest

Interest in the subject of the survey was an important factor influencing respondents' decisions to participate. The very title of the survey could arouse respondent interest, either because it was seen as being directly relevant to personal circumstances or because the respondent had a broader interest in the topic, either personally or professional. In other cases the survey topic could provoke curiosity, either with the content of the survey (questions or topic areas) or with the research process, such as what it would be like to take part.

Personal fulfilment

The perception that there was something to be gained personally by taking part in FACS was a motivating factor. Such personal fulfilment or benefit could be derived in several ways. For example, a respondent could feel valued or important either as a result of feeling she had been 'specially chosen' to participate; or by being asked to take part in an interview, which conveyed an interest in her and her opinions: "*it makes me feel like somebody's interested in how I run my life*". Furthermore, the survey topic – families and children – helped people feel that they had something to contribute because it was a topic relevant to them.

The expectation of some personal reward or benefit from taking part (be it actual or psychological), above and beyond any other personal benefits, could also be a source of personal fulfilment. This could manifest itself in several ways. Firstly, the perception that by taking part in the survey the respondent might receive information that could lead to a tangible improvement in her circumstances, such as an increase in her benefit allowance. Secondly, the psychological rewards of taking part may be apparent, such as finding discussion enjoyable and rewarding, or appreciating the opportunity to chat to someone and break the routine of everyday life. The expectation of a personal reward or benefit linked to participation in the survey has implications for respondents' continued participation, particularly where anticipated outcomes are unrealistic or based on a misunderstanding, which may lead to disillusionment later on when such expectations are not met. This point is discussed further in section 4.1.

For the 'greater good'

Another factor encouraging participation was the sense that taking part in FACS had some greater benefit than purely personal fulfilment. Specifically there was a feeling that by participating in the survey one was doing something for the 'greater good'. This could be motivated by altruism or the idea of helping other people (ranging

from families with young children, children generally, to people worse off than the respondent). For example, one respondent was motivated by thinking of helping “a single mum that’s stuck in a high rise that can’t get out”. Alternatively participation could be motivated by the desire to fulfil a sense of public duty or a respondent ‘doing my bit’.

Both altruism and public duty are sentiments that are linked to a perception that the survey can have an impact or effect change, and that by taking part the respondent is making a difference. There are two different elements to this. First, a desire to inform the government or enable them to act and achieve objectives. One respondent, asked why she took part said:

“The main reason would be if any of the questions that I answered ... would help them [the government] to achieve whatever they wanted to achieve, i.e., identify goals or incentives or whatever...”

(Group E, couple, three children)

Second, a sense that the survey can help to change or improve things such as specific services (e.g. the benefit system), or local facilities. If a respondent had a strong view, then wanting to voice this opinion was a factor encouraging her participation. One respondent summed this up:

“I think if someone in authority can listen to what I have to say then maybe things might change. So I think that’s why I took part anyway. Because I wanted change”.

(Group A, lone parent, one child)

Finally, feeling that the survey is important contributes to a sense that participating in it will have some greater benefit. The importance of the survey is conveyed to respondents in different ways: by the official appearance of the survey (e.g. in the advance letter); and by the fact it is commissioned by a government department. The latter also provides respondents with the reassurance that the survey is not commercially driven, and thus the interviewer is not trying to sell them something.

Survey procedures

Finally, the survey procedures themselves encouraged initial participation. The procedures include the way in which contact is made, co-operation is sought and interviews are arranged; the personal characteristics of interviewers; and the general image of NatCen / FACS.

Feeling safe in inviting a stranger into one’s home was important. This sense of safety depended on two elements: having advance warning that the interviewer would be calling, and an assurance on the doorstep that the interviewer was legitimate (i.e. through showing a copy of the opt-out letter and the interviewer’s ID card). Liking the interviewer, or feeling comfortable with him or her could help respondents feel good about taking part. Such feelings related to the interviewer’s manner (friendly, chatty) and or personal characteristics, such as their age, gender or appearance (looking smart, professional, and approachable).

The convenience or ease of taking part in the survey also encouraged participation. Having an interviewer who could be flexible about the timing of the interview was

an important influence here: one respondent felt it made “100% difference” and another said she would not have taken part if the interviewer had not been flexible. This flexibility made respondents feel they were needed or wanted (which relates to respondents feeling valued, as discussed above).

The perception of having a choice about taking part in FACS could also encourage participation. This could be conveyed in two different ways – by an interviewer who does not push the respondent into agreeing to an interview, and by the fact that there is a chance to opt-out⁹ beforehand. Finally, if respondents believed in the legitimacy of the survey - that it was an important government study about families and children - this could encourage them to participate. Legitimacy was communicated both by the professional manner in which the survey was carried out (appearance and manner of the interviewer, the use of a laptop computer and conduct of the interview), and the official image of NatCen and FACS conveyed by letters and other documents.

3.1.2 Coercive factors

So far we have discussed the factors which encourage initial participation. However there are ‘push’ factors at work as well as these more positive pull factors, which may come into play in the decision making process. The push factors are coercive in their nature and can be classified under the following headings:

- lack of choice;
- guilt/obligation; and
- avoiding judgement.

Each of these contains different elements, considered in more detail below.

Lacking choice

In common with many other social surveys, FACS is a voluntary survey, that is to say respondents have a choice about whether they wish to take part in it or not. The issue of choice, and whether respondents feel they have one, has the potential to be either an encouraging or coercive factor. Where respondents feel they have a free choice this can encourage them to participate (see section 3.1). However, if respondents feel they have to take part in the survey, they may feel coerced into doing so. Despite the initial opt-out letter stating that participation in the survey was voluntary there were circumstances in which respondents felt they had no choice about whether to take part, either because they perceived that the survey was obligatory or that if they did not take part some kind of sanction, such as loss of benefits, would be imposed. This illustrates a deeper misunderstanding about the purpose of the survey and the motives of the survey commissioners, for example, believing that the survey was actually ‘the DSS checking up’ on people.

“...from the first letter, and before I had the interview, I really thought that if I didn’t take part in this then my money would end up getting stopped. I thought it was some part – some part to do with the

⁹ When respondents are first approached about taking part in the survey, they are sent an ‘opt-out’ letter from the DWP, which provides information about the survey and the fact that a NatCen interviewer will be in touch to arrange an interview. If the respondent does not wish to be contacted by the interviewer she is instructed to either contact NatCen or the DWP by a specified date.

Social, and I thought: 'If I don't do it, it's something that's gonna – they obviously want me to work, or do something like that, and if I don't take part then they'll end up stopping my money because I'm not trying, I'm not making an effort.'

(Group A, lone parent, three children)

Guilt/obligation

Feelings of guilt or obligation can be considered as coercive reasons for taking part, although the decision to take part may be motivated by a desire to *avoid* these negative feelings. Such feelings can relate to the respondent's difficulty in saying no to the interviewer. This may be partly due to a lack of self-assertiveness, but may also be influenced by the respondent's empathy for the interviewer. In particular: a desire to avoid offending the interviewer; a sense that saying no constitutes being 'rude'; and feeling sorry or pity for the interviewer, either for the job they have to do (approaching complete strangers to take part in an interview), or the circumstances of the initial approach (for example, standing on the doorstep in the pouring rain).

"I don't say no to people, I find that very hard because I feel I'm being, when I say no to people, that's being rude, you know..."

(Group E, couple, three children)

Furthermore there was a sense in which respondents felt they 'ought' to take part in FACS. This feeling of obligation is different to the more positive sentiment of public duty mentioned earlier – here it is concerned with the respondent's desire to avoid feeling bad about refusing to take part in FACS. Feeling obligated to participate can be exacerbated where respondents feel pressured, perhaps as a result of a persistent interviewer who keeps calling in an attempt to secure co-operation where a definitive refusal has not been articulated.

Avoiding judgement

A wish to avoid being judged for saying no can motivate respondents to take part initially. This is essentially about how the respondent thinks she will appear to the interviewer or others, and has two different elements. The first is the sense that saying no will imply the respondent has something to hide, so the decision to participate is to demonstrate that this is not the case. The second is the feeling that saying no will make the respondent appear stupid, so again, the motivation to take part is to avoid this judgement.

3.1.3 *Factors extraneous to the survey*

There are three factors influencing the decision to participate that are unrelated to the survey itself. The first is the respondent's circumstances at the time of the interview. For example, having the time, being in the right mood, having childcare available and so on can all affect the decision about whether to take part.

The next two factors do not concern a motivation to take part, but rather, the lack of a reason to say no. Apathy, or a feeling of 'why not do it' can lead to participation, particularly if a respondent considers taking part to be easier than saying no. Here the respondent may not have any strong desire to take part, but rather does not have a reason not to take part. Finally, there is the undiscerning respondent, who like their

apathetic counterpart, is not motivated specifically to take part in FACS, but participates because they always take part in surveys, regardless of their purpose or sponsor - as one respondent put it, *“I just automatically tend to give information”*.

3.1.4 Similarity and diversity

Personal interest, altruism, the wish to make a difference, views about the importance and legitimacy of the survey, and the influence of guilt or obligation were factors that were evident amongst the five types of respondent included in this study. Other reasons for participation that were also recurrent across all respondent groups included liking the interviewer, flexibility/convenience, and circumstantial reasons for agreeing to participate. Thus, respondents with a varied history of participation in the survey exhibit a similar range of influence in that they all make mention of encouraging, coercive and extraneous factors.

However, there is also evidence to suggest that some factors appear to be more influential for certain types of respondent. This is evident when groups A, B and C (longer contact with FACS and classified as lower-income previously) are compared with D and E (more recent contact with FACS and mostly classified as higher-income previously); and again when groups A and D (never refused) are contrasted with groups B, C and E (refused at some point). There are a couple of notable patterns. First, only respondents in groups A and C reported thinking that they had to take part. This may be related to the fact that they originally received an opt-out letter from the DSS, and as they were lower-income were likely to be receiving benefits. Thus, such comments were less apparent amongst respondents in groups D and E. Second, the expectation of a tangible reward for taking part was a factor for respondents in groups B and C only. This is a factor that can later lead to refusals due to disillusionment, so it is no surprise that groups A and D are not represented here.

3.2 Factors ensuring continued participation

After taking part in an initial FACS interview, NatCen interviewers return to respondents the following year to interview them again. If they participate a second time, we return for a third interview a year later and so on. The decision to continue participating in FACS is not simply a re-run of the initial decision to take part – but can, not surprisingly, be influenced by the previous interview experience. If we compare continued participation to initial participation, we see that factors affecting continued participation can be:

- identical to initial participation;
- similar, with additional ‘longitudinal’ features;
- or new, affecting continued participation only.

It should be noted that we found little evidence to suggest that a FACS identity had developed among respondents. There are a number of possible reasons for this, including a lack of understanding about the longitudinal nature of the survey and lack of a clearly recognisable FACS image or brand with respondents. However by building on the factors that encourage people to continue to participate, described in

more detail below, such an identity may develop which will further cement respondents' commitment to FACS. The strategies described in Chapter 5 have this goal in mind.

