SOCIETY
While politicians from all parties agree that British society is unequal, why is it proving so hard to change? Sarah Womack looks at the social mobility enigma.
ne interesting feature of the London 2012 Olympics was the focus on how many medal-winning Team GB athletes attended fee-paying schools. According to the Daily Telegraph, almost four in ten British Olympic medallists were privately educated, such as triathlon champion Alistair Brownlee, who attended fee-paying Bradford Grammar School. More than a quarter of Britain’s gold medallists were from independent schools, noted the Sutton Trust, a social mobility charity.

All this, despite the fact that the private sector educates just seven per cent of the population nationally, and the government has spent more than £1 billion encouraging state school pupils to become top athletes. The observation about our Olympics team, and the debates that ensued, showed that the issue of social mobility in Britain is never far from the surface. Concerns about how to improve the prospects of the non-privileged have only heightened with the economic downturn, as tuition fees leave students facing a £50,000 bill for a three-year degree if accommodation costs are included.

A study by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development offered no solace. Comparing the extent to which children’s prospects are predictable from parents’ circumstances, it found that in Britain, 50 per cent of children’s prospects were predictable – a sign of low social mobility. This was worse than the US (47 per cent) and France (41 per cent). But while there is much railing about what happens up to the age of three, mainly in the home, there is evidence that the most affluent youngsters are more likely to have a regular bedtime, be ready for school at the age of three, be read to and have a better vocabulary at five.

Professor Gregg, who headed the large ESRC-funded multi-disciplinary project, An Examination of the Impact of Family Socio-economic Status on Outcomes in Late Childhood and Adolescence, says that while focusing on very young children seemed like a “good place to start”, some of the efforts made so far in this direction had been disappointing: “Lots of people say that early years – up to age five – really matter, but I’m not convinced we have the evidence base of what works here. For example, we have a number of programmes designed to deal with poor attainment for the most deprived families – around 120,000 of them, which represents a very small number of dysfunctional families. But social mobility is about attainment differences across 12 million families.

“**We don’t have programmes for tackling numeracy and literacy gaps between rich and poor across the spectrum, and this is the biggest story for mobility.”** He says there had not been “a huge amount of evidence” that free early years education for all three- and four-year-olds, or Sure Start, had made a huge amount of difference. “So as far as the early years go, we don’t yet know how to reduce inequalities; we need to develop an intervention-led evidence base to fill this knowledge gap.”

There is evidence that educational attainment gaps at 16, by family background, have started to narrow, says Professor Gregg, but what is increasingly important for someone’s later life chances is access to higher education. However, he rejects the idea that tuition fees are the death knell to social mobility: “Tuition fees are not a nuclear thing here. Evidence is emerging that they do discourage people but not in a big way, although it appears to be more marked among those aged over 22 who have deferred entry and tend to come from poorer families.”

More important, he argues, is the raft of subsidies available to poor children going into higher education. “The educational system has a lot of subsidies for low income kids but awareness is poor. It’s all done on a case-by-case university basis. Kids from poor backgrounds need to know that there is this support well before they are doing A-levels to shift expectations.”

Professor Gregg also wants to see social mobility more broadly defined: “The government and researchers tend to define social mobility rather narrowly on educational and economic outcomes, but I’d prefer a broader concept
come to include other aspects of people’s life chances, such as differences in health and life expectancy, crime and wellbeing."

The situation isn’t all gloom and doom. Some Anglophone countries appear to have been successfully tackling aspects of social mobility and we could learn from them, Professor Gregg says. Australia and Canada are around twice as mobile as Britain and the US, according to an analysis produced for a US-based Russell Sage Foundation summit by Professor Miles Corak from the University of Ottawa. Professor Corak says: “The tie between the educational attainment of children and the educational attainment of their parents is much tighter in Britain than not just Australia and Canada but also the vast majority of comparable rich countries.”

ACCESS FOR ALL

For Sir Peter Lampl, chairman of the Sutton Trust, says a genuine improvement in social mobility will only happen “if we open up our elites to talented children from all backgrounds, while improving the educational outcomes of the poorest children, so they leave school equipped to prosper in life.” The Sutton Trust aims to improve social mobility through education, but growing inequalities make it more difficult, he says. Its ‘Open Access’ scheme is the only practical way to open up the country’s leading independent day schools, which dominate entrance to the country’s leading universities and professional elites, he argues.

