DATA STREAM

There's data everywhere, helping us understand how business, government and society can work better. John Warner looks at where it is all flowing.
Large and often complex data collected routinely by businesses, local government, government departments and other organisations is being made accessible for social science research, but in ways that safeguard individual identities. ‘Big data’ provides a rich evidence base that can, for example, inform policy development, implementation and evaluation.

“Recently there’s been a revolution in data-capture technology – data is now automatically captured all the time. In days gone by, you went out with a clipboard and talked to people; and recorded what they said as part of a survey,” says Professor David Hand, Chair of the ESRC-funded Administrative Data Research Network (ADRN), launched in November 2014. “Now data is taken automatically from the web or electronic measuring instruments that monitor, for example, Oyster card use in London, or customers’ purchases in supermarkets. Nobody thinks that they must record such information – it’s just there. Potentially, social scientists can extract something valuable from this data.”

Following £64 million of additional funding announced by the ESRC in October 2013, four new data research centres co-ordinated by a central Administrative Data Service were set up in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland as part of the ADRN. The centres and service are based in a consortium of universities with expertise and experience in this field. Each university works in collaboration with its respective national statistical body (eg Office for National Statistics or Record Office for Northern Ireland) to capitalise on administrative data resources. Examples include tax, benefits or transport records, which may otherwise have remained beyond the reach of the academic community. Potentially, the power of accessing big data comes in understanding how society can work better and determining how well social policies are working – and how they might be modified to make improvements. It can be applied to every aspect of life, from refuse collection to education and healthcare issues. It can also be studied presently, and historically – at any time.

DATA SECURITY
To acknowledge the sensitive nature of data, especially administrative data, the ADRN has stringent controls on the research purposes for which it is to be used and who is given accredited access. Data is only available in a secure environment and a system is in place for ‘de-identification’ of individual records.

“We set out to build a new research infrastructure with the ADRN, which would enable researchers to have access to incredibly rich, important and detailed data – and then link them together. But to do it in a way that is safe, secure, regulated and controlled and always in the public interest,” says Dr Melanie Wright, Director of the Administrative Data Service at the University of Essex. “Right from the beginning, we were aware that there’s huge public concern about privacy and how government uses data that’s collected about people – data that’s really not recorded for the purposes of research.”

To address confidentiality issues during the development of the ADRN, privacy-activist organisations were contacted to explain what was being proposed and to consult with them on how public concerns could be allayed. This provided feedback that was built into the way the network operates. Overriding principles include: all research is undertaken for the public benefit; policies and procedures are conducted transparently; and research data is de-identified. Also, because of concerns about the commercial use of data, direct business access to the network is denied.

AREAS OF RESEARCH
Within the Big Data Network, a number of universities are working together to harness the power of big data in a variety of areas, including how it can build fresh insights in consumer affairs and how it can assist in the growth of SMEs.

Professor William Young of the University of Leeds is leading a team at the Consumer Data Research Centre that is using big data to study and track people’s behaviours in the decisions that they make about what they consume – and what they waste. With the team’s focus on ethical and sustainable consumption, consumer data is being linked with environmental data, such as air pollution, recycling and water quality to reach certain conclusions.

Professor Young explains: “We can combine sales data from supermarkets and travel patterns from mobile phone data to try to predict consumers’ behaviours. If air quality becomes poor, for example, supermarkets may want to know from a sales point of view what medication products customers will be buying, and then stock up accordingly. Or if local...
authorities have overflowing refuse bins being talked about on Twitter or Snapchat in a certain neighbourhood, vehicles can be dispatched immediately to sort out the problem. Currently, we’re looking to see how well such approaches can work. Some of the data can be quite ‘messy’, so we need to understand what people really mean by their social media comments, which is a very different technique from in-depth research interview methods.”

The Business and Local Government Data Research Centre (BLGDRC) aims to shed light on issues resulting from the interface between local policymakers and businesses in the east of England. One research project has been undertaken to determine how upgrading to faster broadband has made a difference to companies located in a particular area and to understand the drivers of their behaviours. As a consequence of the upgrade an investigation was made to see if suppliers were now being Skyped, or if business transactions are carried out electronically. The research required three sources of data: detailed information about companies; where broadband has been installed; and ‘soft’ data – gathered during interviews at companies.