3.3 Additional longitudinal features

Some of the factors that motivated respondents to initially participate continue to have a bearing on the decision to take part again, but are enhanced by the longitudinal nature of the survey. These longitudinal features relate to respondents having participated in an interview already, or an understanding that the survey is ongoing, which was not present first time round. These are outlined in the figure 2 below, with the additional features shown in italics.

Figure 2: Additional longitudinal features

Encouraging	Coercive
<p>Interest</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>In the ongoing survey</i> <p>Personal fulfilment</p> <p>Feeling valued/important</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Competent (answers were right/good)</i> • <i>Opinions count</i> • <i>Not forgotten</i> • <i>Irreplaceable</i> 	<p>Lacking choice - <i>can't drop out now</i></p> <p>Guilt/Obligation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>sense of letting people down</i>
<p>Reward - <i>financial</i></p> <p>Commitment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Wanting to 'follow through'</i> - <i>Being part of something</i> <p><i>To show life changed/improved</i></p> <p>Greater good</p> <p>Making a difference</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Understanding longer term impact</i> <p>Importance of survey</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Ongoing survey more important</i> <p>Survey procedures</p> <p>Liking interviewer – <i>building rapport</i></p> <p><i>Good past experience</i></p> <p><i>Liking interview process</i></p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Reassurance</p> <p><i>Previous interview</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>content</i> - <i>general experience</i> - <i>interviewer</i> <p><i>Outcome</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>no negative result survey not forgotten</i>

3.3.1 *Additional encouraging factors*

Personal fulfilment

When respondents were asked to participate in the survey again, in subsequent years, it was apparent that an additional factor influencing this decision was the respondent's commitment to the survey. This commitment could be related to the feeling that they had started something that they wanted to continue:

"I wanted to do it because it was like the first half of something and then I wanted to see it through".

(Group B, lone parent, one child)

Alternatively, commitment could be derived from feeling a part of something: FACS. As one respondent explained:

"Well, the more you are involved, the more you feel part of something, the more time you spend on it".

(Group C, couple, three children)

Another additional longitudinal factor that influenced respondents' decision to take part in the survey again was the feeling of wanting to show that one's circumstances had changed or improved.

Having a good past experience of FACS could also provide a motivation for taking part again. This came from liking the interview itself, perhaps finding it interesting, or through enjoyment: *"I just do it cos I enjoy doing it"*.

Interest could now be specifically to do with what the interview would be like this time, compared to the last time. (There was a perception that the second interview would be different to the first). Although this involves a misunderstanding of the fact that the same survey is repeated, it could still be a source of personal motivation for respondents to take part. Alternatively, interest in finding out more about the purpose or aims of the survey could motivate respondents – as there was now an appreciation that it was not a 'one-off'.

The feeling that respondents were valued, important or of interest was reinforced by the fact that an interviewer returned the following year to speak to them again. In particular, this return visit could motivate respondents to take part again by making them feel:

- they had been a good or interesting respondent, or as one woman put it:

"If you think that I give sort of reasonable answers then I know you're going to come back and want more."

(Group B, couple, two children)

- their opinions actually counted;
- they had been remembered, or not forgotten since the first interview. One way this appreciation was conveyed was through the advance letter, which thanked them for previous help with the survey;
- they were important *now*, due to being irreplaceable – i.e. an understanding of the importance of the panel to the survey.

Personal fulfilment could also come in the form of a tangible reward – in this case, the financial incentive given by FACS was a new feature. The incentive also notably added to respondents' feelings that their help was appreciated, or that they were valuable to the survey (mentioned above). Exceptionally, respondents might have been motivated to take part in FACS again because they felt that as a result of their participation in a previous interview their circumstances had improved.

Greater good

The desire to make a difference by taking part in FACS could now be qualified by an understanding that any impact the survey might have may take some time to manifest itself. Alternatively, the fact of finding out that the survey was ongoing could mean respondents felt it was more likely to make a difference – that it would actually come to something. Furthermore the importance of the survey was enhanced where respondents appreciated that the survey was ongoing, and could therefore detect patterns, problems or changes over time.

Survey procedures

Where respondents had liked the interviewer from their first or a previous interview and felt they had built up some rapport this could encourage future participation. Moreover, where the same interviewer returned in subsequent years it was apparent that this facilitated continued co-operation as respondents could talk to a familiar face, making the interview feel less stressful.

3.3.2 Additional coercive factors

Feeling that there was not a free choice about whether to take part again now had an additional element – that of feeling that having taken part once there was no option other than to carry on.

“I feel having embarked on this I can't sort of get off ... when my interviewer said you know – it's an ongoing thing and can we come back next year or something to that effect, I kind of said yes, feeling on this track you know – and it would have been a real effort to sort of say no and to get off.”

(Group D, couple, two children)

Likewise feelings of guilt or obligation now encompassed a sense that by 'dropping out' now the respondent would be letting people down (either herself, the research team, or other respondents).

3.4 New factors: Reassurance

Reassurance about concerns or dislikes could motivate respondents to take part again. There were different issues about which respondents were reassured that were related to their previous experience or to the outcome or period between interviews. First, relating to the previous interview experience, concerns about the content were dispelled simply by taking part and finding out that the questions were 'ok' or 'normal'. Reassurance about the interview experience could be more general, such as realising it had not been a bad experience. Another way in which

respondents could be reassured about taking part again was by having a different interviewer, if they had disliked the previous one.

Second, relating to the outcome of the interview, respondents could be motivated to take part by the fact that there had been no negative consequences of taking part previously – for example, one woman was relieved she had not been inundated with junk mail. Alternatively, reassurance could come from the very fact that an interviewer came back, showing the respondent that fears the survey had been forgotten were unjustified. The perception that the survey had not amounted to anything, or that it had just been ‘filed away’ was related to respondents feeling that they had not received any feedback about the way in which the earlier survey data had been used. This last point relates to whether the respondent recalled either receiving the summary leaflet or reading it. (It was sent to panel respondents in advance of the 2001 survey). This issue is discussed further in section 5.2.1.

3.5 Similarity and diversity

When we compare factors affecting continued participation across the different groups in our sample (excluding group E, as these respondents had never agreed to a further interview), there is again considerable similarity evident across the different types of respondents included in the study. For example, interest in the ongoing nature of the survey, the feeling that a longitudinal survey was more important than a ‘one-off’ survey, and commitment to continuing with something already started – a sort of self-obligation – were all recurrent factors for continued participation. For respondents in groups A, B and C, there was also a feeling that the answers they had given previously must have been good or interesting, and that their opinions counted and thus they were being asked to take part again. It makes intuitive sense that group D is not represented here, as these factors were influenced by an interviewer coming back to see the respondent, and for group D respondents their decision was taken at the end of their first interview.

4 FACTORS AFFECTING REFUSAL/ NON-PARTICIPATION

People can decide to withdraw their participation in FACS either at the end of the previous year's interview (by answering no to the permission to recall question) or by refusing to take part in the next interview, when the interviewer contacts them (either by refusing directly to the interviewer or ringing up the NatCen main office). Note that in this study we were concerned with the factors that influenced the decision to withdraw co-operation having once participated, rather than the factors that influenced refusal to participate in the survey at all. In terms of understanding the factors that influence the decision to withdraw participation, the circumstances of these different refusals need to be considered. In particular, some of the refusals to the re-contact question are closely related to the way in which agreement is sought.

There are a range of factors that affected decisions to withdraw co-operation, all of which contribute to the respondent lacking a motivation to take part again. These fall into four main groups:

- lack of understanding/information;
- bad past experience;
- lack of commitment to FACS; and
- extraneous factors.

The variety of reasons which underpin these factors are outlined in figure 3 below, and are described in more detail in the following sections.

Figure 3: Factors affecting refusals

<p style="text-align: center;">Lack of understanding/ Information</p> <p>About the survey</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Purpose • Commitment • Data usage <p>About the respondent's status</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feeling not valued/important • Irrelevance • Incompetence • Replaceable <p>Disillusionment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal reward • Impact /feedback • Interest 	<p style="text-align: center;">Bad past experience</p> <p>Interviewer</p> <p>Interview</p> <p>Circumstances</p> <hr/> <p style="text-align: center;">Lack of commitment to FACS</p> <p>Apathy</p> <p>Not caring about survey</p> <p>Already given enough (time/info/help)</p> <hr/> <p style="text-align: center;">Extraneous</p> <p>Circumstantial</p>
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4.1 Lack of understanding/information

Where respondents have a lack of understanding about the survey, or feel they lack information that might make them more inclined to take part again this is likely to affect their continued participation in FACS. This relates to three areas: the survey, the respondent's status, and becoming disillusioned.

Survey

Misunderstanding or a lack of information about the survey can discourage respondents from taking part because it contributes to people feeling they cannot make an informed choice about whether to participate or not. There are three different ways in which this can happen.

1. Respondents may lack any clear reason to take part again when they do not understand why the survey is being carried out, or what the purpose of doing it *again* is. One respondent summed up her reasons for saying no in terms of lacking enough information:

“Why are they wanting to come into my home and ask questions and what do they want from it?”

(Group B, couple, two children)

In these situations, people can make their own assumptions about the purpose – an exceptional example is of one respondent who thought the reason the questions were repeated again in subsequent years was because we [NatCen] “*messed it up*” last time. There can also be a lack of understanding about the purpose of speaking to the same people each time, which leads to refusals.

2. Respondents can lack information about what they are being asked commit to. Refusals for this reason are particularly recurrent at the re-contact question, which is (deliberately) vaguely worded. This lack of information can be about the timing of the next interview, which can result in refusals from people who do not want to do another interview too soon. Alternatively there may be a lack of understanding about what the answer to the re-contact question means – refusals here stem from a feeling that to say ‘yes’ would be taken as a concrete commitment (which is not the case).

“I think they would have to... ask again a year later, I wouldn't want to sort of sign something now and say yes, I will see you in a year's time”.

(Group E, couple, two children)

3. Respondents may be unwilling to participate again as they feel they lack sufficient information about what happens to their data – who is it passed on to, whether it is treated confidentially, and whether it is used to good effect (rather than being forgotten about).

Status

Refusals can also be due to what is essentially a misunderstanding about status – i.e. where respondents do not feel important, valued, or of interest. Respondents who

feel this are effectively 'de-motivated' by a lack of information or understanding about this aspect of the survey. There are three related issues here.

- Respondents can refuse because they feel they are not relevant to the survey. This can be due to their own assumptions about the survey purpose, e.g. someone who does not receive benefits believing the interview is about benefits.
- Feeling incompetent – that the information the respondent provided was not useful or interesting, or that her answers were not going to help in any way.
- Feeling replaceable, or indeed that someone else would be a better respondent than they would, stemmed either from feeling irrelevant to the survey or from feeling incompetent as a respondent. For example:

“I don't really think that whatever information I give is of much interest so maybe they could go and find some other people, new people”

(Group E, couple, two children)

Overall, this lack of understanding about status is a significant factor in terms of future strategies, for it indicates a failure to communicate how important all FACS respondents are. This point is discussed further in chapter 5.