Sir Peter says: “Under Open Access, places at the schools are awarded on merit alone – democratising entry so it’s based solely on merit not money, thus opening up the schools to children from all backgrounds. Parents pay a sliding scale of fees according to means. We have trialled Open Access successfully and are urging the government to expand the scheme to the more than 80 leading independent day schools, almost half the total, who would introduce Open Access if state funding were available.”

For him, one thing is certain: “The biggest single factor impacting on the achievement of all children is the quality of teachers and teaching.” In terms of what hasn’t worked, the list, he says, “sadly is a long one; the focus on school structures – academies, free schools, and so on – does not address the key issues: quality of teachers, and teaching in the classroom, and to a lesser extent, leadership. I also believe that the tripling in tuition fees in England is a retrograde step for mobility.”

The three main parties continue to stake their claims to be the guarantors of mass social mobility, while pointing out we are going nowhere fast. Former Labour minister Alan Milburn, now the government’s social mobility tsar, said that the next generation of young professionals was becoming a ‘mirror image’ of previous generations. Labour leader Ed Miliband observed: “It’s harder to climb the ladder when the rungs are further apart.”

For both Professor Gregg and Sir Peter Lampl, answers are still to be found in the structures of Britain’s education system, and beyond, but we’re at the early stages of mining gold nuggets and medal hopes are some way off.

www.bristol.ac.uk/ifssoca

Sarah Womack is the former Social Affairs Correspondent and Political Correspondent of the Daily Telegraph
In spring 2012, the Rt Hon Charles Clarke* and I organised a series of debates on the place of religion in our national life. The success of these ‘Westminster Faith Debates’ took us by surprise with both attendance and media coverage exceeding anything we had expected.

The purpose of the debates was to present findings from the £12-million AHRC/ESRC Religion and Society Research Programme, and to ask public figures to respond. The latter included the Attorney General Dominic Grieve, Richard Dawkins, Tony Blair and Rowan Williams. Topics ranged from faith and welfare, to religious freedom and radicalisation. What did we learn about religion and its place in public life today?

The most obvious thing was that there are a large number of people in diverse and often influential positions in society who want to discuss the place of religion in public life, feel they have a real contribution to make, and have been frustrated at the lack of an outlet for serious discussion for a long time. And the debates provided a much-needed opportunity for them.

This appetite expressed itself in cogent and focused discussion of important contemporary questions. There was a feeling that the issues around religion are currently open and unsettled, and that debate needs to move on from those tired issues that go round and round in circles: Is religion declining? Can society be moral without religion? Should religion and state be separate? Is religion compatible with democracy?

There was a clear awareness, sharpened by the new research, that these questions are no longer the most relevant ones. We saw just how much religion has changed in the last four decades. Alongside the decline of a great deal of organised religion, particularly the historic churches, there has been a growth in new forms of religious belonging to small groups, large groups (such as megachurches, festivals, mass gatherings) and virtual networks.

The spiritual search has replaced the idea that orthodoxy can be received by the believer as a package deal. Religious identities have diversified enormously. The new reality is far less about ‘slabs of belief’ such as Catholicism, Islam and so on; it is about the fact that individuals are expressing their own religious beliefs and identities in a wide variety of different ways that deny some of the simplistic classifications that policymakers and commentators have tended to use. The implications of these changes are enormous. Take religion in schools, for example. In Great Britain, religious education (RE) has shifted since the 1944 Education Act from being ‘religious instruction’ of a confessional kind (forming pupils in the existing mould of orthodox belief), to being religious education about a wider variety of faith traditions. At the same time, RE is now meant to be a place where pupils can learn from religion and debate the ‘big questions’ of life. Researchers found that, in practice, it is also a dumping ground for many other bits and pieces that don’t have a natural home in the curriculum – like Personal and Social Education.
The burdens and expectations placed on RE have therefore increased, but its status is highly anomalous. It is a compulsory subject, but parents can opt out their children. It is a statutory subject, yet it is often underfunded and understaffed (one of the research projects found that less than £1 per annum was spent per pupil on teaching resources). RE has been trying to keep pace with change, but it needs much clearer direction, support and consolidation if it is to serve the needs of a complex multi-faith society like Britain today.