“There is a layer of companies, especially in our region, which would benefit from being able to analyse big data, but they don’t have the skills or technical knowledge to do this,” says Professor Vania Sena, Director of BLGDRC based at the Essex Business School. “We focus on SMEs and local government. We collect their data sources and try to merge it with additional sources of data to create a more detailed picture of what is happening as a result of specific policy issues. A good example could be firms’ limited access to credit and the impact this has on business innovation and development. We also arrange training to help companies understand how big data can be used to increase productivity and efficiency.”

Having the final say, Professor Hand warns that big data is not a research panacea, but is another tool that can be used in social science investigations. Like any data source, its scope, relevance and ability to answer a specific social science question has to be taken into account.

“Data comes in at a much faster rate than ever before and it comes in all the time – it’s a ‘fire-hose of data’. When people talk about big data, there’s much enthusiasm for the opportunities it offers and the wonderful things that can be done with it, but there are challenges too,” he says. “There are issues of quality and selection-bias. Just because the data is there, it doesn’t mean the quality shouldn’t be considered. The issues are different than those of conventional survey data, but they’re real, nonetheless, and it means developing new big-data research methods. That’s what the data network aims to support.”

www.adm.ac.uk
ec.europa.eu/justice/data-protection

John Warner is a freelance science writer.
What are the best policies to tackle excessive alcohol consumption?

**OPINION**

**CURBING CONSUMPTION**

*By Dr Martin O’Connell*

**THERE IS A LONG HISTORY** of government intervention to curb excessive alcohol consumption. An economic rationale for government action exists if drinking alcohol is associated either with costs to society – for example, due to road traffic accidents or higher costs of funding the national health service – or costs borne by the drinker that he or she fails to take into account when partaking in alcoholic beverages.

While these negative effects of alcohol are in some cases undeniable, much alcohol consumption is done sensibly by fully informed moderate drinkers who do not impose any negative effect on those around them. Therefore, in the design of alcohol policy it is desirable to target forms of alcohol consumption most associated with problem drinking.

Research by Rachel Griffith, Martin O’Connell and Kate Smith at the Institute for Fiscal Studies looks at a set of price-based government policies and asks how effective they are in targeting heavy drinkers.

**PRICE LEVELS**

The researchers consider two policies that have recently received a lot of attention. The first is a minimum unit price for alcohol. This policy involves setting a lower price under which it would be illegal to sell alcohol products. In the 2012 document Alcohol strategy consultation the government suggested a possible minimum unit price of 45p. Such a policy is designed to target products that provide cheap alcohol, although a substantial proportion (over half) of alcohol transactions would be directly affected. The second policy is a ban on quantity discounts – selling a large pack of an alcohol product that is cheaper per unit of alcohol than a smaller pack of the same product.

Using a dataset that tracks the grocery purchases of households through time the researchers show that households that tend to purchase relatively large quantities of off-trade alcohol are more likely to buy products that are cheaper per unit of alcohol and have larger pack sizes than moderately drinking households. This means that both a minimum unit price and a quantity discount do, to some extent, target alcohols that are disproportionately purchased by heavy drinkers. The researchers also model the likely demand response of households to the introduction of each of these policies.

In response to price changes heavy drinkers are more willing than moderate drinkers to switch to alternative alcohol products. Therefore, in response to the introduction of a minimum unit price or ban on quantity discounts they would not actually reduce the number of units of alcohol they buy by a larger proportion than more moderate drinking households. In other words, the fact that the policies affect the alcohol products bought most by heavy drinkers is offset by the fact that heavy drinkers are most willing to switch to alternative alcohol products.

Historically the main way in which the government has, and indeed continues, to influence alcohol prices is through the system of alcohol taxes. An alternative strategy to minimum unit pricing or quantity discount restrictions for tackling excessive alcohol consumption is to reform alcohol taxes to better target the types of alcohols consumed by heavy drinkers. Heavy drinking households get a disproportionately high amount of their alcohol from spirits. The researchers show that tax reform that both simplifies the current rather complex system on alcohol taxes, and increases the tax levied on strong spirits, would be more successful than a minimum unit price or a quantity discount in achieving a reduction in alcohol purchasing among more heavy drinkers, while having a smaller impact on moderate drinking households.

[www.ifs.org.uk](http://www.ifs.org.uk)

Dr Martin O’Connell is Senior Research Economist at the Institute for Fiscal Studies.
PROFESSOR MICHAEL OXLEY at the University of Cambridge, working with partners Centrepoint, The Joseph Rowntree Housing Trust, Community Housing Cymru (CHC) and Housing Europe, is examining what works in tackling poverty among young people (aged 16 to 25) who do not live in the parental home.

