



Summary of the impact longitudinal surveys have on policy

The MYWEB project is assessing the feasibility of a European Longitudinal Study for Children and Young People (ELSCYP). This paper discusses the impact longitudinal surveys can have on policy.

“When people ask me, ‘does social science evidence ever change policy?’ a particular incident springs to mind. In the context of a broad-ranging discussion on education and skills, with a thick set of analytical material in front of us, one of the Ministers present tore out one of the Strategy Unit’s slides and – leaning forward to put it in front of the Prime Minister declared ‘...but what are we going to do about *this*?’ The slide – now well-known and based on longitudinal data – showed how the cognitive ability of bright children from poor backgrounds appeared to be overtaken by that of much less able children from affluent backgrounds long before they had even entered school. Within a year more than £500m was assigned to build a programme of pre-school provision for the UK.” (Halpern 2008)

1. Introduction

Surveys collect data about the economic, social, political, and cultural shape of a country. Policy makers can use this information to make informed decisions about future policies and evaluate the effectiveness of past or current policies.

Surveys can be divided in two main types: cross-sectional and longitudinal. The key difference is that cross-sectional surveys occur once whereas longitudinal surveys take place on multiple occasions over time (Lynn, 2009: 1). Cross-sectional surveys tell us how people live and what people are thinking or doing at one point in time. Repeating the same measures among the same group of respondents over a long period of time offers insights into how respondents socio-economic situation, health but also their views and attitudes and behaviour developed (Buck 2008). Longitudinal Studies thus help researchers to understand change and stability at the level of the individual, rather than for the population as a whole (Buck 2008).

In this briefing we discuss how longitudinal surveys can impact on policy. More specifically we look at how a European Longitudinal Study for Children and Young People can be used to:

- monitor wellbeing;
- study the evolution of wellbeing; and
- evaluate national policy.

2. Monitoring wellbeing

Currently wellbeing is often monitored both nationally and internationally using high level social indicators. Longitudinal surveys provide an alternative method of monitoring wellbeing.

Social Indicators and their limitations

Social indicators initially focused on measurement and trends in child well-being primarily using ‘survival indicators’ (Ben-Arieh, 2008) such as rates of mortality, disease, and social problems affecting children (e.g. illiteracy, school failure). Major work informed by this approach is OECD research on the comparison of child well-being across its 30 member countries



(Chapple and Richardson 2009) and UNICEF publications (2007).

Most help to understand children and young people's well-being at the objective macro level. While such indicators are important to begin to redress issues of inequality and social exclusion that negatively affect children's health and wellbeing, they provide only limited insight into social change over time and the causes of change. They also tend to ignore the potential, attributes and strengths of children and it can be argued they treat children as 'passive agents not capable of evaluating their own lives'.

Self-report surveys

An alternative to the use of social indicators is self-report surveys. A number of surveys collect self-reported data on children and young peoples' wellbeing:

- The international Health Behaviour in School-aged Children survey covers a number of key areas of young people's health and well-being with 43 countries involved in the latest wave of the survey in 2009/10.
- Some large longitudinal social surveys have begun to incorporate self-report instruments for young people. For example, two household panel surveys [the European Social Survey (ESS) and the European Quality of Life Survey (EQLS)] included some questions on well-being and its various domains for young people in various age groups. For a full review of these surveys, see Richardson (2012).
- Some national, longitudinal surveys have included questions on wellbeing. For example, the UK Household Longitudinal Study, previously known as The British Household Panel Survey, has a youth questionnaire for young people aged 11 to 15 about their happiness, feeling troubled and self-esteem.

There are several advantages to surveys of self-reported well-being:

- international surveys among children and young people provide precious comparable data on child well-being covering countries in the EU and beyond.
- household panel surveys provide new opportunities to explore the effect of changes in young people's lives on their overall well-being.

However, the concepts and domains of well-being used in these surveys were developed primarily from concepts which originated from the study of adult well-being. Moreover, as Bradshaw (2009) argues, most of these studies include only a limited number of well-being domains and therefore do not provide the full picture on the state of well-being for children and young people.

Recently, some child and young people centric well-being studies have been undertaken including the 2005 survey in the UK undertaken by The Children's Society. This approach has been taken further by an international group of researchers linked to the International Society for Child Indicators. They have developed Children's World, an international survey in 12 countries on children's subjective well-being. However, these two surveys are cross-sectional, not longitudinal and therefore are not suitable for monitoring and evaluation.

3. Study the evolution of wellbeing over time

Longitudinal surveys can help us understand transitions in peoples' lives and patterns of change over time.