Disillusionment

Refusals can also be affected by respondents feeling disillusioned – often because expectations have not been met. This is apparent when expectations are unrealistic, and based on misplaced assumptions following the previous interview such as:

- if they had expected some personal reward/benefit from taking part previously and then did not get it (e.g. hoping for benefits information from the interviewer);
- when a hope that the survey would have an impact or make a difference was unmet because the outcome was not discernible to the respondent. One respondent said:

“I lost my belief in surveys because I thought, well, what's the use of doing them ... you don't see the benefit”.

(Group C, couple, three children)

This partly relates to not receiving any feedback about the survey after taking part; and

- when initial interest in the survey was felt to be misplaced, for example taking part initially due to an interest in the subject matter - families and children – but then feeling the interview had focused on income and benefits.

4.2 Bad past experience

A bad past experience of the survey could lead to a refusal where the respondent simply did not want a repeat of what had happened previously. There were a number of ways in which respondents could be put off participating:

- not liking the previous interviewer – either their manner in conducting the interview (too businesslike, not making eye contact, judgmental), or personal attributes such as their gender, age, appearance or ethnicity;

- the content of the interview - intrusive or personal questions (notably those concerned with finances), or what was felt to be the excessive length of interview. One respondent said no when asked to take part for a third year because:

“It was awful last time, my husband felt it was intrusive, it asked far too many questions, ask somebody else to help you”.

(Group B, couple, two children); and

- difficult circumstances at the time of the previous interview could mean respondents did not want to take part again – this could be due to poor timing (such as at a mealtime) or other people in the household being effected (partners or children).

4.3 Lack of commitment to FACS

Respondents could also refuse continued participation because they lacked any particular commitment to the survey. This could manifest in different ways, including a general apathy, typified by a ‘why bother’ attitude. Respondents could also lack motivation to take part if they felt that the survey was not important or a priority to them:

“It wouldn’t bother me if I done it or not...it doesn’t mean nothing to me really”.

(Group E, lone parent, one child)

Alternatively, a sense that they had already committed or given enough to the survey (in terms of time, information or help) could mean respondents were not prepared to take part again.

4.4 Factors extraneous to the survey

It is clear that respondents may refuse for purely circumstantial reasons (i.e. the decision is not to do with the survey at all). This is particularly relevant to refusals on the doorstep/telephone, rather than at the re-contact question. Respondents could feel unable to take part because of being too busy for a certain period of time; alternatively it might be because, for example, they were having personal difficulties or had ill health. These issues have clear implications for the development of a re-contacting strategy for those who withdraw co-operation from the survey in any one particular year and are discussed further in section 5.3.3.

4.5 Similarity and diversity

As with the decision to participate, it was sometimes a combination of factors that led to the decision to refuse. In addition, certain factors influencing refusals spanned all relevant groups (B, C and E); these were disillusionment of some sort, a bad past experience of the interview, and circumstantial reasons. However, regarding the content of the interview, it is apparent that while discomfort over financial questions was mentioned by respondents in different income groups, it was more recurrent amongst the predominantly higher-income groups D and E. On the other hand, only respondents in ‘lower-income’ groups A and B mentioned finding these questions comfortable and not sensitive. Another notable difference is that refusals due to a

lack of understanding or information about the survey or the status of the respondent were most likely to be from respondents in group E. This suggests that this is closely related to the re-contact question.

4.6 Recall of refusal

While all respondents faced difficulty in recalling aspects of the survey, recall appeared to be particularly difficult for those who had at some point refused to participate in the survey. This is not altogether astonishing since these are the respondents who, for the most part, have had little recent contact with the survey. Indeed, refusals to the survey could have occurred up to 2 years before this study took place. While all respondents interviewed in groups B, C and E remembered the survey and participation, there were some who when initially asked could not recall a precise incident when they had explicitly stated that they no longer wished to participate in FACS. Alternatively, others could remember refusing but could not recollect the timing of the refusal, or indeed their precise reasons for not taking part. However, the use of detailed probing and the provision of helpful reminders about the context and timing of the survey approach (such as approach letters, descriptions of what an interviewer may have looked like, how they would have approached the household etc.) meant that respondents were eventually successful in recollecting the refusal and their reasons for it.

However, recall was not always successful, though such cases were highly exceptional. Where it occurred there are two potential explanations. First, it may be that the event of refusal holds little significance for some respondents, and therefore the occurrence, and the reasons underpinning it, is quickly forgotten. This could perhaps be of particular relevance where respondents refuse at the end of an interview, rather than at the outset of a fresh approach, or when their refusal is of a circumstantial nature. Second, lack of recall may indicate an actual error in the panel records. For instance, it may be due to incorrect interviewer coding on the case record, where a 'non-contact' is erroneously coded by an interviewer as a refusal.

4.7 Opt-out / refusals to this study

An opt-out process was used for this study, whereby respondents in groups B and E could opt-out of being contacted for an interview. Also, when the remainder of these sample groups were contacted, some people refused to take part. Where possible, the reasons for these refusals were collected. These people may represent a different group of respondents who could be described as a 'harder-core of refusers'. It is therefore worth examining the reasons people gave for opting-out or refusing, to see whether we have discovered the full range of factors affecting refusals. Clearly the data collected about these reasons for opting-out are not comparable to data collected in the depth interviews, and therefore should be treated with caution.

Reasons for opt-outs or refusals to participate in this study were broadly similar to reasons for non-participation captured in the depth interviews. For example, circumstantial reasons such as being busy or going through a difficult situation were reasons for opting-out. Feeling irrelevant to the FACS survey (e.g. because children have now grown up), and experiencing disillusionment as nothing seemed to have happened as a result of taking part were also factors. A bad past experience of the

survey was also recurrent, with similar factors mentioned such as intrusive questions and an over-long interview.

There were two types of reasons for opting-out that were not factors for respondents in our study; however they are still within the broad categories that we did capture. One is under the 'lack of commitment' heading, and relates to feelings of not wanting to help, and not being interested in taking part. Although this is similar to a general lack of commitment, the articulation of it was more strongly negative. The other type of reasons were about a previous bad experience, and related either to the previous interview having been inconvenient – hard to fit in, or a 'hassle' to do; or feeling pressured into taking part previously. Reasons for refusal to participate in this study are contained in Appendix C.

5 FUTURE STRATEGIES

In this chapter existing strategies to achieve sustained response in FACS are evaluated and new strategies identified. It is important to be aware of those aspects of the current procedures that encourage participation and those that may require refinement. It is clear from the reasons for participation and non-participation that the adoption of additional strategies may help to encourage (continued) co-operation. Many of the ideas on how to maximise response have come from respondents themselves.

FACS is now in its fourth year and as such the vast majority of sample members have been interviewed at least once¹⁰. Thus the key challenge is now encouraging continued participation in the survey. It needs to be noted that achieving sustained participation is more complex than gaining agreement for a one off interview. This is because past experience can be a factor in the decision about whether to take part again or not. Strategies adopted to achieve sustained response may in fact be detrimental to initial response. For example, respondents may want to receive more information about the nature of the survey, including the fact that it follows families' year on year. Whilst having this information at subsequent rounds of the survey may be helpful in encourage respondents to take part again, as it helps to explain why we have gone back to them, it may put people off initially taking part if they think they are signing up 'for life'. Any potential risks to initial participation are flagged.

5.1 Aims of strategies to achieve continued response

The aims of the current procedures are to inform and reassure respondents about the survey and to secure their co-operation.

Informing

This involves providing general information about the commissioner, NatCen and the purpose of the survey. It also involves providing the opportunity for consent to participation to be obtained.

Securing co-operation

This is concerned with informing respondents about the details of the survey that are needed in order to secure participation, for example the length of the interview, the questionnaire content and also the process of actually setting up an interview.

The role of the interviewer here is key; in stressing the aspects of the interview that are particularly relevant to the respondent and arranging the interview at a convenient time.

¹⁰ Each year the panel is refreshed with a sample of new families and in-movers into the originally selected 150 post code sectors. This sample is known as the booster sample.

Reassuring

This primarily involves reassurances about legitimacy and confidentiality. It is important that the approach instils confidence in the organisation, the confidentiality of information given and the legitimacy of the interviewer.

5.2 The current approach

We currently employ several mechanisms to inform, secure participation and to reassure. The first method is via letter prior to interview. There are two different letters. The opt-out letter is sent prior to the first participation and provides respondents with basic information about the purpose of the survey, the commissioner and NatCen and provides reassurances of confidentiality. It also provides an initial opportunity to opt-out. In subsequent years, an advance letter is sent which does not explicitly invite an opt-out but otherwise has a similar content. Letters in subsequent years are printed on NatCen rather than DWP paper. Receiving a letter prior to interview was generally regarded as a positive method of introducing the survey. There are several important reasons for this. Firstly, the letter allows time for the respondent to consider whether to take part and in the case of the opt-out, allows time to get in touch and refuse, preventing a visit by the interviewer. This gives a sense of choice, which is an important feature for respondents. Second, it warns the respondent that an interviewer will be calling, which helps to legitimise the survey.

The second mechanism for communication is the interviewer approach. Key to the current strategy is a reliance on the interviewer to identify the elements of the survey that are pertinent to the individual respondent. The role of the interviewer can be invaluable in drawing attention to the details in the letter, reassuring respondents about confidentiality and in stressing the aspects of the interview that are particularly relevant to the respondent. The interviewer carries an identification card as a measure of communicating legitimacy and will reinforce the message of confidentiality. The interviewer is briefed to be as flexible as possible about the timing of the interview to allow the respondent every opportunity to take part.

A summary leaflet of the results of the survey is sent to respondents after participation in an interview. This includes selected results, a brief explanation of how the research is used and details of the research team. This is sent with a change of address card for respondents to send back in case they move.

The success of these strategies is considered in the following sections in terms informing respondents about the purpose of the survey, securing participation and reassuring them.

5.2.1 Informing

There are two key problems with the current approach of informing respondents about the survey. Respondents do not always receive enough information about the purpose of the survey and this information is not always clear. A result of this is that respondents vary in their understanding of the survey and its purpose. This variation is due to information received from the interviewer, respondents' preconceptions and their ability to interpret how the material in the interview might

be used. These misunderstandings can lead to unrealistic expectations prior to the first interview; for example where they may expect something in return such as benefits advice for instance. Some respondents have a clearer grasp of the research process and why the survey was being conducted. They might expect an opportunity to express their views about government services or to be able to see how their contribution has impacted on policy. The key risk factor is that if people are not informed adequately about the nature of the survey then their expectations of receiving some material or other benefit will not be met and participation will not be sustained.