In the UK young people's incomes are falling, despite rises in other age groups, and youth unemployment is 16.2 per cent. Because of this, young people are leaving home at a later age than previously and, of those young people who have left home, 26 per cent rent from a housing association or local council, 65 per cent rent privately and nine per cent own a home (mostly with a mortgage). Twenty-eight thousand young people are living in temporary homeless accommodation and of the 533,000 who rent privately, 130,000 claim Housing Benefit (24 per cent).

Measures to address poverty in this age group are delivered by a range of landlords and agencies that provide accommodation and housing-related services. They can also provide advice and services including assistance with training and education and schemes to facilitate access to the private rented sector.

Housing providers throughout Europe are tackling poverty among young people in a variety of ways. Initiatives include: Dutch Foyers – four pillars of housing, learning, working and coaching; Trial tenancies for 18-26-year-olds in Sweden to support them into work or training – after nine months the tenancies become permanent; and in Ireland the Childcare scheme set up by lone parents who needed childcare, and the Co-opstarter scheme which offers kickstart funding for co-op enterprise models.

Professor Oxley's research is focusing on schemes that have the potential to alleviate poverty by reducing housing and living costs including fuel bills, increasing incomes by improving employability, locating housing near to jobs, increasing the capacity for unsupported and supported independent living and tackling the wider factors that are both cause and consequence of poverty.

The research should lead to an increase in good practice that improves the quality, scale and effectiveness of the housing and related services provided to young people in poverty and, ultimately, a reduction in poverty among young people in the UK.

www.cchpr.landecon.cam.ac.uk/directory/MichaelOxley

The rise of working poverty

There are now fewer workless families but more working families living in poverty

RECENT RESEARCH by Jonathan Cribb and Robert Joyce at the Institute for Fiscal Studies has shed light on how the changes in the labour market since the recession have had impacts on the types of people living in poverty in the UK.

First, strong employment growth has led to falls in the number of workless families. For example, the proportion of children living in workless families fell from 18 per cent in 2009-10 to 16 per cent in 2013-14. Since workless families have significantly higher risks of poverty than working families, this reduced absolute child poverty by over one percentage point. But over the same period, there were increased rates of poverty for working families. For example, the absolute poverty rate for children with a single parent working part-time rose from 23.7 per cent to 33.1 per cent, and the rate for children of one (full-time) earner couples rose from 26.9 per cent to 34.5 per cent. Overall, increased rates of in-work poverty acted to push up absolute child poverty by more than two percentage points. This was caused primarily by falling real earnings, rather than cuts to the benefits and tax credits of working families, although planned cuts to in-work support will put upward pressure on in-work poverty in the coming years.

DIFFERENT POVERTIES

Overall, these contrasting changes meant that absolute child poverty was unchanged from 2009-10 to 2013-14, but the fraction of children in poverty living in a working family rose from 54 per cent to 63 per cent by 2013-14. The reductions in worklessness are important and are one reason why it is sensible for the government to track worklessness as part of its new strategy on child poverty. But this research shows that tackling low living standards will be difficult without improvements for working families too.

But not all families with an income below the poverty line have the same experience of poverty. When we look at rates of ‘material deprivation’ – a measure of low living standards that indicates that a family cannot afford to buy a certain number of important items – for those in income poverty, there are very different rates of material deprivation among different groups. Social renters and disabled people living in income poverty have much higher rates of material deprivation than self-employed people who live in poverty. This is a reminder that, as well as being careful to track important causes of low living standards such as worklessness, it is also important for us to be able to identify genuine low living standards as accurately as possible. Tracking information other than current income is useful for that too.

www.ifs.org.uk/publications/7878
GETTY

THATCHER’S CHILDREN

What is life like for the British generation born in the late 1960s and early 1970s?

The generation who grew up in Thatcher’s Britain – Generation X – came of age at a time of social flux and transformation. Today, as the generation enters middle age, it is making its mark on British society. Indeed, some are even running the country – David Cameron, George Osborne, Nicola Sturgeon, Leanne Wood and Natalie Bennett are all Gen Xers, born in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

But what is life like for your average Gen Xer? The 1970 British Cohort Study, run by the Centre for Longitudinal Studies at the UCL Institute of Education, has been following the lives of more than 17,000 people born in England, Scotland and Wales since they were born. The study offers an unparalleled insight into the health, lifestyle, employment, attitudes and economic circumstances of a generation.

