



# The impact of longitudinal research

## The policy impact of the Millennium Cohort Study

### The MCS at glance:

#### Millennium Cohort Study

is based at the Institute of Education and managed by the Centre for Longitudinal Studies (CLS) at University College London (UCL).

**Funding:** The MCS is funded by Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and a consortium of government departments.

**Duration:** 2001-Present

**UK is a world leader in longitudinal studies, with many decades of investments in a range of different surveys** (Davis-Kean et al, 2017), and UK birth cohort studies set the standards by which similar surveys are conducted internationally.

The Millennium Cohort Study findings have directly led to changes in healthcare policies, and been referred to in numerous policy documents, both by the U.K. government and global organisations.

### Breastfeeding

The MCS data have shown that breastfeeding has protective effects against diarrhea and respiratory infections.

The **Department of Health** refers to the study findings in the introduction of its guideline on local breastfeeding support services. **National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE), British Dietetic Association, and National Childbirth Trust** also frequently cite the findings in their guidelines.

The **UK UNICEF's** flagship publication on breastfeeding has cited the findings extensively to provide empirical evidence and rationale for the implementation of the Baby Friendly Initiative Standards by **UNICEF and WHO in 134 countries**.

### Obesity

In response to the MCS findings of alarming rates of childhood obesity in Wales, the **Assembly Government in Cardiff** launched the *All Wales obesity pathway paper*. **Local Health Boards in Wales** now use the pathway paper as a benchmark and tool to monitor and evaluate the current implementation (Welsh Government, 2016).

### Immunisation

Data from the MCS in 2004 showed that 12% of MCS children were unimmunized against measles, mumps and rubella – 6% of them did not receive any immunization and 6% received one vaccine separately. Researchers at the University of College London have suggested tailored interventions to improve complete vaccine uptake. **NICE's 2009 guidelines for the National Health Services** have referred to these recommendations (UCL, 2014).



# The wider impact of the Millennium Cohort Study

**The Millennium Cohort Study** is one of the three cohort studies at the Centre for Longitudinal Studies at UCL (alongside the 1958 National Child Development Study and 1970 British Cohort Study). Together these studies have provided data for **over 4,000 publications** that have generated insights into how health, education, and family backgrounds of children have lasting impacts on later-life outcomes. The study has been and certainly continues shaping public health policy and influencing policy thinking and public debate on poverty, social mobility and child development.

## Knowledge and Insight

- MCS data were used to **evaluate two major national programmes**, the Children's Fund and Sure Start (IoE, 2010).
- The Millennium Cohort Study has served as a **model for longitudinal cohort studies** in other countries, contributing to academic knowledge on survey methodology and inspiring similar studies in New Zealand, France and Ireland.
- The CLS has recognised the value of media coverage and therefore the MCS findings have become a part of a **public debate**, which has helped to **demonstrate the value of longitudinal data to policy makers**.



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“[W]hen you read stories about how effective early intervention actually is or about the effects on a child of different patterns of parental work, they are likely to draw on analysis of the millennium birth cohort”

**David Willetts,**  
then Minister of State for  
Universities and Science  
(quoted in UCL, 2014)

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# The Millennium Cohort Study

## “The primary aims of the MCS are to:

- collect detailed longitudinal information on the early life circumstances of the children of the new century
- trace links to later outcomes and achievements
- generate insights that will help to improve the health, development and wellbeing of individuals in future generations.”

(IoE, 2011)

## The Millennium Cohort Study is a benchmark for birth cohort studies globally. It has been following the lives of over 19,000 children born in the United Kingdom in years 2000 and 2001.

The children have been surveyed at ages of 9 months, 3, 5, 7, 11, 14 and 17 years and the survey intends to follow them into adulthood. It is the first longitudinal study to include all four countries of the United Kingdom. It covers diverse topic ranging from child and parental health, ethnicity, income, education and school choice to child behaviour, cognitive development and social capital.

### Key findings from the studies using MCS data include:

- Breastfeeding protects against infant hospitalisation for diarrhoea and respiratory tract infections and was associated with lower prevalence of overweight at 3 and higher cognitive scores at 3 and 5;
- Children from disadvantage backgrounds and minority ethnic families were educationally up to a year behind their most privileged peers already by age 3;
- At 14, children of mothers who had a degree were less likely to be overweight than the children of mothers with a low level of education;
- The level of vocabulary among 14-year-olds was higher among those who read for pleasure and those growing up in a home rich in books.

### Links between cultural factors and higher vocabulary scores for teenagers



**Figure 1.** Centre for Longitudinal Studies (2017, 20 November). *MCS Age 14 initial findings – Links between cultural factors and higher vocabulary scores for teenager* [digital image]. Retrieved from: [link](#)

## Research references

Davis-Kean, P., Chambers, R., Davidson, L., Kleinert, C., Ren, Q. & Tang, S. (2017). *Longitudinal studies strategic review*, Economic and Social Research Council. UK: London

IoE (2010). *Case study on the impact of IoE research: The British birth cohort studies*, Institute of Education, University College London. UK: London

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Johnson, S. & Antill, M. (2011). *Impact Evaluation of the Millennium Cohort Study*, Economic and Social Research Council. UK: London

UCL (2014, 12 December). *Millennium Cohort Study: building a picture of a new generation*, University College London. Retrieved from: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/impact/case-studies/2014/dec/millennium-cohort-study-building-picture-new-generation>

Welsh Government (2016). *All Wales obesity pathway*, p.1.

# EuroCohort is a proposed European longitudinal survey of children and young people's wellbeing.

## Growing Up in Europe: EuroCohort

**EuroCohort** will directly benefit children and young people by collecting both objective and subjective wellbeing measures which will be used to ensure that social policies are evidence based. Major themes covered in the survey include: *Inequality, Learning, Digital Life and Lifestyle*.

The survey is currently being developed through the European Cohort Development Project (ECDP), led by the Policy Evaluation and Research Unit at Manchester Metropolitan University in the UK.

**Funding:** The study is funded under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 7770449.

**The aim of EuroCohort is to provide deep, insightful, comparative and longitudinal data on the wellbeing experiences of children and young people across Europe. By doing so, researchers, governments and others might better understand – and take steps to improve – youth's life chances, outlook, happiness and wellbeing.**

## The Potential Impact of EuroCohort

To understand whether and how EuroCohort might have such impact, researchers from Manchester Metropolitan and University of Bologna (UNIBO) have developed a series of impact case studies. These examine the policy impacts that other longitudinal surveys have delivered.

These impact case studies explore how and in what ways these studies have effected government policies, by asking three important question:

- *How did the survey affect policy?* Did survey analysis directly lead to new or changed policies? Did it contribute to wider discussions on the need for policy change?
- *What type of knowledge or insight did the survey provide?* Did the survey provide insight into social problems? Of what policy interventions worked and did not work? Of how to make policies more effective?
- *Was the policy effective?* Is there any evaluation or other research evidence that the policy was effective and had a positive effect in the ways intended?