The aim is to equip respondents with a clear understanding of the purpose of the survey so participants have realistic expectations that can be met. Careful consideration should be given to the content of the advance letter with the possibility of including further details about the nature and purpose of the research, either in the letter or as a short leaflet that would be included with the letter. There is some suggestion that an outline of the content of the survey would be helpful. However information about the benefits and financial questions may jeopardise response to an unacceptable extent.

Whilst the advance or opt out letter may provide the respondent with some information, it needs to be recognised that these letters are often not read carefully and sometimes not even opened. A rare view was that post which came in hand-written envelopes was the only mail opened as junk mail is often personally addressed in a window envelope. In the case of the opt-out letter, it is received far in advance of the interviewer calling so it is often not remembered. As letters are not always remembered or opened, the doorstep approach is often the first contact the respondent has with the survey. Thus interviewers are briefed thoroughly to be able to deal with questions on the doorstep.

It is therefore vital that communication can be understood. There are varying levels of literacy and proficiency in English, and varying understandings of the research process and purpose among respondents, which means that some did not understand the information they were given. As the following respondent illustrates:

“I didn’t fully understand what the survey was all about, it wasn’t that it wasn’t made known to me. I think most of it went over my head”.

(Group B, couple, two children)

We need to communicate with respondents in clear, straightforward language and in both verbal and written form to ensure the message is understood. Written communication will reinforce the messages given by the interviewer and can be read when, and if, questions occur to respondents. A survey website will have a similar function and appealed to respondents who had access to, and were familiar with, the internet.

Similarly it is important to consider the presentation of materials which are sent or given to respondents. For example, it was rare for respondents to recall receiving the summary leaflet, which was sent after the 2000 survey interview. It is unlikely that all of those interviewed simply did not receive it and the overwhelmingly positive reaction to the leaflet in the depth interview or group discussion context leads one to

consider one of two possible options. Firstly, the context of the qualitative interview led respondents to think about participation in more depth than they had before and as a result of formalising their attitudes they were more interested to see the leaflet. The second possibility is that, as one respondent notes, the bland format of the leaflet and how it was distributed (a glossy leaflet in an envelope without a covering letter) may give the impression that it was junk mail and so it was not read. Greater attention needs to be given to the format and branding of future mailings. The NatCen logo is now recognised by some of our respondents, and this should be used as continuity helps recall.

Recommendations for informing respondents

- Provide further information in the advance/ opt out letter about the purpose of the research.
- Ensure that communications are in clear, straightforward language.
- Provide written information for the interviewer to leave with the respondent and introduce a survey website.
- Re-evaluate the presentation of survey materials such as the summary leaflet, change of address card and opt-out letter: branding and layout, and method of distribution (by the interviewer or by post).

5.2.2 Securing participation

Feeling valued

Key to securing sustained participation is making the respondent feel appreciated, valued and important to the survey. Some respondents did speak of feeling important and valued and there was a range of sometimes unexpected reasons for this.

- The realisation that it is specifically their response that is required and not their neighbours can be communicated indirectly, for example by being flexible about the time of interview. Respondents then feel that we are taking the time to get their views.
- The simple fact of going back to people year on year can encourage a sense of value.
- Acknowledgement of previous participation in letters sent to respondents also made the respondent feel appreciated.
- Some cited the fact that the same interviewer returning on multiple occasions as a factor contributing to participation, although this was not always of positive benefit, particularly if the respondent had not been happy with the interviewer on previous occasions.
- Persistence seems to be one mechanism of communicating the importance of an individual contribution to the survey but again this was not always the case, and could lead to some respondents feeling harassed.
- Receiving a quality control phone call¹¹ conveys that we are concerned that the interview had been carried out correctly.

¹¹ We check 10 per cent of each interviewer's work as a quality control procedure on all of our surveys.

- The incentive payment is regarded as a token of appreciation for the time that it takes to do the interview.

Sending thank you letters to all respondents is a strategy we should definitely consider to encourage the feeling that respondents' time is appreciated. Contact details can be included so that any concerns or comments about the conduct of the interview can be voiced.

Relevance of individuals to the survey

Feeling appreciated is dependent on the understanding that the individual is relevant to the survey. Key to the current strategy is a reliance on the interviewer to identify the elements of the survey that are pertinent to the individual respondent. However this is not always the enduring impression of the survey, as respondents make judgements about the purpose of the survey based on the interview experience. The way in which quantitative interviews are structured means that questions need to be asked to ensure standardised and complete results. Sustained questioning about awareness and receipt of benefits, for example, can lead individual respondents, who do not feel they would ever need benefits, to conclude that they are not relevant to the survey. It is important to stress the relevance of FACS to **all** respondents, especially those for whom the survey may not seem directly applicable– for example, higher income families and families with older children.

Refusals can be simply due to an inadequate explanation of how individuals contribute to the research as a whole. Leaving a leaflet after the interview may be a way of addressing this. In addition, there needs to be clear reasons for the decision to include certain groups in the survey (for example parents of older children) so that these can be communicated clearly to the respondents concerned. The relevance of any new questions to different groups also needs to be considered.

“I mean it says you're doing a study, it's an important study, OK, but why is it important and what effect are you hoping for it to have at the end, what was the effect? What difference am I going to make because if I'm not going to make any difference, like I said last year, I would say no again because I don't think anything I said would make any difference to anything.”

(Group E, couple, three children)

The importance of the research

Part of feeling important and valued is having a sense that the research is important and has an impact on government policy. Respondents are sometimes unclear about how the survey would be used, whether it was for academic purposes or for government. They are keen to learn how exactly the research has made a difference and receiving this information is key to maintaining response. Whilst certain respondents participate in any research, regardless of its intent, others participate in some research and discern depending on its perceived value. There is a strand of cynicism about research, which questions the value of it in achieving change. Some question why certain information is required, even where the summary leaflet has included such information and thus demonstrated that it is used. For example, the

reason for needing to know the proportion of families who have children before marriage. Clear and convincing explanations are required to encourage continued participation among these groups.

Understanding the longitudinal component of the research

Misunderstandings about the reasons why the same people approached year on year have directly led to refusals. This is related to the lack of understanding about the sample selection procedures and the fact that those selected cannot be replaced by another family. There is an assumption that we simply cannot find enough people to interview so we use people who have agreed previously. This lack of understanding of the purpose of re-contact can lead to refusals for the reason that respondents feel they have contributed enough and we should now be approaching other people. Others believe that we are checking they have given the right answers in the first interview. There is some awareness that we are monitoring change, but the value of interviewing the respondent again even when there is no change in circumstances also needs to be communicated. A suggestion was that we should return after several years rather than annually, as then there might be some significant change. Participation for a second year can be due to the assumption that different questions will be asked and participants sometimes cannot understand the value of being asked the same questions, often to give the same answer. These respondents will not participate again unless we are able to explain the value of asking the same questions year on year.

Recommendations about securing participation

- Communicate to respondents that they have been specially selected and cannot be replaced.
- Develop additional ways of showing appreciation for participation, for example by sending a thank you letter.
- Communicate more effectively that the research is important and makes a difference to government policy.
- Stress the relevance of specific types of respondents and their circumstances to the survey: especially higher income families and families with older children.
- Reconsider whether to include families where all children have left home; if they are to be included, a clear rationale is required.
- Convey the reasons for returning to the same respondents and asking the same questions each year.

5.2.3 Reassurances

Feeling confident enough about the purpose, legitimacy and confidentiality of FACS is an essential prerequisite for participation in the survey. To some extent it is true that there is only so much that can be done to reassure respondents with strong preconceived ideas or fears about the survey purpose. However, the aim of the strategy is to get beyond the initial, potentially false, assumptions about the interviewer approach and instil confidence that the interviewer is the representative of a legitimate organisation, conducting important research and that individuals' data will be treated in strict confidence. Any doubts about any aspect of this can lead to refusals or incomplete information being given during the interview. It seems

logical to assume that those who have never agreed to an interview may have similar doubts.

Introducing the research

Respondents may have false assumptions about the doorstep contact with the interviewer, especially if they have not absorbed the information in the opt-out or advance letter. The first assumption might be that the person is there to sell something, or to conduct market research. Salespeople also use survey questions in order to engage in conversation, as an opening to sell products or obtain respondent details. There is a sense that the interview will be represented inaccurately in order to secure participation. Suspicion about motives can also be related to a fear of crime. There is a suspicion that the interviewer is using the research to gain access to the home in order to commit a crime. Once the idea of research for the government has been introduced, some participants view it as a smokescreen for identifying benefit fraud.

It is clear from the range of possible misinterpretations that the manner of introducing the survey is very important. The opt-out or advance letter is useful as it provides respondents with contact details to check the legitimacy of the interviewer and provides an outline of the purpose of the research. The advance letter, sent to panel members in subsequent rounds of the survey, also contains the name of the interviewer who will be visiting the respondent, which is helpful in reassuring the respondent about the legitimacy of the interviewer. The interviewer can draw attention to the letter on the doorstep and invite the respondent to contact head office if there are any concerns.

Interviewer ID cards are also used to communicate legitimacy. However, there is a certain suspicion about ID cards, especially if there is low recognition of the organisation, as they are perceived to be quite easy to forge. We need to think carefully about additional ways in which we can reassure respondents about the legitimacy of the interviewer. Raising the profile of NatCen in the media and in local papers was suggested in order to increase respondent recognition on the doorstep. This will increase respondents' perception of the importance of the survey and greater recognition may mean that respondents feel more comfortable about letting an interviewer into their home. A survey website may contribute to a sense that the survey is important and legitimate.

Feeling safe with the interviewer in the home

The respondent needs to feel safe and comfortable with the interviewer. Reasons for feeling unsafe or uncomfortable include being at home alone with a male interviewer, leaving the interviewer alone whilst the respondent looks for financial papers and the slightly different issue of feeling that the interviewer was judging responses. Gender was not always a significant issue: respondents who had a male interviewer could also be quite happy with this. However these issues become crucial if interviewer gender or other reasons for discomfort are causing refusals. The provision of a mechanism whereby respondents can request a different interviewer after the first interview was suggested. The implications of this in terms of time, cost and administration need to be considered, as well as the practicalities of being able to provide an alternative interviewer. These issues are discussed further in section 5.3.3.

Confidentiality

Concerns about confidentiality become especially pertinent once the interview has taken place. These are often related to the financial questions asked during the survey interview. There are two distinct dimensions to these concerns: the fact that during the process of the interview, the interviewer becomes aware of the family's financial position and the subsequent use of this information.

Discomfort about disclosing financial information to the interviewer was related to concerns about the legitimacy of the interviewer and an underlying fear of crime. One view was that the respondents did not mind their financial details being part of a database but would prefer that the interviewer did not know them, as it was possible that the respondent might see them again in the neighbourhood.