A special issue of the journal Longitudinal and Life Course Studies paints a portrait of the 1970 generation in middle age, taking stock of what has changed – and what has stayed the same – in the cohort members’ lives.

While unemployment was low in the early 1970s, the decade saw growing industrial and social unrest. Strike action culminated in the ‘winter of discontent’ in 1978-79, and the Troubles began to unfold in Northern Ireland.

Thatcher was elected in 1979, when the cohort members were nine years old, remaining in power until they were 20 in 1990. The Thatcher government marked the end of the post-war consensus and the start of widening inequalities. Public utilities were privatised and council housing sold off.

HOUSING AND EDUCATION

At five years of age, more than a third of the cohort lived in a council home. House prices rose dramatically during the 1980s and subsequently. Home ownership is lower among the 1970 cohort at age 42, and private renting more common, than it was for the generations born in 1958 and 1946 at the same age.

The vast majority of the 1970 cohort attended comprehensive secondary schools, following the slow decline in grammar schools and secondary moderns throughout the 1970s. Teacher pay was historically low, resulting in industrial action in schools between 1984-1986. By age 42, a quarter of those born in 1970 had a university degree. While this may seem low by contemporary standards, it is significantly higher than the generations born in 1946 or 1958. The greatest advances were made by women.

MOTOR ON

Car ownership was on the rise as Generation Xers came of age. Here are the 1980s top motors:

1. Ford Escort (above) 1,607,999 registered
2. Ford Fiesta 1,273,689 registered
3. Vauxhall Cavalier 1,008,866 registered
4. Ford Sierra 979,379 registered
5. Austin Metro 913,336 registered

Source: classics.honestjohn.co.uk
All Action

Great Britain was beset with industrial action in the 1970s as our Generation Xers grew up. Here are some highlights of a troubled time:

Three-Day Week

The miners went on strike in 1972 for the first time since the 1926 General Strike. Low pay was the issue as Ted Heath’s Conservative government offered 8% to try and help curb rampant inflation, compared to union demands for a 43% pay rise. Power shortages ensued before an agreement was reached.

Further unrest followed in 1973, with Heath finally announcing measures to conserve coal stocks including the infamous ‘three-day week’ at the beginning of 1974. Another miners’ strike a month later precipitated Heath’s move to call a general election, which resulted in a hung parliament. Heath hoped to form a coalition with the Liberals, but this wasn’t to be, so he resigned and Harold Wilson became Prime Minister. Another general election was called later in the year and by October James Callaghan was installed as Labour’s new leader.

The Winter of Discontent

Callaghan initially gave miners the pay rises they demanded, but as the decade progressed, inflation still rose, so he issued a paper recommending a restriction of 5% on any public sector pay rises, which the TUC rejected. A wave of strikes ensued during the bitter winter of 1978. Ford, through the Transport and General Workers Union, was first to take action, followed by lorry drivers, grave diggers in the north, refuse collectors, and nurses and ambulance drivers. Huge piles of rubbish built up in the streets of London and unburied corpses were stored in warehouses.

But Callaghan holidayed and the subsequent newspaper headlines read ‘Crisis, What Crisis?’. A public loss of faith in him paved the way for a new general election. Margaret Thatcher swept into power and relations with trade unions changed for ever.

Social Mobility, Health & Religion

Much debate has focused on whether relative social mobility has changed for the 1970 cohort compared to previous generations. There is certainly no evidence of an increase in relative mobility chances for the worse off compared to the better off. More than two thirds of children from more affluent homes were in professional or managerial occupations at age 42, compared to just a quarter of those from unskilled backgrounds. Cohort members from middle-class backgrounds were more likely to say that they received help from their parents in getting a job, but this does not appear to be a key factor explaining their higher earnings and social class positions at age 42.

The 1970 cohort represents the crest of the wave of the obesity epidemic. Convenience and fast foods became more common in the 1980s, as did car ownership. People became less and less physically active. By the age of 16, the 1970 generation was significantly more overweight than the generations before them, and this has persisted into mid-life. The seeds of adult obesity are sown early. Those with at least one parent classed as obese – a Body Mass Index (BMI) of 30 or higher – were just over three times more likely to be persistently overweight or obese throughout their lives than those whose parents were a healthy weight.

Religious belief declined for Generation X. At age 42, almost half did not identify with any religion. Most of the remainder said they had a Christian background.