This ‘problem’ of religious diversity for our national life was another topic about which the debates had much to say. But they cast doubt on the idea that it was nearly as problematic as is often assumed. What many of the research projects found was that Britain has negotiated a rapid and remarkably successful integration of an astonishing variety of new faiths.

Indeed, the UK is now at the forefront of a great experiment in religious – and secular – democracy. We are only just beginning to appreciate how significant this is. Of course there are problems, but the real area that needs more investigation is not the problems but the solutions: How Britain has succeeded in integrating such variety in public spaces, workplaces, schools, hospitals and other arenas of public life.

HOPE FOR THE FUTURE
Looking back at the debates as a whole, it seems that a large part of their success was that they offered a space for serious discussion of a neglected but vital topic, illuminated by high-quality research. They addressed the questions that people really ask about religion in public life, and did so in a remarkable triangular conversation between academic researchers, public figures and an interested general audience. All three parties gained in the process. We are continuing to consolidate the results of the discussions and to work out the practical and policy implications for the future.

I leave the conclusion to my colleague Charles Clarke, an atheist who became aware of the key role that religion plays in public life when he served in local and national government: “It is time to try and reach a new settlement of the place of religion in public life in the UK, and I think that the Westminster Faith Debates have helped move us in that direction.”

www.religionandsociety.org.uk

*Ex Home Secretary, now Visiting Professor of Politics and Faith at Lancaster University
Socially minded

Social enterprises have achieved a great deal but what exactly does the term ‘social enterprise’ mean?

A social enterprise is not a legal entity. It is easiest to see it as a label that is variably used over time and context to refer to voluntary organisations that earn money through trading activities (including those contracted to deliver public services), co-operatives and mutuals, and community enterprises. More recently some commentators have used the term to refer to for-profit businesses with a social conscience. Each of these types is (inadvertently or otherwise) captured in the loose government definition created in 2002: ‘A social enterprise is a business with primarily social objectives, whose surpluses are principally reinvested for that purpose in the business or in the community, rather than being driven by the need to maximise profit for shareholders and owners.’

Creating a definition

Evidence to support claims of the dramatic growth in social enterprises may not be so robust. The often-cited government estimate of 62,000 social enterprises was derived in 2008/09 from the Annual Small Business Survey (ASBS). This seems to show a rapid increase since the first government estimates of 15,000 social enterprises in 2004/05. But research undertaken by Simon Teasdale, Fergus Lyon and Rob Baldock at the ESRC

Unemployment

BLEAK EXPECTATIONS

What are the economic effects of health-related job loss?

Each year in Britain more than 300,000 people of working age move from work on to health-related benefits and more than a third of these are aged over 50. A new study by Professor Steve Pudney, Dr Alexandra Skew and Professor Mark Taylor at the Institute for Social and Economic Research at the University of Essex, found that leaving work due to illness or injury can be more damaging to an individual’s financial wellbeing than becoming unemployed.

The research, commissioned by income protection specialists Unum, looked at the impacts of leaving employment for health-related reasons. Using data from the British Household Panel Survey, which looks at changes in people’s lives over an 18-year period, the researchers were able to build up a picture of how individuals and families cope with changing circumstances.

The team found that one per cent of Britain’s working population leave work for health-related reasons each year. This is smaller than the proportion leaving to unemployment, but still represents almost one in four of all labour market exits among those of work ages. This group of individuals have quite distinct characteristics: more than one half are aged 45 or over; 60 per cent are the main earner in the household; and two-thirds were leaving full-time jobs.

UNHEALTHY OPTIONS

The researchers looked at the impact on these workers and their families, on the level and composition of household income, exposure to poverty, savings behaviours, problems meeting housing payments, and expenditure of leisure and eating out, as well as the employment status of their partner. They found that on average 43 per cent of income after leaving work came from state benefits, rising to 60 per cent for those in relatively low-income households.

Household incomes dropped by 25 per cent or more if they were leaving a high-income job, or a full-time rather than part-time job. Leaving work for health-related reasons can be more damaging to an individual’s financial wellbeing than becoming unemployed.