There is a sense that if it were understood how such precise financial information is useful to government, then respondents would feel happier disclosing it. Disclosing the income bracket rather than the precise amount was one possibility suggested to increase comfort with income questions. An alternative was the use of CASI (Computer Assisted Self-Interview) where the respondent types in the answers themselves to particularly sensitive questions. Alternatively, these answers could be completed on paper and placed in a sealed envelope. Whether these options are feasible or not, reassurances about the legitimacy of the interviewer need to be a priority.

A lack of clarity about how the information is used also leads to a reluctance to disclose personal or financial information. There is a lack of appreciation that information would be used in aggregate and no clear reassurances are given about who and how many people have access to data and sample information. In addition, there is a level of scepticism about reassurances of confidentiality demonstrated in one fear that the research was a smokescreen for identifying benefit fraud. This is an issue not only for participation but also for completeness and accuracy of data. Reassurances about confidentiality need to be doubly emphasised.

“From the first letter, and before I had the interview, I really thought that if I didn't take part in this then my money would end up getting stopped. I thought it was do with the Social, and I thought: ‘If I don't do it... they obviously want me to work, or do something like that, and if I don't take part then they'll end up stopping my money because I'm not trying, I'm not making an effort’. And then it was about halfway through the interview, once he was asking the questions like, you know, have you got your washing machine and all this, that I actually asked him to stop and explain to me properly, which I should have done in the beginning, and then once he'd explained it all to me, then I felt a little bit more at ease.”

(Group A, lone parent, three children)

A manageable commitment

A related issue is that of reassuring respondents about the nature of the commitment. This involves communicating that the length of the interview is manageable and that agreeing to participate will not result in many further requests for help with research, or in other forms of inconvenience to the respondent – the receipt of junk

mail for example. Respondents fear that they will become known as a willing participant and will be inundated with interviewers knocking at their door, asking them to take part in research. Many of these issues will be resolved after the first interview, but need to be considered, for example when using the FACS survey as a sampling frame for follow up studies.

Recommendations for reassurances

- Continue to raise the profile of the National Centre for Social Research in the media.
- Consider the possibility and implications of introducing a mechanism to request an alternative interviewer.
- Investigate the possibility of collecting potentially sensitive information, such as income and the value of savings and assets, using self-completion methods.
- Explain more clearly why detailed personal and financial information is required
- Provide clear reassurances about confidentiality: spelling out who will have access to the information.
- Continue to use the advance letter and to stress the importance of interviewers showing their ID card to respondents on the doorstep, as these are important mechanisms for communicating legitimacy.
- Introduce a survey website as another way of conveying legitimacy
- Re-consider the impact of using FACS as a sampling frame for other follow up studies on panel response rates.

5.3 Understanding and dealing with refusals

There are different stages at which an individual can refuse to take part in FACS. The first opportunity for refusal is after receipt of the opt-out letter. The next opportunity for refusal is to the interviewer on the doorstep. This study is concerned with encouraging continued participation in FACS and as such it focuses on respondents who have participated in at least one FACS interview. It may well be the case that some of the factors that influence the decision to withdraw co-operation, described in Chapter 4, may also have a bearing on the decision about whether to take part in the survey at all, however we cannot be certain.

Withdrawal of co-operation from the survey having previously taken part can occur either at the end of the interview, if the respondent does not give permission to be re-contacted, or to the interviewer the following year when the respondent is approached again.

5.3.1 Refusal to recontact question

The re-contact question is asked at the end of the interview and establishes whether the respondent is, in principle, agreeable to being re-contacted by NatCen at a future date.¹² (The exact wording of this question is reproduced in section 2.7). There are several problems with the question as it stands.

¹² There are historical and other reasons for this. In the first year of FACS, it was not clear that the survey would be carried out in subsequent years. In addition the general question enables respondents to be approached about participating in other follow up studies.

1. It gives no sense that the main reason for asking the question is to ascertain whether respondents would be willing to participate in the same interview in a year's time.
2. The question makes no reference to the frequency of the re-contact. Respondents fear that they will become known as a willing participant and will be inundated with interviewers knocking at their door, asking them to take part in research.
3. The nature of the research that they would be asked to participate in is not spelt out.
4. Respondents noted that it is important to be aware that agreement does not mean that you have an obligation to participate in future research, that you can pull out at any time.
5. Finally, it comes at the end of a relatively long interview when respondents may not be best placed to judge whether they want to participate again. (Although an alternative view is that it is hard to say no after a pleasant interview experience). One respondent compared the question to ticking the box that appears at the bottom of forms asking if she would mind if her details were passed onto a third party, which invariably results in the receipt of junk mail.

In summary, the questions is viewed as being open-ended and vague, and as such we recommend the purpose and, if appropriate, wording of the question be re-considered. We suggest this issue could be addressed in the FACS 4 pilot.

5.3.2 Refusal to the interviewer on the doorstep

Refusals on the doorstep were frequently unrelated to the experience of taking part in the survey and were often to do with the circumstances of the family at the time¹³: a child might be going through a hard time at school, for example. It was felt that interviewers needed to be sensitive enough to recognise when someone had a genuine personal reason for non- participation. One respondent, who opted back into the survey after a circumstantial refusal, felt that if the interviewer had been pushy her participation in the survey would have been lost for good.

5.3.3 The recontact exercise

For the most recent wave of FACS, those who had refused at the re-contact question in 1999 or who had refused to the interviewer in 2000 were contacted by telephone to ascertain whether they might participate in an interview in 2001. A surprising finding was that in some cases respondents positively appreciated the fact that we gave them the opportunity to be included in FACS again even though they had withdrawn their co-operation in an earlier round. Approaching people again made them feel that we really valued their contribution.

The lesson to be learned here is that a refusal should not necessarily be interpreted as a blanket refusal. Refusals are not always remembered; similarly the reasons for a refusal are not always clear to the respondent. It seems that it is perfectly acceptable

¹³ This may be partly related to the fact that those who participated in this qualitative study can be seen in some ways as converted refusers, as they agreed to participate in this study. We recorded the reasons for refusal to the qualitative study – these can be seen in the Appendix C and did not differ widely to the reasons for refusal in our sample.

to some respondents that they are re-approached at a later date and re-interviewed, as indeed we did in this study.

As noted above, refusals can be for a variety of different reasons, and more information about this will enable a sensitive and appropriate response. A more detailed record of the reasons for refusal could be used as a basis for determining at what stage and whether an opt-in procedure might be appropriate. One problem is that refusals can be due to the interviewer and in these cases the interviewer will not be best placed to ascertain the reason. A possibility may be a telephone follow up of all refusers to determine the reason for refusal. However the likely differing reactions to this should be considered. Receiving a telephone call might feel like more pressure to participate, or alternatively it might be appreciated that we are concerned about why they refused.

Recommendations for refusals

- Develop a policy for contacting those respondents who have withdrawn their co-operation with a view to seeking their co-operation again.
- Recognise that refusals may be because respondents are not feeling valued or relevant to the survey and re-contact may encourage a sense of value for the respondent.
- Collect more information about the reasons for refusal on the Address Record Form.
- Consider an alternative mode of contact (such as telephone) for collecting information on the reasons for refusal. This may encourage respondents to indicate that the refusal is linked to the field interviewer if a different person seeks this information, such as a telephone interviewer.

5.4 Summary of recommendations

Figure 4 summarises the different ways in which we can communicate with respondents more effectively to encourage continued participation in FACS. Notably the current survey procedures contain many elements that have been found to encourage continued participation. However it is clear that these procedures need refinement to ensure that we communicate with all respondents and tap into the range of different factors that motivate people to continue to take part. Treating all respondents in the same way will not ensure continued participation. As we have found, there is both an individuality and a multiplicity of factors affecting participation and the strategies developed for encouraging participation need to better reflect this.

Figure 4 Summary of recommendations for improving strategies to encourage future participation in FACS

	Current strategies (that work)	Additional suggestions
Information		
Making an informed decision to take part	Advance or opt out letter. Interviewer.	Additional information in the letter. A leaflet/ other format for the interviewer to leave with the respondent. Clear, simple information with consistent layout. Further interviewer briefing on how to sell the survey. More information in the re-contact question. Website.
Securing participation		
Feeling appreciated	Quality control phone calls to thank for participation and to check the interview was carried out correctly. Dissemination –summary leaflet. Incentive payment as a token of appreciation. Acknowledging any previous participation in advance letter.	Receiving a thank you letter. See also recommendations for making a contribution to positive change and feeling specially chosen.
Making a contribution to positive change	The policy implications section in the summary leaflet. Informal dissemination through the interviewer.	Making the summary leaflet have a greater impact (format, layout, timing) Increasing the prominence of the policy initiatives as a result of the survey and potential future use. Additional modes of dissemination (e.g. website).
Feeling specially chosen to participate	The simple fact of going back to people each year. The interviewer being flexible about the time of interview.	Contact by letter and telephone. Information explaining why we specifically want their participation.
Knowing that the research is longitudinal and the value of this	Current policy is to not let people know until the second interview that this is longitudinal research. Current modes of communication (advance letter, interviewer).	To clarify the re-contact question: that they would be contacted for the same piece of research, the timing of the re-contact (annual) and that they can refuse on the doorstep when the interviewer comes back. An alternative is to remove the re-contact question altogether. To inform about research in general and the purpose of longitudinal research specifically and how it makes a difference to policy.

Reassurance		
Feeling confident that the interviewer is legitimate	ID Card. Advance letter naming the interviewer.	Receiving a phone call from the interviewer prior to first visit. Contact at National Centre that respondent can call. Ability to check at the police station. Publicising the National Centre so people are more generally aware of the organisation.
Feeling safe and comfortable with the interviewer in home	Being aware that the interviewer is legitimate is the first step to feeling safe with the interviewer in the home. A sense that interviewer characteristics impact on feelings of safety – gender and age being the factors referred to although it is likely that other demographics, for example ethnicity have a role. Continuity of interviewer.	Additional reassurances of legitimacy may be required. An ability to request a different interviewer where feel uncomfortable.
Feeling that taking part is a manageable commitment	Interviewer communicating.	More specific information about what is involved: annual one hour interview, possibility of refusing at any time.
Ensuring the interview is enjoyable as possible		Changes to questionnaire content and length need to be considered in the light of effect on respondent.