Interestingly, there was a huge disparity in the proportion of men and women who say they believe in God and life after death – 60 per cent of the women but only 35 per cent of the men believe in life after death. Similarly, more than half (54 per cent) of the men surveyed said they were atheists or agnostics, compared to only a third (34 per cent) of the women.

www.cls.ioe.ac.uk/bcs70

www.cls.ioe.ac.uk/bcs70

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25 per cent of women in the 1970 cohort have university degrees, compared to just six per cent of the 1946 women.

By tracking the development of the cohort, we are also able to see the lasting effects of their learning outside of the classroom. For example, those who had regularly read for pleasure at the age of 10 had higher vocabulary scores at 42, even when socioeconomic factors were taken into account.

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Small steps

Across Scotland, it’s harder than ever for young adults to get on the housing ladder

IN THE CURRENT UK housing market, the challenges facing young adults seeking to move out of the parental home have received much media attention, highlighting the unaffordability of owner-occupation for many in what has been dubbed ‘generation rent’. A new study by Professor Elspeth Graham, Dr Francesca Fiori and Dr Zhiqiang Feng, from the ESRC Centre for Population Change at the University of St Andrews, examines the evidence for Scotland by comparing young people’s transitions to home ownership in the 2000s with those in the 1990s.

Fewer young people in Scotland moved out of their parental home and into home ownership in the 2000s than in the 1990s. Among a sample of over 18,000 young adults aged between 16 and 29 years living in their parental home in 2001, 24 per cent were living with their parents 10 years later, compared to 20 per cent in the previous decade. Of those who moved out, a lower proportion became homeowners in the 2000s (65 per cent) than in the 1990s (73 per cent). A closer look at who did and who did not make the transition to home ownership in the two decades reveals both continuity and change.

Young women were more likely than young men to move out of their parental home in both decades but, among those who left, there was no difference between men and women in the likelihood of becoming a homeowner in either decade. Age, education and employment remained more important influences than gender on the chances of getting on to the housing ladder. For example, during the 1990s young adults with post-secondary qualifications were more than twice as likely to become homeowners compared to those with lower qualifications, and the advantages of higher education strengthened over the 2000s.

INFLUENCES TO MOVE

So what has changed? Across Scotland, even young adults in higher status jobs were less likely to get on to the housing ladder in the 2000s compared to their peers the decade before. The economic downturn after 2007 has resulted in a greater sensitivity to property prices in local housing markets, with prospective buyers facing particular challenges in middle-range markets such as West Lothian and South Ayrshire. These are local authorities where average incomes tend to be lower than in the most expensive housing markets, yet house prices have remained relatively high.

The most important finding is that the influence of family background on young people’s access to home ownership in Scotland has increased, such that all young adults from non-professional backgrounds were more disadvantaged in the 2000s than their peers in the 1990s. This should concern policymakers seeking to reduce social equalities as it is opening up a gap that young people themselves, however well educated, can do little to close.

www.cpc.ac.uk

DIVORCE

SEPARATION EFFECTS

Do women and children fare the worst financially after family separation?

AFTER FAMILY SEPARATION, children and their mothers see living standards fall by more, on average, than do fathers. As a result, around one in six children and their mothers affected by separation or divorce fall into relative poverty. The income of those affected by separation can take years to recover to pre-split levels, but levels of material deprivation return more quickly to pre-split levels. This could reflect that people accustom themselves to a lower income by reducing material aspirations.

Individuals previously in well-off families see larger falls in living standards after separation, on average, than those from families with below-median income. A typical pattern for well-off families is that the loss of the man’s earnings is in no way compensated for by alimony and child maintenance payments, any increases in state benefits and tax credits, and having one fewer mouth to feed.

A striking finding is the difference in how living standards change after separation for older men and women. Women in these families, mostly aged over 50 when separating, and usually previously married, see living standards fall by far more after separation, on average, than their former partners, with 30 per cent falling into poverty. Often, this is because moving out of the family home means such women lose out not just on the earnings of their former partner, but also of any grown-up children still living at home.