Leaving work for health-related reasons affects the employment prospects of other household members; their partners are less likely to be employed and more likely to leave work than other families. Twenty-eight per cent of people with spouses who leave work for health reasons reduce working hours in the first year and 37 per cent reduce them within two years.

Long term the picture is bleaker - 76 per cent of those who left work for health reasons were still out of work 12 months later, while about one in four had returned to work within this year. This is much lower than for those who are unemployed, where about half are back in work within a year.

Socially minded

Social enterprises have achieved a great deal but what exactly does the term ‘social enterprise’ mean?

A social enterprise is not a legal entity. It is easiest to see it as a label that is variably used over time and context to refer to voluntary organisations that earn money through trading activities (including those contracted to deliver public services), co-operatives and mutuals, and community enterprises. More recently some commentators have used the term to refer to for-profit businesses with a social conscience. Each of these types is (inadvertently or otherwise) captured in the loose government definition created in 2002: ‘A social enterprise is a business with primarily social objectives, whose surpluses are principally reinvested for that purpose in the business or in the community, rather than being driven by the need to maximise profit for shareholders and owners.’

Creating a definition

Evidence to support claims of the dramatic growth in social enterprises may not be so robust. The often-cited government estimate of 62,000 social enterprises was derived in 2008/09 from the Annual Small Business Survey (ASBS). This seems to show a rapid increase since the first government estimates of 15,000 social enterprises in 2004/05. But research undertaken by Simon Teasdale, Fergus Lyon and Rob Baldock at the ESRC

Unemployment

BLEAK EXPECTATIONS

What are the economic effects of health-related job loss?

Each year in Britain more than 300,000 people of working age move from work on to health-related benefits and more than a third of these are aged over 50. A new study by Professor Steve Pudney, Dr Alexandra Skew and Professor Mark Taylor at the Institute for Social and Economic Research at the University of Essex, found that leaving work due to illness or injury can be more damaging to an individual’s financial wellbeing than becoming unemployed.

The research, commissioned by income protection specialists Unum, looked at the impacts of leaving employment for health-related reasons. Using data from the British Household Panel Survey, which looks at changes in people’s lives over an 18-year period, the researchers were able to build up a picture of how individuals and families cope with changing circumstances.

The team found that one per cent of Britain’s working population leave work for health-related reasons each year. This is smaller than the proportion leaving to unemployment, but still represents almost one in four of all labour market exits among those of work ages. This group of individuals have quite distinct characteristics: more than one half are aged 45 or over; 60 per cent are the main earner in the household; and two-thirds were leaving full-time jobs.

UNHEALTHY OPTIONS

The researchers looked at the impact on these workers and their families, on the level and composition of household income, exposure to poverty, savings behaviours, problems meeting housing payments, and expenditure of leisure and eating out, as well as the employment status of their partner. They found that on average 43 per cent of income after leaving work came from state benefits, rising to 60 per cent for those in relatively low-income households.

Household incomes dropped by 25 per cent or more if they were leaving a high-income job, or a full-time rather than part-time job. Leaving work for health-related reasons affects the employment prospects of other household members; their partners are less likely to be employed and more likely to leave work than other families. Twenty-eight per cent of people with spouses who leave work for health reasons reduce working hours in the first year and 37 per cent reduce them within two years.

Long term the picture is bleaker - 76 per cent of those who left work for health reasons were still out of work 12 months later, while about one in four had returned to work within this year. This is much lower than for those who are unemployed, where about half are back in work within a year.

www.iser.essex.ac.uk
A SOCIAL ENTERPRISE IS A BUSINESS WITH PRIMARILY SOCIAL OBJECTIVES

Third Sector Research Centre (TSRC) shows this is not a consequence of growth in the number of new organisations, but rather an expansion in the types of organisation included in the total. Almost 90 per cent of the 62,000 social enterprises are for-profit businesses with no legal restrictions on paying dividends to shareholders. It is unlikely that most people would recognise these organisations as social enterprises.