APPENDIX A FIELDWORK DOCUMENTS

- Topic guides:
 - Group A } group discussions
 - Group D }
 - Groups B, C and E – depth interviews

TOPIC GUIDE

Group discussions – Group A

OBJECTIVES

- To understand why respondents agree to participate in successive rounds of the study, particularly to illuminate the factors underpinning participation
- To evaluate current strategies for encouraging respondents to continue to participate in the study

INTRODUCTION

- introduce *Natcen* and study
- tape & confidentiality
- timing

1. PERSONAL INTRODUCTIONS

Name

Who live with, including number and age of children

Current activity (work/education/other)

How many times participated

2. VIEWS AND ATTITUDES ABOUT PARTICIPATION

Explore each in detail – encourage full participation

General likes and dislikes

Content

- recall of topics covered
- general views
- interest in topics covered (probe for more/less important ones)
- relevance/appropriateness of topics
- whether any important topics not covered
- level of comfort with issues raised
- whether questions are easy/difficult to answer (e.g. benefit knowledge)
- repetitiveness
- suggestions for change

Length

- views about full interview
- views about time spent on individual topics
- views about partner interview
- suggestions for change

Approach

- letters, change of address card, summary of findings
- assurances about confidentiality

Interviewer

- general views/ impressions about conduct
- introduction/selling the survey
- (if relevant) continuity

Views about purpose of study

- whether seen as important or not
- views about how results are used

Comparison with other research studies

- how participating in FACS compares with other research
- image of FACS compared to other research
- whether more/less inclined to participate in FACS

3. FACTORS AFFECTING PARTICIPATION

Use this section to explore why people have participated in the past – and continue to participate over time

Motivation for initial participation

Note: respondents will have participated two or three times

General recollections about why participated

How in general feel about participation when first contacted

Explore whether decision to participate is influenced by:

- approach
 - interviewer (style, persuasiveness etc...)
 - purpose/importance of study topic

 - sense of public duty/public service
 - views about importance of contribution
 - curiosity (about the topic, about research etc)
 - 'peer pressure' (others in the area or partner)

 - circumstantial reasons

 - research commissioner
 - who research carried out by
- } Legitimacy/confidentiality

Motivation for continued participation

Note: Explore whether motivation has changed over time.

General views about why continue to participate

Explore whether decision to continually participate is influenced by:

- obligation (to study; to interviewer)
- apathy
- peer pressure (others in area or partner)

- experiences in past
- sense of being (part of something) special

- persuasiveness of interviewer
- ways of making it easier to participate
 - summary, change of address card, stable address

- Influence of incentives
 - general thoughts on incentives
 - whether make a difference
 - method of payment (boots voucher)
 - what used for
 - when paid (up-front, at end of interview etc)

4. PERCEPTIONS OF BEING A PANEL MEMBER

Whether see selves as part of something (ongoing or special)

Explore:

- the importance they place on their role
- how unique/replaceable they feel they are/their contribution is
- what other people think of their involvement (in known)
- what attributes of current practice make them feel valued
 - approach
 - interviewer
 - incentives
 - purpose/importance of study

What would make them feel more valued

5. EVALUATION OF PROCESSES

Explore views (drawing on earlier comments) in general about:

- survey practices that they approve of
- survey practices for which they have less support

Circulate advance letter (allow short time to reflect)

- general impressions, do they remember receiving one
- likes/dislikes

- whether/how improve

Circulate change of address card (allow short time to reflect)

- general impressions, do they remember receiving one
- likes/dislikes
- whether/how improve
- views on when should receive such a card

Circulate most recent summary (allow short time to reflect)

- do they remember receiving one
- whether found interesting
- views about coverage
- views about researcher profiles
- whether feel should continue with it
- views on when and how often should be sent
- views on format – should it be a leaflet or something else

Explore suggestions for future panel strategies

spontaneous suggestions

Prompted reactions to:

- making first contact each year by phone (as opposed to post)
- leaving change of address cards at time of interview
- introduce different types of incentives
 - 'branded items' e.g. mugs, coasters, T-shirts etc..
- a FACS website
 - access
 - content
- changes to interview (e.g. length, content)
- other suggestions

TOPIC GUIDE
Group discussions – Group D

OBJECTIVES

- To understand why respondents agree to participate in successive rounds of the study, particularly to illuminate the factors underpinning participation
- To evaluate current strategies for encouraging respondents to continue to participate in the study

INTRODUCTION

- Introduce *Natcen* and study
- Tape & confidentiality
- Timing

1. PERSONAL INTRODUCTIONS

Name

Who live with, including number and age of children

Current activity (work/education/other)

2. VIEWS AND ATTITUDES ABOUT PARTICIPATION

Explore each in detail – encourage full participation

General likes and dislikes

Content

- recall of topics covered
- general views
- interest in topics covered (probe for more/less important ones)
- relevance/appropriateness of topics
- whether any important topics not covered
- level of comfort with issues raised
- whether questions are easy/difficult to answer (e.g. benefit knowledge)
- repetitiveness
- suggestions for change

Length

- views about full interview
- views about time spent on individual topics
- views about partner interview
- suggestions for change

Approach

- letters
- assurances about confidentiality

Interviewer

- general views/ impressions about conduct
- introduction/selling the survey
- (if relevant) continuity

Views about purpose of study

- whether seen as important or not
- views about how results are used

Comparison with other research studies

- how participating in FACS compares with other research
- image of FACS compared to other research
- whether more/less inclined to participate in FACS

3. FACTORS AFFECTING PARTICIPATION

Use this section to explore why people have participated in the past – and agree to continue to participate over time

Motivation for initial participation

Note: respondents will only have participated once

General recollections about why participated

How in general feel about participation when first contacted

Explore whether decision to participate is influenced by:

- approach
 - interviewer (style, persuasiveness etc...)
 - purpose/importance of study topic

 - sense of public duty/public service
 - views about importance of contribution
 - curiosity (about the topic, about research etc)
 - 'peer pressure' (others in the area or partner)

 - circumstantial reasons

 - research commissioner
 - who research carried out by
- } Legitimacy/confidentiality

Motivation for continued participation

Note: These respondents have agreed that we can come back and speak to them again. This was a question in the interview, which they may or may not recall. Explore reasons for agreeing re-contact.

General views about why continue to participate

Explore whether decision to continually participate is influenced by:

- obligation (to study; to interviewer)
- apathy
- peer pressure (others in area or partner)

- experiences in past
- sense of being (part of something) special

- persuasiveness of interviewer
- ways of making it easier to participate
 - stable address

4. EVALUATION OF PROCESSES

Explore views (drawing on earlier comments) in general about:

- survey practices that they approve of
- survey practices for which they have less support

Circulate most recent summary (allow short time to reflect)

- whether find interesting
- views about coverage
- views about researcher profiles
- whether would like to receive one
- views on when the best time to receive it
- views on format – should it be a leaflet or something else

Explore suggestions for future panel strategies

If were to include them in future years of the survey what would encourage them to take part...

spontaneous suggestions

Prompted reactions to:

- making first contact by phone (as opposed to post)
- leaving change of address cards at time of interview
- introduce incentives for future years (what sorts)
 - 'branded items' e.g. mugs, coasters, T-shirts etc..
- a FACS website
 - access
 - content
- changes to interview (e.g. length, content)
- other suggestions

TOPIC GUIDE

Depth Interviews

OBJECTIVES

- To understand why respondents agree to participate in successive rounds of the study, particularly to illuminate the factors underpinning participation
- To explore why respondents decline to take part in further interviews
- To evaluate current strategies for encouraging respondents to continue to participate in the study

INTRODUCTION

- introduce *Natcen* and study
- tape & confidentiality
- timing

1. BACKGROUND

Who live with
Whether have children
Current activity (work/education/other)

2. EXPERIENCE, VIEWS AND ATTITUDES ABOUT STUDY

Explore each in detail

'History' of contact with study

- number of interviews
- timing of interviews (e.g. '99/2000)

General likes and dislikes

Content

- recall of topics covered
- general views
- interest in topics covered (probe for more/less important ones)
- relevance/appropriateness of topics
- whether any important topics not covered
- level of comfort with issues raised
- whether questions are easy/difficult to answer (e.g. benefit knowledge)
- repetitiveness
- suggestions for change

Length

- views about full interview
- views about time spent on individual topics
- suggestions for change

Approach

- advance letters
- change of address card, summary (*if had more than one contact*)
- assurances about confidentiality

Interviewer

- general views about conduct
- (if relevant) continuity

Incentives

- whether received any
- type of incentive (stamps, voucher)

Views about purpose of study

- whether seen as important or not
- views about how results are used

Comparison with other research studies

- how participating in FACS compares with other research
- image of FACS compared to other research
- whether more/less inclined to participate in FACS

3. FACTORS AFFECTING PARTICIPATION

Use this section to explore why people have participated in the past – and (if relevant) continue to participate over time

Motivation for initial participation

Note: some respondents will only have participated once, others two or three times

General recollections about why participated

How in general feel about participation when first contacted (each year)

Explore whether decision to participate is influenced by:

- approach
- interviewer (style, persuasiveness etc...)
- purpose/importance of study topic

- sense of public duty/public service
- views about importance of contribution
- curiosity (about the topic, about research etc)
- 'peer pressure' (others in the area)

- circumstantial reasons

- research commissioner
- who research carried out by

Motivation for continued participation (B's & C's only)

Note: this section will only be relevant for those who have participated two or three times. For those who have participated year on year, explore whether motivation changed over time.

General views about why continue to participate

Explore whether decision to continually participate is influenced by:

- obligation (to study; to interviewer)
- apathy
- positive experiences in past
- sense of being (part of something) special
- persuasiveness of interviewer
- ways of making it easier to participate
 - KIT exercise, summary, change of address card, stable address
- Influence of incentives
 - general thoughts on incentives
 - whether make a difference
 - how paid (cash, voucher, stamps)
 - who paid to
 - what used for

Factors influencing refusal to participate / re-contact

Note: there are different ways in which respondents can refuse:

- *by saying no at a question in the previous year's interview*
- *by phoning the office when they receive the advance letter*
- *by refusing to the interviewer on the doorstep*
- *by refusing to a phone call / letter asking for an opt-in*

General views about why decline continued participation

Explore how attitudes changed over time (i.e. participate, then refuse to participate)

Explore whether decision to not participate is influenced by:

- circumstances
- Past negative experiences of interview
 - Content / topics
 - Sensitivity
 - Length
 - Timing
 - Style of interview
- Interviewer

- General likes/dislikes
- Approach
- Continuity

- Pressure / coercion / lack of persuasiveness (of interviewer or study generally)

- Content
 - perceived importance/relevance/appropriateness
 - intrusiveness

- Data
 - concerns over confidentiality of data
 - concerns about how the data is used

- Value / importance of research
 - Research in general
 - This study

- Understanding of longitudinal basis of this study
 - Importance attached to this
 - Feeling replaceable / not feeling special

- Anxiety about privacy in own home / strangers calling at house

Explore ways in which refusals can be reduced

- Refer to specific factors which led to refusals – could these be changed?
- Other suggestions

(if not a current participant in survey, i.e. groups B&E)

- why participated in follow-up study

4. PERCEPTIONS OF BEING A PANEL MEMBER

Remember that respondents may or may not be a current panel member

Whether see selves as part of something (ongoing or special)

Explore:

- the importance they place on their role
- how unique/replaceable they feel they are/their contribution is
- what other people think of their involvement (in known)
- what attributes of current practice make them feel valued
 - approach
 - interviewer
 - incentives
 - purpose/importance of study
 - what would make them feel more valued

5. EVALUATION OF PROCESSES

Explore views (drawing on earlier comments) in general about:

- panel practices that they approve of
- panel practices for which they have less support
- advance letter
- change of address card
- summary

Explore views about opt-in procedure (for main survey or for this study)

- views about being contacted after refusal
- likes/dislikes
- suggestions for improvements

Explore suggestions for future panel strategies

- making first contact each year by phone (as opposed to post)
- leaving change of address cards at time of interview
- introduce different types of incentives
- 'branded items' e.g. mugs, coasters, T-shirts etc..
- a FACS website
 - access
 - content
- other suggestions

APPENDIX B FACS FIELDWORK DOCUMENTS

- Opt-out letter
- Advance letters (panel and re-screen)
- Summary leaflet
- Change of address card

FACS W3 OPT OUT LETTER

Department for
Work and Pensions

Social Research Branch
Department for Work & Pensions
FREEPOST PHQ5
London WC2N 6BR

6th August 2001

Study of Families with Children

I am writing to ask for your help with an important study about families bringing up children. The study is being carried out for the Department for Work and Pensions by two independent research organisations, the *National Centre for Social Research* and the Policy Studies Institute (PSI).

