



EUROPEAN

# POLICY BRIEF

## MYWEB: MEASURING YOUTH WELL BEING



### THE BENEFITS OF EUROPE WIDE LONGITUDINAL DATA TO THE UNITED KINGDOM

This policy brief of the Framework 7 Programme MYWeB project involving partners in 11 countries highlights the benefits of Europe wide longitudinal data to the United Kingdom.

**Ongoing project**

**Commenced March 2014**

**DATE June 2016**

#### SUMMARY

The United Kingdom has long been a leader in the development of longitudinal social surveys. With the existence of a range of cohort studies and panel surveys, policy makers and academics in the UK have benefited from high quality evidence, which details the lives of people and families and their social circumstances. The investment in longitudinal survey data in the UK is manifestly high and demonstrates a firm commitment to collecting such data. This is matched by a belief that longitudinal data is superior to cross-sectional data when analysing social changes at the individual and family level. On the basis of the research conducted, we recommend that, in order to strengthen the case for a Europe wide (or even international) longitudinal survey of children and young people's well-being, a series of pilots be commissioned to undertake an accelerated cohort survey in a range of countries with different capacities, but including the UK and Germany who currently have the most experience in this field.

#### INTRODUCTION

MYWEB is a project funded by the European Union, which looks at the feasibility of beginning a European Longitudinal Study for Children and Young People (ELSCYP) to collect data on their well-being. Fourteen universities and research organisations in eleven European countries are working together to identify the information that is already available, the policy priorities for children and young people's well-being and the concrete challenges of realising such a large study.

We are particularly interested in:

- both objective and subjective measures of well-being
- measures of health, welfare, and poverty
- family experiences, including parental family dissolution and reformation and the effects on children
- educational and housing experiences and trajectories
- the transition from school to work
- young people's relationship formation (and dissolution)
- mapping the ongoing experiences and dynamics of the development of friendship circles
- organisational participation, civic and leisure activities
- capturing the experiences of the most vulnerable groups in society

The project involves different components providing a thorough and rounded view of the information that is required to inform policies across Europe in order to promote the well-being of children and young people. The project includes:

- Asking young people about their own interpretations of different aspects of well-being. Young people also contribute to the development of research instruments and decisions about appropriate ways of data collection.
- A wide array of experts in government, NGOs, academia, practice, in determining a suitable strategy to collect and use data on well-being.
- Identification of currently available data sources.
- Evaluating a suitable survey methodology.
- A cost-benefit analysis of an ELSCYP.

This Policy Brief summarises the existing data sources that provide longitudinal data on children and young people's well-being in the UK. In addition, it reports findings from the Delphi survey and the options appraisal exercise, which highlight the appetite for and potential design of a new Europe wide survey that would complement and enhance current provision.

## EVIDENCE AND ANALYSIS

The United Kingdom has long been a leader in the development of longitudinal social surveys. With the existence of a range of cohort studies and panel surveys, policy makers and academics in the UK have benefited from high quality evidence, which details the lives of people and families and their social circumstances.

**Table 1: Major UK longitudinal surveys**

Survey	Year started	Sample details	Survey type
National Child Development Survey (NCDS)	1958	17,000 children born in England, Scotland and Wales in a single week	Birth cohort, data collection at age 7 11 16 23 33 42 46 50 55
British Cohort Survey (BCS)	1970	17,000 children born in England, Scotland and Wales in a single week	Birth cohort, data collection at age 5 10 16 26 30 34 38 42
Avon Longitudinal Survey of Parents And Children (ALSPAC)	1991	14,500 families in the Bristol area of the UK	Birth cohort, data collected at 68 points between birth and age 18
British Household Panel Survey (BHPS)	1992	5,500 households in Britain. From 1996 the British Youth Panel included 11-15 year olds from the BHPS sample.	Household panel survey, data collected annually until 2008 when US began
Millennium Cohort Survey (MCS)	2000	19,000 children born in the UK	Birth cohort, data collected at nine months, 3 5 7 11

Next Steps (Longitudinal Study of Young People in England)	2004	16,000 age 13/14 from state and independent schools throughout England	School cohort of year 9 pupils, surveyed annually until 2010, since then less frequently
Growing Up in Scotland (GUS)	2005	Three samples: child cohort (3,000) born 2002, birth cohort 1 (5,000) born 2005, birth cohort 2 (6,000) born 2010	Accelerated cohort survey. data collected annually for child cohort and birth cohort 1, biennially for birth cohort 2
Understanding Society (UK Household Longitudinal Study UKHLS)	2009	40,000 households in the UK, includes household members aged 10-15	Household panel survey, data collected annually on a rotating two-year cycle

The investment in longitudinal survey data in the UK is manifestly high and demonstrates a firm commitment to collecting such data. This is matched by a belief that longitudinal data is superior to cross-sectional data when analysing social changes at the individual and family level.

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.

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.”