This loose definition of social enterprise has enabled the field to grow as different organisational forms and their representative bodies have aligned themselves with the social enterprise label. The 62,000 figure is widely used when setting out the government’s vision for public service reform, and has been uncritically accepted by many academics and leaders of the social enterprise movement. What is more, funders have become increasingly keen to provide resources for this form of activity, offering particular opportunities to organisations claiming to be social enterprises.

There is no doubt that social enterprises have achieved a great deal, but we really need a clearer understanding of what is and is not included within the label, to develop a more rational assessment of the social and economic potential of social enterprise.

www.tsarc.ac.uk

BEING BRITISH

How do ethnic minorities feel when considering their Britishness?

EARLY FINDINGS FROM new research examining how British people feel about their nationality have revealed that people from ethnic minority backgrounds identify more closely with Britishness than their white counterparts.

The research by Dr Alita Nandi at the Institute for Social and Economic Research at the University of Essex, and Professor Lucinda Platt at the Institute for Education at the University of London shows that fears expressed by some groups about the negative impacts of immigration on cultural identity may be considerably overstated.

In particular, Muslims from a Pakistani background, often said to associate more strongly with their own national identity as opposed to where they are living now, say quite the reverse in the survey. The researchers also point to the significant numbers of white British people who feel little or no association with ‘being British’.

Using the world-leading study, Understanding Society – a survey of people living in 40,000 households in Britain, including an ethnic minority boost of 4,000 households – they discovered all minorities (other than mixed) identify more strongly with being British than the white majority. Indians, black Africans, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis and Middle Eastern Muslims associate most closely with Britishness, while white, Chinese and Afro-Caribbean ethnic groups were found to associate least closely with Britishness as their identity.

MINORITY REPORT

The study asked how important on a scale of one to ten being British was to them. White residents scored themselves the lowest, with an average 6.58 out of ten, with mixed race individuals only scoring slightly higher (6.78).

On the other hand, Pakistanis scored highest with an average of 7.76 out of ten, closely followed by Bangladeshis (7.75), Indians (7.68) and black Africans (7.64).

Overall, all minorities identified themselves as British more strongly than white residents. The impact on the children and grandchildren of migrants was most marked with increased identification of being British across each generation.

Dr Nandi explains: “There is a huge emphasis in public and policy discourse on immigration and its potential challenge to cultural homogeneity and national identity. Our research shows that people we might assume would feel very British, in fact, do not – while others who we might assume would not associate themselves with feelings of Britishness, in fact, do.”

She adds: “Many people seem to manage dual identities, and it’s interesting to note that in all the ethnic groups we looked at, British identity increases from generation to generation, while within the majority white population many maintain strong non-British identities, such as Scottish or Welsh.”

The research was presented at the ESRC Research Methods Festival in Oxford, and to policymakers from the Department of Communities and Local Government, and the Government Equalities Office at an ESRC event hosted by Universities and Science Minister, David Willetts.

www.understandingsociety.org.uk

NUMBERS OF WHITE BRITISH PEOPLE FEEL LITTLE OR NO ASSOCIATION WITH ‘BEING BRITISH’

How do ethnic minorities feel when considering their Britishness?

How do ethnic minorities feel when considering their Britishness?

How do ethnic minorities feel when considering their Britishness?

How do ethnic minorities feel when considering their Britishness?

How do ethnic minorities feel when considering their Britishness?
VALUE JUDGEMENTS

What is the best measure of living standards, and does the value of housing play an important role?

AS CONTROVERSY GATHERS over how to measure poverty and living standards in Britain, economist Professor Mike Brewer, from the Institute for Social and Economic Research at the University of Essex, says a more effective method to better understand the nation’s financial health may be to look at how much we spend rather than how much we earn.

Along with Cormac O’Dea from the Institute for Fiscal Studies, Brewer has explored the use of household consumption – rather than household income – as a form of measure, arguing this could paint a more detailed picture of the lives and living standards of Britons today. Currently the accepted form of determining whether a household is in poverty is to measure its income. But experts believe that looking at how much families consume over months and years would give a better guide to their long-term standard of living. There are two big differences between a household’s consumption and its income: first, households might save some of their income, or borrow in order to spend more; second, a measure of consumption will recognise that households benefit from the durable goods they already own. Professor Brewer explains: “If you buy a car next month, your level of spending in that month will appear to be high, but you would hope to benefit from the car not just next month but over the car’s lifetime. This will be reflected in a measure of your consumption, which will now be higher over the lifetime of the car than it would have been if you hadn’t bought the car.”