Of course, separation can be a very distressing time, and longitudinal survey data clearly show wellbeing and life satisfaction falling for many adults around the time of separation. Men, and particularly fathers, seem more negatively affected than women. But wellbeing and life satisfaction return to their pre-split levels after less than two years, and this pattern seems unrelated to what happens to income after separation.

www.iser.essex.ac.uk/research/publications/working-papers/iser/2014-30

This article is based on research published in Partnership dissolution: how does it affect income, employment and well-being? by Mike Brewer and Alita Nandi.
TAKING THE LONG VIEW

Britain’s longitudinal studies reveal how we are shaped by our beginnings

JUST FIVE DECADES AGO, no one understood that smoking was harmful to babies. That was until results from the 1958 National Child Development Study (NCDS) revealed that mothers’ smoking was associated with reduced birth weight – a key indicator of poor infant health. This finding is lauded as one of the most significant discoveries in longitudinal research and led to extensive investigations into maternal smoking that continue to uncover lifelong adverse effects.

Longitudinal studies follow the same people throughout their lives, uniquely capturing the wide-ranging impact that events and circumstances early in people’s lives can have many years later. Britain’s legacy of national birth cohorts, each of which tracks the lives of people born in a particular time period, began in the aftermath of the Second World War, when giving future generations a better start in life was seen as vitally important. The findings from the first two British birth cohorts – the MRC National Survey of Health and Development (the 1946 birth cohort) and the NCDS – shed light on inequalities in healthcare provision for pregnant women. The quality of antenatal care and conditions at delivery varied considerably between mothers who have little or no antenatal care, or are transferred to hospital urgently. Home births all but disappear and more maternity beds become available.

1960s • As the 1958 cohort grows up, smoking during pregnancy is revealed as harmful to a child’s development – one of the most significant discoveries of longitudinal research.

1970s • Increased immunisation in the 1970 cohort cuts childhood measles by almost half.

1980s • A rise in convenience foods and a decline in active living takes its toll on the 1970 cohort, members of which are significantly more overweight by age 16 than previous generations.

1990s • The ALSPC discovers peanut allergies are connected to peanut oil in skin creams. Today all skin creams are required to list their ingredients.

2000s • Several cohorts reveal why ‘breast is best’ leading to better infant health and cognitive development.

2010s • CLOSER tracks the development of the obesity epidemic – one of the greatest public health concerns of modern times – across five generations.

KEY FINDINGS

Seventy years of discoveries from the UK’s longitudinal studies:

1940s • Poorer mothers in the 1946 cohort receive shorter antenatal supervision and inferior care during delivery than more affluent women. Only one in five mothers in 1946 receives pain relief during childbirth. The 1949 Analgesia in Childbirth Bill is triggered.

1950s • Perinatal mortality rates in the 1958 cohort are highest in mothers who have little or no antenatal care, or are transferred to hospital urgently. Home births all but disappear and more maternity beds become available.

2010s • Understanding Society finds that health behaviours (such as a good diet and physical exercise) are related to happiness in the young.

CLOSER data shows that children born in the 1970s are significantly more likely to experiment with smoking, and more likely to become daily smokers than those from better-off homes.

Longitudinal evidence has shown how environmental influences on our health interact with another ‘condition of birth’ – genes. Studies like the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (ALSPC), and the biomedical elements of other longitudinal studies, have advanced our understanding of genetics and health immeasurably. Longitudinal research has helped to uncover contributing factors towards obesity and common diseases such as eczema, diabetes, cancer and multiple sclerosis.

www.closer.ac.uk

THE PERSISTENCE OF INEQUALITY

Despite hopes that health inequalities would decline with the founding of the National Health Service, evidence from cohort studies points to persistent socioeconomic differences across a wide range of measures of health and wellbeing, including obesity and heart disease.

Longitudinal evidence is not restricted to findings from cohort studies. Understanding Society is an innovative world-leading study about 21st-century UK life and how it is changing. It captures important detail about people’s social and economic circumstances, attitudes, behaviours and health and tracks everyone within a household and is representative of the whole UK population, rather than a specific cohort of people. This gives it considerable scope to add to our understanding of how early circumstances shape later outcomes, and to help measure and understand variations in health and wellbeing. For example, recent research has shown that, despite a significant drop over the last two decades in the number of young people who start smoking, teenagers from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds are twice as likely to experiment with smoking, and more likely to become daily smokers than those from better-off homes.

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FAMILIES COME IN many forms. Some parents are same-sex; others are single by choice. And growing numbers of children are conceived through assistive reproductive technology.

What do these developments mean for the parents and children involved? Are children less likely to thrive in families headed by same-sex parents, single mothers by choice or parents who conceived them using assisted reproductive technologies? Will children born to gay fathers through egg donation and surrogacy be less likely to flourish than children conceived by IVF to genetically related heterosexual parents?