Finally, a recent analysis of evidence based policy has highlighted the importance of longitudinal survey data in contributing to the development of child well-being policies through the evidence base of an on-line tool, which allows policy makers to examine the likely impact of alternative policy interventions (Breckon and Dodson, 2016).

An exhaustive selection exercise was undertaken by the project team in conjunction with the Delphi participants to consider all options to use/collect data on children and young people’s well-being from doing nothing, through using administrative data to completely new Europe wide surveys as shown in figure 1.

**Figure 1: Options considered to use/collect data on children and young people’s well-being**

- 0. No change**
- 1. Administrative data**
  - 1.1 Making better use of existing data – Meta analysis
  - 1.2 Standardising indicators / definitions across countries
  - 1.3 Filling gaps in existing data
- 2. Cross-sectional survey**
- 3. Longitudinal survey**
  - 3.1 Cohort survey
    - 3.1.1 New pan-European birth cohort
    - 3.1.2 New limited birth cohort
    - 3.1.3 New cohort study linked to administrative data
  - 3.2 Panel survey
    - 3.2.1 New panel survey
    - 3.2.2 New limited panel survey
    - 3.2.3 Panel based on an existing cross-sectional survey
    - 3.2.4 Panel linked to administrative data

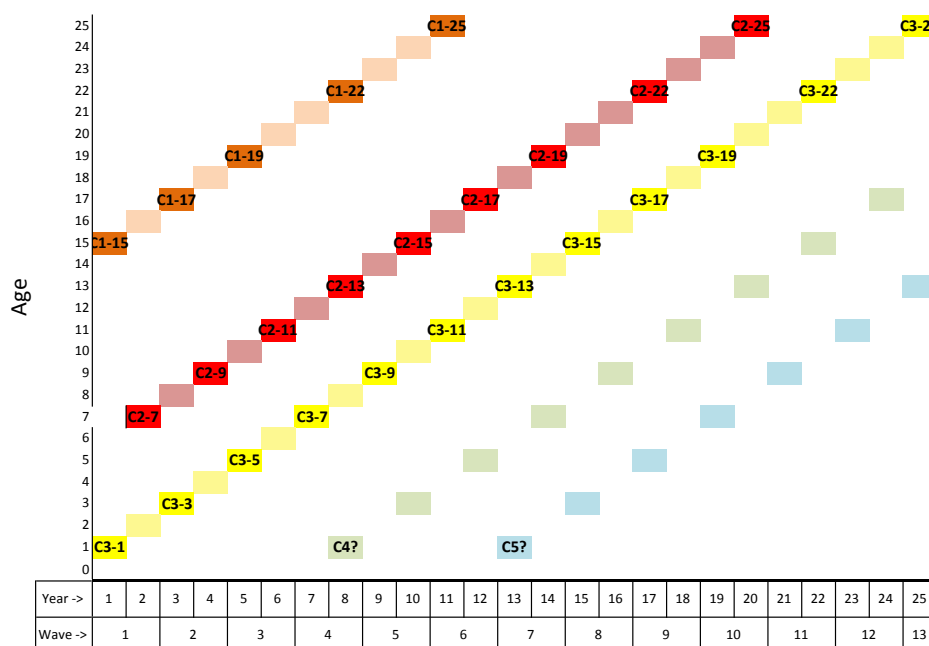
The option that commanded the broadest support was a new, pan-European ‘accelerated’ birth cohort survey with a series of age specific cohorts from birth to 25 based on nationally representative samples in each member state. Currently, in the UK the Growing up in Scotland survey is the closest equivalent to such a survey.

Options	National survey	Local survey
Single birth cohort	MCS, BCS NCDS	ALSPAC
Accelerated birth cohort	GUS	

**A national sample accelerated cohort survey**

This, in essence, a series of national birth cohorts rolled out in parallel on different age cohorts. In this sense they are independent surveys as there are different sampling designs and different survey instruments. What unites them is a common purpose – to study a single set of phenomena for a range of age cohorts as each cohort gets older.

**Figure 2: Accelerated cohort survey: phased design**



### *Advantages*

Longitudinal cohort development analysis facilitates analysis of age, period and cohort. The parallel cohorts allow a comparison of different cohorts from the outset. This is not truly longitudinal, but contributes to early analysis of age effects. Using a range of cohorts does not fix the survey to a single point in history, which gives partial control over acute period effects.

Feedback to children and young people could include a temporal dimension (i.e. how are the young people two years older than me doing?) It would also engage with the same children and young people who do not currently feel that their voice is heard in society. Children and young people are interested in hearing about how the research influences policy.

Policy relevant information is generated across several cohorts of young people and enables policy makers to compare life cycle changes and policy impact across different cohorts within waves and, as time progresses, same age cohorts across time. The survey helps to identify transition and intervention points and may make policy design more efficient and interventions more effective. The wealth and complexity of data allows researchers to make multidimensional comparisons and enables macro-level programme process evaluation and policy adjustment for subsequent waves. Overall policy effort and effort in specific policy areas (education, child care provision, family welfare etc.) can be compared across different regions in EU member states.