Using data from the UK household budget survey (the Living Cost and Food Survey, for example) researchers have constructed micro-data on family incomes and spending over the last 40 years. They found a mismatch between reported income and reported spending for households with low incomes, and this seems more likely to be due to inaccuracies in recording income rather than recording spending.

BRICKS AND MORTAR

Looking at the past 40 years, inequality and relative poverty have also grown less rapidly when measured by consumption than by income, because consumption at the bottom grew more strongly than income in the 1980s, and consumption at the top grew less strongly compared with income in the 1990s and 2000s.

Recognising that people benefit from owning their own house also makes a substantial difference to the view of how living standards have improved over time because home-ownership is more widespread now, and housing has risen in value faster than any other goods during this time. And the impression we have of the living standards enjoyed by the elderly changes considerably if their living standards are measured by their consumption (which includes the benefits of home-ownership) rather than their income, which will inevitably fall upon retirement. The young tend to look less well-off than the elderly once account is taken of the benefits of home-ownership.

So what should policymakers do? Professor Brewer says: “Researchers arrive at substantively different – and, we would argue, more insightful – conclusions about whether the old are better off than the young when we value the income or consumption from housing. We therefore recommend that official measures of relative living standards, or of inequality or relative poverty in the UK, should take account of the value of housing.”

www.iser.essex.ac.uk

www.ifs.org.uk/publications/6256

THE POWER OF PEERS

Charitable donations are often influenced by how much other people give

THERE IS A WIDESPREAD belief that peer effects are important in charitable giving, but little direct evidence on how powerful these effects are in practice on the behaviour of other people. New research from the Centre for Market and Public Organisation (CMPO) by Sarah Smith, Frank Windmeijer and Edmund Wright, looks directly at peer effects in giving.

Using data from two fundraising websites, Justgiving and Virgin Money Giving, the research focused on fundraising for the 2010 London marathon and analysed more than 10,000 fundraising pages – which had more than 300,000 donations. The main question was whether donations to these pages were affected by how much other people had given.

POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE

There is likely to be a correlation between donations to a page and the similarity of members within the peer group, as well as the fact that some fundraisers will be better than others at encouraging donations. To test the peer effect the research strategy relied on the within-page variation in donations that arises as a result of donors arriving at the website at different times.

There is clear evidence of positive peer effects. One way to show this is to look at what happens if there is a large donation to a fundraising page (large meaning more than twice the average donation on the page, say about £100). The pattern of donations before and after the large donation (see right) is striking: donations made after the large donation are clearly larger than donations before. And the effect is fairly sizeable: a large donation increases the average donation size by £10 on average. So as a fundraising strategy, a £100 donation would pay back in ten donations’ time.

But peer effects can cause the value of donations to go down too. The effect of a small donation, defined as less than half the page donations to go down too. The effect of a small donation, defined as less than half the page donations made after the large donation (see right) is striking; donations made after the large donation are clearly larger than donations before. And the effect is fairly sizeable: a large donation increases the average donation size by £10 on average. So as a fundraising strategy, a £100 donation would pay back in ten donations’ time.

www.bris.ac.uk/cmposwww.bris.ac.uk/cmpos
Why breast is best

With research indicating that breastfeeding could increase educational attainment, parents should more seriously consider infant nourishment

AN INVESTIGATION INTO the impacts of breastfeeding on the nation’s children is prompting calls for initiatives to support breastfeeding to become part of the government’s wider social mobility strategy.

The many advantages of breastfeeding babies are widely documented and accepted, yet in Britain less than one in three babies are exclusively breastfed for the first four months of life. Of these, the majority already begin life with the advantages of better-educated and wealthier parents. But what are the social, economic and health returns – if any – from supporting and encouraging breastfeeding mothers? Is it a policy this government can afford not to pursue, or is it a distraction from the more pressing issues of social injustice and inequality?

The study of the effects of breastfeeding on children, mothers and employers is the most comprehensive of its kind in Britain. The team of researchers from the Institute for Social and Economic Research (ISER) at the University of Essex and the University of Oxford is examining the relationship between breastfeeding and a child’s early development including early literacy and numeracy skills at Key Stages 1 and 2.