Professor Susan Golombok of the University of Cambridge Centre for Family Research has examined new family forms within a context of four decades of empirical research in her new book Modern Families: Parents and children in new family forms. She found that the growing body of research into the wide range of family forms, undertaken in the UK, USA and around the world shows that it is the quality of relationships that matters most to the wellbeing of families, not the number, gender, sexual orientation or genetic relatedness of the parents, or whether the child was conceived with reproductive technology.

For example, in studies of children born through assisted reproduction, their mothers have consistently been found to show more warmth and emotional involvement, and less parenting stress, than natural conception mothers. A key factor in the positive functioning of children in these new family forms appears to be that they are very wanted as their parents have struggled to have children due to infertility or in the face of social disapproval.

Looking at the issue of surrogacy, although attitudes to it have softened, it remains the most controversial form of assisted reproduction. But studies report that relationships between intended parents and surrogate mothers are generally enduring and positive. And children born through surrogacy sometimes form relationships with the surrogate’s own children.

OPEN COMMUNICATION

Many parents in new family forms fear that telling children about their donor conception will jeopardise the loving relationship that has developed between the child and non-genetic parent. But research has shown that parents who are open with their children when young – before they reach school age – say that their children accept this information and are not distressed by it. Finding out in adolescence or adulthood appears to be more difficult.

Attitudes towards same-sex parent families in the UK have changed enormously. In less than half a century we have moved from a situation in which lesbian mothers were ostracised, and gay men were at risk of imprisonment, to a time where same-sex couples can marry, adopt children jointly, and become the joint legal parents of children born through assisted reproductive technologies.

Today families are both fluid and flexible, and there is more variation within family types than between them. Many of the newer routes helping people to fulfil their desires to have a family are still in their infancy. While progress is never smooth – and innovations in conception are bound to be a matter for public debate – it is important to overcome the misconceptions that new family forms do not benefit the children, or parents, within them.

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GOODBYE ‘GENERATION A’

The Church of England is losing the unique contribution provided by Generation A, the group of Anglican women born in the 1930s and 30s who have provided not only numbers in the congregation but also a kind of labour, leadership and knowledge that has quietly kept churches going. The passing of Generation A signals an inevitable decline of the Church of England and Anglican Communion of the Global North due to Generation A not being able – amid widespread cultural revolutions – to transmit specific skills, beliefs and practices to their ‘baby-boomer’ children and churches.

Priests may need to think quickly about how to replace the kind of leadership provided by Generation A instead of trying to attract young people to the church.

Dr Rose Lindsey
University of Southampton

to Generation A instead

VOLUNTEER VIEWS

Very occasional volunteering is the most common form of volunteering in the UK, according to the first British study to use longitudinal survey data to track volunteering behaviours and attitudes over time. The study shows that more than two-thirds (71 per cent) of British Household Panel/Understanding Society (BHPS/US) survey participants who reported volunteering between 1996 to 2011 did so on only one or two occasions. In contrast, the proportion of volunteers who had undertaken voluntary activity over many of these 15 years was relatively small: less than a third (29 per cent) of those surveyed. These long-term volunteers, however, contributed over half (54 per cent) of the total amount of voluntary activity reported by BHPS/US respondents over time.

Dr Abigail Day, University of Greenwich
Britain is a relative latecomer among affluent countries to offer paid leave for fathers. Britain is a relative latecomer among affluent countries to offer paid leave for fathers. British fathers were only given a legal right to take two weeks’ paid paternity leave after the birth of a child in 2003, several decades after European neighbours.

Maternity leave of 52 weeks remains one of the longest in the world. Under the Children and Families Act 2014, fathers in the UK are now entitled to access any unused maternity leave after two weeks but only at a low flat rate of £138 per week.

Despite the ‘shared parental leave’ spin, this new UK legislation contains no provision to introduce an individual non-transferable paid entitlement to fathers, which is the accepted evidence-based approach to incentivise partners.

Expanding national policies and programmes to promote a stronger engagement of men in family care activities through the life course will help modernise work-family policies to catch up with the changing role of women.

In the 20th century, many post-war public policies created systems and services that assumed a full-time home female carer, supporting a full-time male breadwinner; this is a work and family model that no longer fits the circumstances of 21st-century families.

How can nations engage fathers more closely in family care activities?