Transitions: Longitudinal surveys are well suited to studying important transitions in the life cycle (for instance the step from education to the labour market), interruptions and trauma (break up the family unit) as well as turning points that might contribute to the understanding of well-



being. Longitudinal surveys gather “much longer continuous histories of events and transitions (...) than could be collected retrospectively in a single interview” (Lynn, 2009: 6). The data collected can also be more accurate than data gathered during a single interview, which relies on memories subject to recall errors. Furthermore, longitudinal surveys have the unique advantage of being able to compile unbiased information about expectations that can be analysed against measures of outcomes collected at a later stage.

Patterns of change over time: Longitudinal surveys allow for the measure of stability or instability and the identification of causal relationships (Blossfeld and Rohwer 1997). Individual-level change can only be understood in the context of changes taking place over a considerable amount of time. This type of analysis enables researchers to identify patterns of change (e.g. steady growth, fluctuation around a low level, sudden decline followed by stability) (Lynn, 2009). For example, if the proportion of children and young people satisfied with their life is relatively stable over time there might be many of them starting to feel satisfied with their lives while others are not satisfied anymore. A small proportion of children and young people might be satisfied with their lives on a continuous basis, while the majority show strong variations in time. This insight provides greater information about the dynamics and the factors associated with children and young people being satisfied with their lives.

A comparative longitudinal survey of child wellbeing offers policy-makers at a European and Member State level a number of new possibilities for policy formulation. A practical example of data from a longitudinal survey changing our understanding of a social issue and impacting policy responses is the role of the British Household Panel Survey in understanding the dynamics of poverty.

Jenkins (2008) recounts how, in the 1990s inequality and poverty rates flattened off and it appeared that there was little or no change in the income distribution from one year to the next. However, the British Household Panel Survey revealed that apparent cross-sectional stability hid longitudinal flux – households’ incomes fluctuate between one year and the next, and there was substantial turnover in the membership of the low income population. Jenkins goes on to demonstrate how these findings influenced policy including much of the emphasis in the Labour government’s welfare reforms from the late 1990s that reflected a dynamic perspective with a focus on moving people into work and making work pay.

4. Evaluating policy

Longitudinal studies can be viewed as a form of quasi experimental evaluation design (ISER 2002). Although they do not involve the allocation of individuals to treatment or control the temporal sequencing of longitudinal data offers a means of controlling for the effects of independent variables (*ibid.*). In this sense longitudinal studies provide an evaluation design akin to an interrupted time series. As ISER (2002) note, we can at least say with certainty from the statistical analysis of biographies what events preceded others, even though we still have problems in deciding which event in relation to another event was the underlying cause.

An example cited by ISER (2002) that illustrates the use of birth cohort survey data in the evaluation of policy comes from the UK where returns to qualifications and returns to education more generally have been understood using longitudinal data. Outcomes in adulthood such as occupation and earnings are set against qualifications, taking account of ability as tested in childhood and numerous other circumstances and experiences earlier in life which might be confounded with them. ISER (2002) concludes



that “Statistical modeling of this kind, is not a perfect substitute for the controls offered in randomized experiments, but goes some of the way to producing the most plausible accounts of micro economic processes.”

5. Conclusion

While insights from longitudinal surveys have much to offer to policy it is worth noting that different designs will be associated with answering different research and policy questions.

Birth cohort studies allow researchers to chart the development of the human life course. As ISER (2002) notes, the data collected for any single birth cohort confounds age, period and cohort effects at any particular point in time. In addition, comparison of more than one cohort enables the researcher to hold constant one of these three ‘extrinsic’ factors, for example, comparing cohorts at a given age to establish a cohort effect or cohorts at the same age at different times to establish a period effect. The data can then be used *prospectively* to make predictions about the outcomes of particular circumstances and experiences in life occurring at particular points in time or *retrospectively* to identify the circumstances and experiences in earlier life that underpin a given outcome later (ISER 2002).

Household panel surveys sample the whole population rather than single years of age with the aim of understanding the dynamics of change of the whole population, and its evolution over the lifetime of the study (ISER 2002). These surveys usually follow all the people living in the sample household, not just a reference individual. The origin of household panel studies was in the need to explore the dynamics of poverty and income and an understanding that these could not be explored through separate snapshots, but rather required an approach to collecting a continuous record about income in particular

(*ibid.*). However, the household panel survey is also particularly suited to the analysis of the dynamics of household formation and dissolution, and associated events and outcomes (*ibid.*).

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