The study looks at whether there are links between breastfeeding and a child’s social development by examining areas such as hyperactivity and peer problems. It also explores whether there are any links between breastfeeding and the health of mothers, for example in areas such as post-natal depression, as well as the impact of family-friendly working practices on the duration of breastfeeding and the mothers’ decisions to return to work.

Dr Emilia Del Bono, an economist at ISER, said: “There seems to be evidence of benefits of breastfeeding in relation not just to health – which are already widely known – but also, and perhaps more controversially, in the cognitive, emotional and behavioural areas. There is a strong argument that the government should include breastfeeding on its list of social mobility indicators.”

The social mobility and child poverty commission’s list of indicators of success includes birth weight, results at Key Stage 2, GCSE and A-level, and participation in education or training from 18-24 years of age.

The researchers have found evidence that breastfeeding is responsible for a relatively small, but statistically significant, increase in SATs scores – around ten per cent of a standard deviation, which translates roughly into about two positions in a class of 30 children. These differences are visible at the ages of five, seven, 11 and 14 and across a range of subject areas.

Increasing the promotion of breastfeeding children – especially with socio-economically disadvantaged parents – could be key to increasing the next generation’s chances of escaping poor educational attainment and the subsequent potential for unemployment, poverty and ensuing problems.

www.iser.essex.ac.uk

ARE DONORS INFLUENCED BY HOW MUCH OTHER PEOPLE HAVE GIVEN?

Source: Data taken from Justgiving and Virgin Money Giving fundraising pages
Universal Credit challenge

The new Universal Credit could create an improved benefits system for claimants, but the separate council tax rebate schemes threaten its success

IN 2013, THE UK’S benefit system will begin its most radical transformation since 1948 as six of the seven main means-tested benefits and tax credits for those of working age start to be phased out and replaced by a single ‘Universal Credit’. But the main advantages of Universal Credit’s introduction will be undermined by the decision to leave the seventh – Council Tax Benefit – separate from the Universal Credit system and to devolve responsibility for designing schemes for council tax support to local authorities in England.

The government is introducing Universal Credit to correct some of the perceived problems with the current benefit system. Having means-tested benefits and tax credits administered by three different government departments, three separate income-replacement benefits for those out of work and separate benefits for those working more or less than 16 hours per week, is seen as too complicated and burdensome for claimants. The complicated system also means claimants are uncertain about how much better off they will be from moving into work, and it requires them to report the same information multiple times.

Having overlapping benefits (where families receive more than one means-tested benefit at the same time) adds to the confusion for claimants, and can lead to situations where they benefit very little from increasing their earnings, with people losing up to 96p of each additional pound earned through a combination of higher tax payments and lower benefit entitlement. The hope is that a single integrated benefit will be simpler for claimants, reduce administrative costs and, by replacing a jumble of overlapping means tests with a single one, ensure that overall effective tax rates cannot rise too high, thus eliminating the very highest tax rates that can exist under the current system. So despite the well-publicised potential administrative challenges of introducing Universal Credit, there are clear benefits if the computer systems can be made to work successfully.

Research at the ESRC Centre for the Microeconomic Analysis of Public Policy at the Institute for Fiscal Studies has shown how Universal Credit will strengthen work incentives for those who have the weakest incentives to work under the current benefit system, although slightly weaken them for other groups, in particular those who have a partner in paid work.

But, as other IFS research has shown, these two main advantages of Universal Credit – simplification and rationalising work incentives – may be undermined by the decision not to incorporate support for council tax within Universal Credit. Instead, local authorities will design their own council tax rebate schemes to come into effect from April 2013.

Keeping support for council tax separate (and allowing it to vary across the country) will certainly undermine the simplification of the benefit system offered by Universal Credit. Whether it also undermines the rationalising of work incentives will depend on the decisions made by local authorities. Separate means tests for council tax support have the potential to reintroduce some of the extremely weak work incentives that Universal Credit was supposed to eliminate.