This study is designed to collect information about your experiences of family life and work. Your name has been selected at random from records held by the Department for Work and Pensions. **We are interested in your views and experiences, whatever your present circumstances.**

An interviewer from the *National Centre* will be calling on you at home some time during the next few weeks, to explain more about the study and ask you to take part. The interviewer will carry an identification card.

This is a voluntary study and anything you tell the interviewer will be treated in the **strictest confidence**. The findings of this study, which will be reported by PSI, will not identify you or your family. The names of those who take part in the study will not be passed on to anyone outside the *National Centre*.

I do hope you decide to take part in the study. If, however, you do not wish an interviewer to contact you, please either write to me at the FREEPOST address above or telephone the *National Centre* during office hours (Monday-Friday 9.30am to 5.30pm) on **0800 652 0501** before **20th August 2001**. If you write or phone, please remember to give your name and the reference number at the top of this letter.

I hope you will be able to help with this important study.

Yours sincerely



Jim Hughes

FACS W3 PANEL ADVANCE LETTER

Study of Families with Children

A research study of families bringing up children, carried out on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions by two independent research organisations, the *National Centre for Social Research* and the Policy Studies Institute.

Study of Families with Children: Wave 3

Last summer you kindly agreed to take part in this important study. Your contribution, along with nearly five thousand other families helped make it a great success. In fact the study has been so successful that we have been asked to carry it out again this year.

We are writing to all those families who said they would be willing to talk to us again. You kindly agreed so I am writing to let you know that one of our interviewers will be in contact soon. Where possible this will be the same interviewer you spoke to last time. However this may not always be possible as some interviewers will have other commitments. **All our interviewers carry an identification card, with a photograph.** Please ask to see this.

The name of the interviewer who will be contacting you is: _____

The interviewer will be able to answer any questions you have about the study, and if you are willing to participate will make an appointment to come and interview you. As a token of our appreciation those families taking part in this interview will receive a £10 Boots gift voucher.

All your answers will be treated in strict confidence and the findings of this study will not identify you or your family. The names of those who take part in the study will not be passed to anyone outside the National Centre.

I do hope you will want to continue to be involved in this important study, and that you will enjoy speaking to one of our interviewers again.

Yours sincerely,



Elaine Brown



FACS W3 RE-SCREEN ADVANCE LETTER

Study of Families with Children

A research study of families bringing up children, carried out on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions by two independent research organisations, the *National Centre for Social Research* and the Policy Studies Institute.

Study of Families with Children

Last summer you kindly took part in this important study. Your contribution, along with thousands of other families across Great Britain helped make it a great success. In fact the study has been so successful that we have been asked to carry it out again this year – and this time it has been broadened to cover **all** families.

We are writing to all those families who participated last time to let them know that one of our interviewers will be in contact soon. Where possible this will be the same interviewer you spoke to last time. However this may not always be possible as some interviewers will have other commitments. **All our interviewers carry an identification card**, with a photograph. Please ask to see this.

The name of the interviewer who will be contacting you is: _____

The interviewer will be able to answer any questions you have about the study, and if you are willing to participate s/he will arrange a convenient time to come and interview you. As a token of our appreciation, in anticipation of your co-operation, please find enclosed a book of stamps.

All your answers will be treated in strict confidence and the findings of this study will not identify you or your family. The names of those who take part in the study will not be passed to anyone outside the *National Centre*.

I do hope you will want to continue to be involved in this important study, and that you will enjoy speaking to one of our interviewers again.

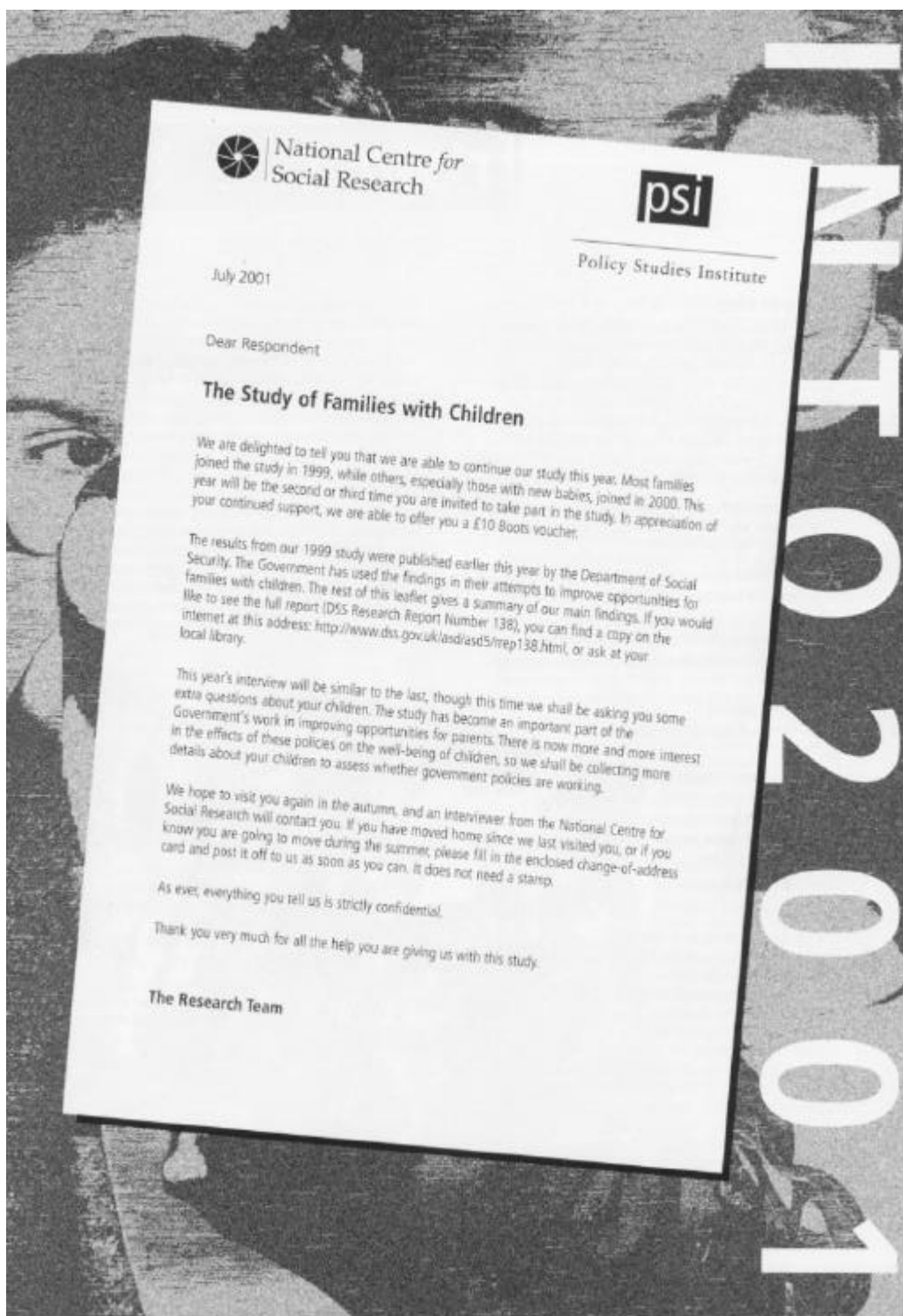
Yours sincerely,



Elaine Brown

R

FACS SUMMARY LEAFLET...1



results

from the 1999

Families in 1999

We interviewed over 5000 families, and more than nine out of ten families who were available for interview joined the study. We included in the study all those who were bringing up children on their own (who nowadays make up one in four of all families in Britain), and couples with children. But we left out for the time being couples with children who were in the top part of the income range – they will join the study this year. So we currently have a sample of which one half consists of lone parents and the other half of couples with children.

But lone parents and couples are not always fixed groups, and there are many ways to classify families. The following list shows some of the main differences:

Among couples...

62 per cent had been together since before their eldest was born

21 per cent got together after their eldest was born

17 per cent were stepfamilies, where one parent used to be a lone parent

Among lone parents...

42 per cent were mothers who used to be married

26 per cent were not married but used to live with someone as a couple

23 per cent had always lived alone with their children

3 per cent were widows

6 per cent were lone fathers

The lone parents were typically aged between 30 and 40, though lone fathers were older. When we met them in 1999, they had been lone parents for about five years on average, though some for much longer than this. Half had just one child, a third had two children and just 17 per cent had three or more. A third of them had a child under five. Two-thirds of their children were in regular contact with their other parent, who was usually their father. Just over half lived in council or housing association accommodation, while three in ten owned their own homes, and the rest rented privately or lived with others, sometimes with their own parents.

The couples were, on average, a year or two older than the lone parents, though also typically in their 30s and 40s. They had more and younger children than did the lone parents: less than a third had one child, and the most common were couples with two or three children, while 11 per cent had four or more. Half the couples had a child under five. Fewer couples than lone parents lived in council or housing association accommodation (about a third) and over half owned their own homes.

Family change

We were able to compare our results with a similar survey we carried out in 1991. There were some interesting changes. The average age of lone parents had risen from 32 to 35 and those aged under 25 fell from 18 to 12 per cent. So the idea that lone parents are all teenage mums can be safely put aside. The average age of their children rose too, so that the proportion with a child under five fell from nearly half in 1991 to just over a third in 1999.



Couples too had a higher average age than couples did eight years ago and they also had fewer children. The biggest change was in the proportion of couples who were not, or who were not yet legally married, increasing from one in every ten couples to two in ten in just

study...

eight years. Among the youngest couples, half were not yet married. Many may not marry at all, of course, and this change may be expected to continue.

