

ESRC Longitudinal Studies Review 2017

Further analysis of responses to the consultation

Paper 2:

The policy relevance of longitudinal studies – contributions and barriers

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The views represented in this report are from those who responded to the consultation and do not represent the views of ESRC



Introduction

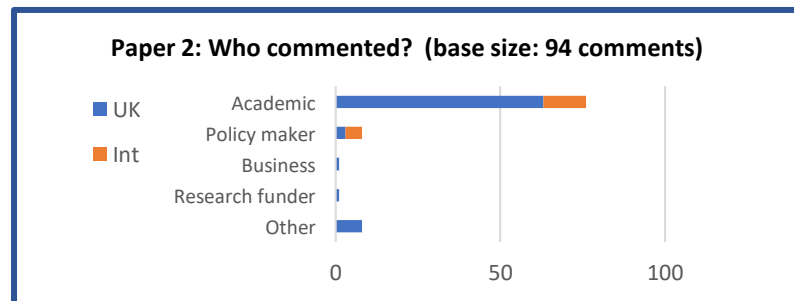
The ESRC Longitudinal Studies Review 2017 is exploring the current and future scientific and policy-relevant need for longitudinal research resources. The review started in October 2016 and will report to ESRC Council early in 2018.

An open online consultation in autumn 2016 sought input broadly, resulting in 637 completed responses from UK (83.4%) and international (16.6%) respondents. Respondents were predominantly from the academic sector (80%) as well as government, civil society and business sectors (20%).

The main findings of the consultation were published in December 2016 in an [initial report](#). This report is supplemented by short briefing papers that examine key themes from the consultation data in more detail.

Paper 2: The policy relevance of longitudinal studies

This paper examines the policy relevance of longitudinal studies, as evidenced by policy-related comments and suggestions across all respondents (n=637) to the consultation. A wildcard search was run using the string polic*, which identified 94 comments with some connection to policy issues, which were analysed qualitatively to draw out key themes and topics.



“Longitudinal surveys are essential to tackling many important policy questions. Repeated cross-sectional surveys are not satisfactory.” (ID 620)

“Research from these longitudinal studies offers an empirical basis from which policy makers can form opinions, develop policies and implement change in society.” (ID 446)

“Identifying causal effect is very important for policy and social research. Longitudinal surveys have the advantage of providing data from the different stages of a person's life.” (ID 221)

Respondents’ policy-related comments were grouped under three main themes:

- > What contributions are longitudinal studies making to policy?
- > Areas of continued policy relevance
- > Barriers to using longitudinal data to inform policy.

What contributions are longitudinal studies making to policy?

Comments from respondents highlighted the immense value of longitudinal studies to framing, developing and evaluating policy, particularly in terms of:

- > Tracking the effects of social and technological change over time
- > Understanding the long-term effects of lifecourse factors and exposures
- > Providing nationally-representative and trusted longitudinal data on the experiences of successive cohorts
- > Helping to understand causation
- > Tracking, measuring and comparing the impact of policy and social change on individuals, families, communities and countries, for example the effects of devolution.

Respondents valued the robustness, richness and quality of the current longitudinal studies, and a few people gave specific examples of areas where longitudinal data have had demonstrable effects on the framing or development of political debates and questions:

- > Improved understanding of the long-term effects of unemployment on health, income, social mobility, poverty and social care
- > Better understanding leading to policy debate on inter-generational inequality in earning, assets, debt and access to affordable housing
- > Policy initiatives to support greater social mobility
- > Helped to inform policy debate and development of better support for 'challenging families'.

Others noted more generally that insights from longitudinal studies have contributed to policy developments and debates in many other key areas:

- > Child development and early years' education
- > Pregnancy and parenting
- > Schooling and educational choices and attainment
- > Employment and skills (including skills gaps)
- > Social determinants of health and disability
- > Impact of compression of morbidity including on work and health.

Areas of continued policy-relevance

Many respondents commented that continued use of longitudinal data will be needed to inform on-going debates in key policy areas including:

- > Social and political attitudes and values (including discriminatory attitudes) and how these change over time, between generations and in response to social change

- > Extended labour market participation, including impact on physical health, mental health and well-being
- > Cross-national research, including devolved administrations
- > Inter-generational and socio-economic inequality and the need for continued evaluation, monitoring and forecasting
- > Changing conception of 'family', including families where children do not live with two parents
- > Long-term outcomes of alcohol and drug use
- > Mental health, including drivers, consequences, impact and treatment
- > Impact of policies on individuals, families, communities and wider groups, including evaluation of natural policy 'experiments', such as Brexit, devolution, universal credit, and the phonics screening check.

"There are many claims of increasing disadvantage of younger generations compared with their parents' generations. The UK longitudinal studies provide a unique set of resources to evaluate this, monitor how far disadvantages continue to accumulate, forecast future effects on life chances and identify possible policy levers to mitigate these effects." (ID 54)

"Longitudinal studies offer a unique opportunity to explore the causal processes that underlie the joint progress of morbidity and mortality in the UK to identify policy modifiable factors ... to inform interventions ...and offset the effects of population ageing." (ID 81)

"From my own lengthy experience working as a social scientist within government it is clear to me that, without these studies, the development of policies in key areas ... would have been less focused and based on much weaker evidence with an inadequate understanding of both causation and longer term effects." (ID 13)

Barriers to using longitudinal data to inform policy

Respondents also identified a number of barriers to using longitudinal data to inform policy. These included:

- > Lack of a new birth cohort and therefore a lengthy and ever-growing data gap on life course trajectories of those born after the MCS cohort
- > Under-investment in data dissemination and opportunities for policy impact - longitudinal studies are perceived as an 'untapped resource'
- > A need for information that is more readily interpretable, alongside more trained analysts to exploit the potential of the data
- > The time between waves may be too long to be useful in many policy-making contexts – there is a need for a quicker response from cohort studies and some people suggested a web-based panel may provide a solution when quick answers to key political questions are needed
- > Some cohort studies lack substantive data on objective health measures which are a vital resource for understanding health inequalities and the impact of social factors on health
- > The recognition that linkage to administrative data is an enhancement not a replacement for data from longitudinal studies – data linkage may provide swift and cost-effective insights, but many logistical and data-quality issues limit its usefulness for informing policy.

There were several suggestions that the UK might benefit from sharing learning with the international longitudinal studies community since some of these barriers have already been tackled by researchers elsewhere.

"Many political phenomena are much faster-changing than for example changes in family structures or labour market participation. It is hence of great advantage to study political issues in a panel study that would allow for shorter intervals between waves (e.g. months). With the datasets that are currently available it is not possible to study many important political issues of public interest." (ID 245)

"Social inequalities in health are large, have persisted across time, and reducing them is an aim of health policy makers... yet objective measures are scarcely available in existing birth cohorts initiated in 1958, 1970, and 2000/1 (ESRC funded), compared with the MRC-funded 1946 cohort. This greatly impairs our understanding of these processes." (ID 98)

"There is a gap in expertise/research capacity between those who develop and those who apply new methods. This gap is important because it can mean the difference between information that is more readily interpretable (and thereby relevant to policy) and that which is not (often the case if purely methodological considerations are employed)." (ID 68)

"The need for longitudinal data on generations born in the 21st century becomes ever more pressing. Child and adult life courses are changing rapidly - and are becoming more unequal - yet we lack the sequence of cohort studies (1946, 1958, 1970, 2000/01) on which science and evidence-informed policy has previously relied." (ID 270)