- Creates policy relevant data for several cohorts starting from the first wave.
- Enables the identification of transition periods and turning points relevant to policy
- Helps to detect important periods for policy intervention
- Allows finding high impact policy areas (for instance education, family unit etc.)
- Enables policy impact evaluation
- Macro and micro level programme process evaluation
- Policy adjustment and impact evaluation for subsequent cohorts
- Enables medium term cost savings
- National level policy evaluation and EU level comparison (assuming Europe wide)

### *Disadvantages*

An accelerated birth cohort survey introduces operational complexity, much of which is frontloaded.

## **POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The UK benefits from a broad range of longitudinal surveys, which include children and young people. There has been considerable investment in such surveys since the 1940s. On-going surveys, such as the ALSPAC, Millennium Cohort Survey (MCS) and Understanding Society (US) ensure that it is possible to carry out secondary analysis in order to examine individual and family trajectories. Each data source contains particular strengths in terms of the analysis that can be conducted and the consequent policy areas that can be contributed to. One important question is the extent to which the UK needs to be involved in a Europe wide survey of children and young people's well-being given that there is so much data already available. The answer to this, however, lies in the power of comparative research and the potential for learning from policy interventions in different national contexts. A common methodology in different countries would facilitate such comparisons. Further, a common methodology and design would ensure that

comparative analysis would be robust from the outset rather than undertaken post hoc with the necessary caveats, which result from comparing surveys that were never intended for that purpose.

Our work has shown the desirability, feasibility and direct policy benefits of an accelerated cohort survey of children and young people's well-being. The practical steps required to undertake such a survey more broadly than in one country requires further proof of concept. There are precedents for this in regard to: the European Social Survey (for comparative cross-sectional), the Gender and Generations Programme (a longitudinal survey currently including ten countries), the SHARE survey (a longitudinal survey of older people in 20 European countries). We recommend that, in order to strengthen the case for a Europe wide (or even international) longitudinal survey of children and young people's well-being, a series of pilots be commissioned in a range of countries with different capacities, but including the UK and Germany who currently have the most experience in this field.

## RESEARCH PARAMETERS

As part of the MYWEB project there was a systematic collection and comparison of surveys undertaken. The work involved collecting methodological, technical, policy and academic information about a wide range of surveys, which included some information relevant to the well-being of children and / or young people. The work collated information the world over, but we only report on UK data here. In addition, we undertook a Delphi survey of experts from across Europe. Between October 2014 and February 2015, three questionnaires were issued to 334 panellist identified as experts in the fields of survey methodology, children and youth, well-being, and policy. Response rate were very good, ranging from 75% in the first questionnaire, to 58.9% in the second, and 61.7% in the third.

## PROJECT IDENTITY

**PROJECT NAME** Measuring Youth Well Being (MYWEB)

**COORDINATOR** Professor Gary Pollock, Manchester Metropolitan University.  
[G.pollock@mmu.ac.uk](mailto:G.pollock@mmu.ac.uk)

**CONSORTIUM** *Manchester Metropolitan University, UK*  
*University of Bremen, Germany*  
*Pompeu Fabra University, Spain*  
*Ivo Pilar Institute, Croatia*  
*University of Debrecen, Hungary*  
*Daugavpils University, Latvia*  
*Panteion University, Greece*  
*Tallinn University, Estonia*  
*University of SS Cyril and Methodius, Slovakia*  
*University of Lisbon, Portugal*  
*Caucasus Research Resource Centres, Georgia*  
*University of Essex, UK*  
*University of Cambridge, UK*  
*Catalan Youth Agency, Spain*

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30 months

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**BUDGET**

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**WEBSITE**

[www.fp7-myweb.eu](http://www.fp7-myweb.eu)

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**FOR MORE  
INFORMATION**

Contact: Gary Pollock, [g.pollock@mmu.ac.uk](mailto:g.pollock@mmu.ac.uk)

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**FURTHER READING**

Breckon, J. and Dodson, J. (2016) Using Evidence: What works? A discussion paper, Alliance for Useful Evidence.

<http://www.alliance4usefulevidence.org/assets/Alliance-Policy-Using-evidence-v4.pdf>

Goswami, H., Fox, C, and Pollock, G. (2015) 'The current evidence base and future needs in improving children's well-being across Europe: is there a case for a comparative longitudinal survey?', *Journal of Child Indicators Research* DOI 10.1007/s12187-015-9323-5.

ISER (2002) National Strategy for Longitudinal Studies, Essex: ISER.

Jenkins, S. (2008) 'Income and poverty: the rubber band theory' in *In Praise of Panel Surveys*, Colchester: University of Essex.

MYWEB DELPHI survey briefing: <http://fp7-myweb.eu/delphisurvey.html>