Health and family well-being

Our research over the past ten years has raised concerns about the health of some of Britain's families with young children, especially among those who have to spend longer amounts of time out of work. In this survey, some of these concerns returned. For example, three out of ten mothers, and slightly more of their partners, reported some kind of long-standing illness or disability. As you might expect, these problems were concentrated among families who were out of work. Among out-of-work couples, six out of ten fathers reported such health problems. Among all out-of-work families, health was one of the biggest constraints on getting back to work. A third of lone parents who were not working said they had children with health problems.

The questions on family well-being provided a detailed picture of what families could afford, how they tried to avoid too much debt, the conditions of their homes and so on. It was clear that some families were experiencing hardship and found it difficult to maintain what they felt was a good standard of living. A third of out-of-work families were experiencing 'severe hardship' – having to go without too many of the things that most families agreed were necessary. Working families had far fewer of these problems, though some that had previously been out of work could find it takes a while to improve their families' standards of living.

There were also clear connections between unemployment and the experience of hardship and poorer family health.

Families and work

One of the main tasks for this research is to assess the effectiveness of Government policies to 'make work pay'. In 1999 this meant assessing the effects of Family Credit, though this has now been replaced with Working Families Tax Credit.

Almost four out of ten lone parents worked 16 or more hours a week, an

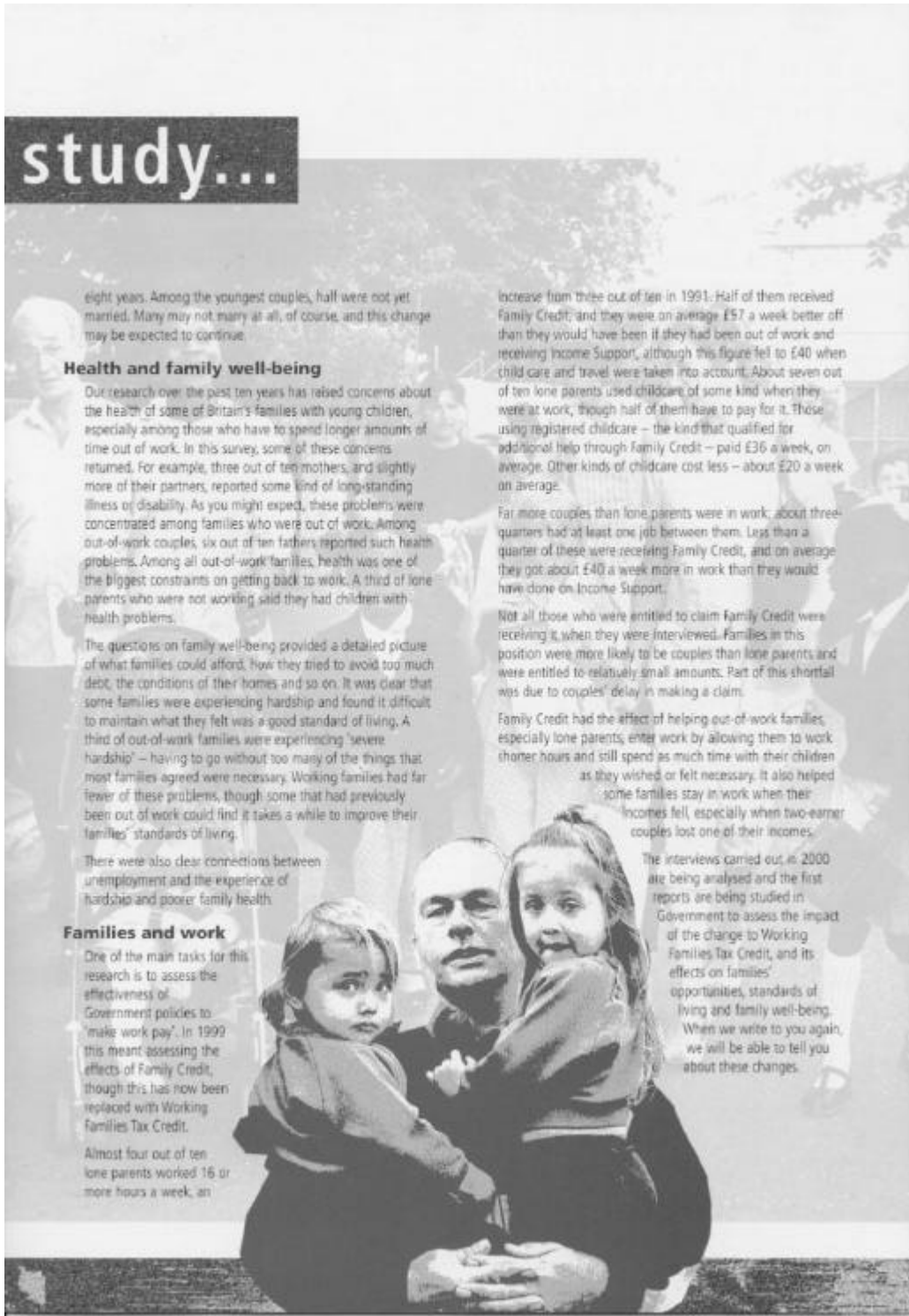
increase from three out of ten in 1991. Half of them received Family Credit, and they were on average £57 a week better off than they would have been if they had been out of work and receiving Income Support, although this figure fell to £40 when child care and travel were taken into account. About seven out of ten lone parents used childcare of some kind when they were at work, though half of them have to pay for it. Those using registered childcare – the kind that qualified for additional help through Family Credit – paid £36 a week, on average. Other kinds of childcare cost less – about £20 a week on average.

Far more couples than lone parents were in work, about three-quarters had at least one job between them. Less than a quarter of these were receiving Family Credit, and on average they got about £40 a week more in work than they would have done on Income Support.

Not all those who were entitled to claim Family Credit were receiving it, when they were interviewed. Families in this position were more likely to be couples than lone parents and were entitled to relatively small amounts. Part of this shortfall was due to couples' delay in making a claim.

Family Credit had the effect of helping out-of-work families, especially lone parents, enter work by allowing them to work shorter hours and still spend as much time with their children as they wished or felt necessary. It also helped some families stay in work when their incomes fell, especially when two-earner couples lost one of their incomes.

The interviews carried out in 2000 are being analysed and the first reports are being studied in Government to assess the impact of the change to Working Families Tax Credit, and its effects on families' opportunities, standards of living and family well-being. When we write to you again, we will be able to tell you about these changes.



how the study will be used

As the study has already shown, Britain's families are changing rapidly. There are changes in the way people form families and in the patterns of the work they do to support them. Government policies have to take these changes into account. Research of this kind done over recent years has made important contributions to government initiatives in shaping what was to be done and assessing how well their aims were achieved. Initiatives such as the New Deal for Lone Parents, the National Childcare Strategy, and Sure Start, which provides new services and help to families with very young children, have recently been introduced. This study, and similar studies by PSI and the National Centre for Social Research, have encouraged these developments and made them easier to design and promote. The design of the new Working Families Tax Credit took into account the research on the effects of Family Credit, for example.

For the future, the Prime Minister has set a target to remove all Britain's children from poverty within 20 years. This new research is part of that aim and part of how we will judge what progress is being made. So our attention has widened to include more information about children themselves.

One thing we have learned above all else is that you can study families best over time. What counts most is the understanding of how families change from year to year, and it is a fascinating process to observe and measure in this way. For this reason, we are especially grateful for your commitment to the study and all the help you are giving us.



National Centre for
Social Research

35 Northampton Square, London EC1V 0AX

the research team

Alan Marsh, the head of the research team, is Deputy Director of the Policy Studies Institute and Professor of Social Policy at the University of Westminster. Alan has been researching areas of social concern for 30 years, in Government and for the Economic and Social Research Council. He has published many books and reports, including a series over the past ten years studying change in British families, and speaks regularly on radio and television. He lives in North London with his wife and two grown-up children, Louisa and David.

Stephen McKay has the central role in carrying out *The Survey of Families*, having previously worked with Alan at PSI on the first surveys in this series. He has also carried out similar work at the Universities of Bath and Loughborough, and with PSI's research partners at the National Centre for Social Research, studying all aspects of social security policy, especially benefits for families with children. He lives in Wiltshire with his partner, Karen, and their three-year-old daughter, Alex.

Gussie Stephenson is a Research Fellow at PSI, joining the team in 1999 from the London School of Economics. Her research interests include social security policy, low-income families and labour market participation. She lives in South London and has a new baby son, Jacob.

Sandra Vegeris is a Research Fellow at PSI and joined the team this year. She is Canadian and has a wide range of research interests including family change and the outcomes for children. She has four young children.

Stephen Woodland is a Research Director at the National Centre for Social Research. He has been part of the team since the first survey in the series and has had joint responsibility for the conduct of fieldwork and the delivery of interview data to the research team. Stephen's research interests include labour market participation and employee relations. He lives in South London with his wife, Samantha.

Debbie Collins is a researcher at the National Centre for Social Research and has worked on the study since it started in 1999. She has worked on a number of studies including the National Child Development Study and the National Diet and Nutrition Study of Children aged 1.5 to 4.5 years. Debbie lives in East London with her partner, Marc.

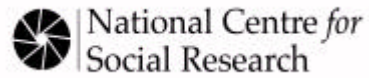


Policy Studies Institute

100 Park Village East, London NW1 3SR

FACS W3 CHANGE OF ADDRESS CARD

**Survey of Families with
Children**



I am an interviewer from the National Centre for Social Research working on the Survey of Families with Children. You recently agreed to see me and an appointment was made for today. Unfortunately when I called you were out.

I would be grateful if you could telephone Laura Elaine Brown on 01277 200 600 between 9.30am and 5.30pm Monday to Friday so that we can arrange a more suitable time for you to see me. I look forward to speaking to you soon.

.....(SURVEY INTERVIEWER)

Our ref: P2093

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APPENDIX C REASONS FOR REFUSAL TO TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY

The reasons for opt-outs or refusals to participate in this study among respondent types B and E were collected where possible, and were found to be broadly similar to reasons for non-participation captured in the depth interviews. These are shown in table C.1 below. Additional reasons for refusal, that did not emerge from depth interviews with groups B and E, are shown in bold.

Readers are asked to interpret this data with caution. The reasons cited by those not wishing to participate in this study are not directly comparable to those obtained from those interviewed in this study: the level of questioning and explanation being far more detailed in the case of the latter. However those who refused to participate in this study are of interest because they represent a different group of respondents who could be described as a 'harder-core of refusers'.

Table C.1 Reasons for refusal to take part in this study

Main reason	Details
Time / Commitment	no time (B, E) very busy (B, E) working full-time (so too busy) (E)
Lack of commitment/motivation	doesn't want to help (B) not interested (B, E)
Feeling irrelevant	Children grown up (B)
Circumstantial	(bad) things going on/happened (B) ill child (E) ill, lots of problems (E)
Disillusioned	Nothing happened as a result of interviews (B)
Previous bad experience	hassle last time (B) hard to fit interview in last time (E) questions intrusive/personal (E) interview took too long (E) didn't like interviews (B) felt pressured into last interview (B) persistent interviewer (E)