UNIVERSAL CHALLENGES

An additional challenge for local authorities is that the benefits that currently give entitlement to full Council Tax Benefit will disappear once they are subsumed into Universal Credit. At present, two-thirds of Council Tax Benefit recipients are ‘passported’ in this way, and if all these people needed to go through a full means test to receive support, the burden on both claimants and local authorities would increase substantially. This could be mitigated if central government transferred data on Universal Credit claims to local authorities so that they could use this information in their means tests without having to ask claimants for it again, although this would only add to the difficulty of an already challenging IT project. Local authorities therefore have a challenging task to make their council tax rebate schemes work alongside Universal Credit, especially given the short timescale for designing these schemes before implementation in April.
The Olympics have brought much into sharper focus, including discussions about and representations of who we are as a nation, and the contribution of people with different histories and backgrounds in ‘representing’ us. Now we need research data to allow us to go beyond the athletes who brought such excitement to our lives, to the everyday existences of the rest of us, unpicking experiences that are statistically representative.

Understanding Society is an unprecedentedly large panel survey, which also contains a substantial minority ethnic boost sample. Its multidisciplinary content across a wide range of areas allows great potential for ethnicity research and there is also a focus on content that is specifically relevant to the analysis of ethnicity and ethnic minority experiences. Some of this is asked of everyone in the study, but there are also some additional questions that are only asked of the ethnic minority boost sample and a comparison sample.

Helping Minorities
Researchers have already started using this data to raise new questions. For example, Shamit Saggar, Professor of Politics at Sussex, has looked at the extent to which barriers to employment persist for minorities, initiating discussion of what aspects of employment and employer behaviour can be ‘hedged’ to change this. Research by Omar Khan of the Runnymede Trust shows that while relatively small proportions of minorities send money to their country of origin, even those on low incomes do so and this constitutes a higher proportion of their income than for better-off remitters. Those on low incomes can, and do, save, even if it is not registered as a conventional form of saving.

Professor Ludi Simpson’s work (Population Studies at the University of Manchester) reveals how immigrants are no more or less likely than British-born to move around Britain. He has explored how going back to theorigins of people’s grandparents shows us a more heterogeneous nation than modern accounts of ethnic diversity would suggest.

One striking finding from the Understanding Society research is that those who retain their minority self-classification are more strongly attached to a British identity than the majority, challenging many persistent perceptions and misconceptions, such as the risks of self-selected concentration of minority groups, or the applicability of the infamous Tebbit’s ‘cricket test’ to people’s national attachment.

The potential for new directions in ethnicity research is even greater than these preliminary findings illustrated. Deep-seated questions relating to identity, social mobility, diversity and disadvantage are not going to go away and Understanding Society offers the possibility of addressing them in a rigorous way. It provides large samples from minority groups that can be used to reveal such differences and similarities, and also allows researchers maximum flexibility in how they define minorities and majorities. It contains different ways of categorising groups as well as detailed background information on family countries of origin going back two generations, and degree of identification with parental ethnicity.

Mapping Ethnicity
Researchers are not constrained by the simple, mutually exclusive, much criticised (but invaluable) census categories. Instead they can map their understanding of ethnicity more closely on to the different measures. For example, many use groups that are defined by religion as well as ethnicity. Other possibilities include categorising people by precise family migration status – using parental and grandparental country of birth in different combinations – or by the strength of their attachment to a minority identity. Such variation in approaches is to be encouraged, especially as it may help to break down some of the suspicion of the ‘reductionism’ of quantitative data in relation to minority ethnic experience that is sometimes voiced by researchers as well as by the researched.

Subsequent sweeps of the Understanding Society data will feed the intense current interest in identity and ‘who we are’ with a novel set of questions on ethnic identity, and the wave 2 data for these questions will be highly revealing. But, perhaps more fundamentally, future waves will enable the exploration of change, and the causes and consequences of changes in individual lives.

We know that disadvantage starts early in life, but we know much less about how people from different backgrounds overcome it, or how it can continue to shape their futures. As we are reminded by the 2011 census that we are an ageing population, it’s also worth recognising that youth and younger adults will be made up of an increasing share of minorities (however defined). If we want to grasp the nation of the future we’ll need to understand their trajectories.

www.ioe.ac.uk; www.cls.ioe.ac.uk; www.understandingsociety.org.uk