**FATHERS’ ACTIVE PARTICIPATION** in family life will likely be one of the most important social developments of the 21st century. Today’s children wish for a relationship with their daddy as a loving father not just a father of duty.

Financial provisioning by fathers is still vital but is not enough: across the world fathers are expected to be accessible and nurturing as well as economically supportive to their children. Images of caring fathers are now part of everyday culture, in advertising and depictions of sporting icons.

In June 2015 a State of the World’s Fathers report was published portraying the landscape of contemporary fatherhood building on the first UN report on this subject in 2011. The Modern Fatherhood project, by researchers from NATCEN Social Research, UCL and UEA, is contributing to this by profiling British fathers at home and at work.

Working conditions, in particular excessive hours, can be a barrier to active fatherhood. In rich-income countries the debate about work and family time in the 1990s was dominated by discussion about a culture of long working hours.

But our research shows that fathers’ working hours have declined over the past decade and more fathers are sharing the breadwinning with their partners in an increasingly diverse set of arrangements – more part-time working by fathers, increased working hours by part-time working mothers.

There is growing evidence that employment-based family support measures, such as maternity and paternity leave after childbirth and parental leave to care for children in the early years, has the potential for improving children’s health. More research is emerging on the benefits of fathers taking parental leave, particularly in the Nordic countries and more recently in Germany, with its parental leave reform of 2007, which created a new incentive for men to take parental leave. In some countries, a section of parental leave during this period is reserved for fathers only and cannot be transferred to mothers, so-called ‘daddy months’ or ‘fathers’ quota’.

Germany’s break away from a leave policy, which tended to encourage mothers to stay out of the labour market for three years after the birth of a child, has had rather dramatic results. The government shortened maternity leave to a highly paid 12-month period and added two highly paid daddy months with a ‘use it or lose it’ design. The Federal Statistics Office shows that the proportion of fathers taking leave has risen significantly from 3.3 per cent in 2006 to 29.3 per cent for children born in the second quarter of 2012.

**Paternity Leave**

Fathers and mothers need explicit nudges to change behaviour and non-transferable well-paid entitlement to fathers increases choice and incentivises fathers.

**By Professor Margaret O’Brien**

Margaret O’Brien is Director of the Thomas Coram Research Unit at UCL IOE.
Our website includes information about who we are and what we do, and a broad mix of news, topical features, case studies and funding opportunities.

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The ESRC is the UK’s largest organisation for funding research on economic and social issues. We support independent, high-quality research that has an impact on business, the public sector and the third sector.
How happy are people in the UK with their quality of life compared to Europeans?

Satisfaction levels were measured for people from the following countries, in the categories shown: EU countries collectively (28 in all), Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland*, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Norway*, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland*, UK

People in the UK seem to have a reasonable level of satisfaction, often above the EU average. But folks in Bulgaria seem generally pretty miserable, while Denmark appears to be the country to head to for maximum satisfaction.

- Unless otherwise indicated, figures are measured on a scale of 1-10, where 1 is negative and 10 is positive.

Overall Life
- Bulgaria (least content) 4.8/10
- EU average 7.1/10
- UK 7.3/10
- Denmark/Finland/Sweden (most content) 9/10

Finances
- Bulgaria (least content) 3.7/10
- EU average 6/10
- UK 6.2/10
- Denmark/Finland/Sweden (most content) 7.6/10

Housing
- Bulgaria (least content) 6/10
- EU average 7.5/10
- UK 7.9/10
- Finland (most content) 8.4/10

Job
- Bulgaria (least content) 6/10
- EU average 7/10
- UK 7.1/10
- Denmark/Finland/Sweden (most content) 8.1/10

Self-Perceived Health
- Share of people rating their health good or very good
- Latvia (least content) 45.4%
- EU average 67.7%
- UK 74.4%
- Ireland (most content) 82.3%

Relationships
- Bulgaria (least content) 5.7/10
- EU average 7.8/10
- UK 8.3/10
- Ireland (most content) 8.6/10

Safety
- Share of people feeling safe when walking alone in the dark
- Lithuania (least content) 9.8%
- EU average 28.4%
- UK 38.3%
- Malta (most content) 66.4%

Trust in the Legal System
- Slovenia (least content) 2.7/10
- EU average 4.6/10
- UK 5.5/10
- Denmark (most content) 7.5/10

Sources: Quality of Life Survey, ec.europa.eu/eurostat
www.rightmove.co.uk *Non-EU countries