

# Evidence briefing: longitudinal studies

## Health and wellbeing

This research briefing highlights the use of longitudinal data in informing and shaping policies relating to health and wellbeing.

### Longitudinal data enable us to

- Study wellbeing and health in a wider context of related factors, including income, job and school satisfaction, family circumstances and life events
- Examine individual behaviour and outcomes in the household, in relationships between parent and children, couples and siblings – increasing understanding of how one person's circumstance impacts on others
- Observe multiple generations, allowing examination of long-term transmission processes and social mobility
- Analyse dynamics - how we respond and adapt to life events and shocks over time
- Follow the development of health and ageing across the life course, within and across generations.

### Policy use

- Maturing birth cohorts and historical cohorts provide growing evidence that early life factors and factors acting across life shape health risks, and have been influential for early intervention policies seeking to address health issues early in life,



- Adult cohort studies have identified key biological, behavioural and environmental determinants of health risks, such as the link between smoking and lung cancer, lipids and coronary artery disease, and the adverse health outcomes of social and economic inequality.

These findings have led to considerable impact on patient care and public health policy, supporting interventions at key biological and social transitions.

## What are longitudinal studies?

A longitudinal study tracks a sample of people over long periods of time - often many decades - in order to reveal developmental trends across generations. By repeatedly observing the same variables, such as income, health or employment, these surveys provide invaluable data for research on a range of issues, their causes, and the effectiveness of different policies.

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## Case: The Marmot Review

In February 2010, the Marmot Review Team published *Fair Society, Healthy Lives*. This report was the culmination of the Strategic Review of Health Inequalities, which Professor Sir Michael Marmot was asked to chair by the Secretary of State for Health.

The review proposed the most effective evidence-based strategies for reducing health inequalities in England from 2010. Drawing heavily on evidence from all three birth cohort studies, it showed marked differences in children's development between rich and poor areas of England.

The report argues that, traditionally, government policies have focused resources only on some segments of society. To improve health for all of us and to reduce unfair health

inequalities, action is needed across the social gradient.

The Marmot Review has informed the Office for National Statistics' Measuring National Well-being Programme, launched in November 2010. This initiative aims to develop new measures for national wellbeing, to complement existing measures of economic performance as an indicator of the state of society.

The review is referenced in the ONS report *Measuring national well-being*, published in July 2011. The ONS will be working with the Cabinet Office to support the design and evaluation of policy, as well as with Devolved Governments to ensure that measures are appropriate for UK-wide implementation.

"We use longitudinal studies to strengthen our arguments, which can help to drive out anecdote and myth, and make sure that policy reflects reality."

*Baroness Sally Greengross, Chief Executive, International Longevity Centre (ESRC/ONS Longitudinal Studies Seminar 19/7/2011)*

## Supporting longitudinal research

The Economic and Social Research Council is the UK's leading agency for research funding and training in economic and social sciences.

We fund a number of longitudinal surveys and related research, including *Understanding Society*; Timescapes; the new Birth Cohort Study; the UK Longitudinal Studies Centre; and the Centre for Longitudinal Studies, which houses three of Britain's internationally renowned surveys - the 1958, 1970 and Millennium Birth Cohort Studies.

Web: [www.esrc.ac.uk](http://www.esrc.ac.uk). Email the ESRC communications team: [comms@esrc.ac.uk](mailto:comms@esrc.ac.uk)

*The information in this briefing is based on the presentations of Professor Nick Buck, UK Longitudinal Studies Centre, and Professor Diana Kuh, MRC Unit for Lifelong Health and Ageing, at the ESRC/ONS Longitudinal Studies Seminar 19/7/2011.*