2021
ANNUAL REPORT

Understanding Society

Contents

Welcome to our 2021 Annual Report – a selection of our achievements, research and policy impact. We hope they give you a flavour of the many projects that Understanding Society has been working on, and the wide range of research that the Study has contributed to.

To read more about our work, find all the research that uses the Study, or get started with using the dataset yourself, visit our website: www.understandingsociety.ac.uk

Foreword

Simon Briscoe

Understanding Society – the largest longitudinal household panel study of its kind – is something I have long admired from a distance, so it was a great pleasure to become Chair of the Strategic Oversight Board just over a year ago. I am delighted to report that the much-used volumes of data and the polished public face is backed up by solid foundations behind the scenes.

As you read this report you will see many successes. Everyone will have their favourites, but to see both a continuing increase in the number of people using the data and it delivering important policy impact (on, for example, the tracking of household finances following the pandemic or for the advice on vaccinating children), suggests that good use is being made of the Study.

The pandemic has presented many challenges for participants and the survey team. The fact that response rates and participant engagement has been maintained after a couple of difficult years and a greater move online is success in itself.

But, as the report shows, the team has gone further. It has explored key aspects of the dataset, reached out to new partners, and developed new strands of work. In many ways the pandemic forced change that has better equipped Understanding Society for the future, with online events to engage a wider research community, the new boost sample and experiments to engage specific population groups.

In many ways the pandemic forced change that has better equipped Understanding Society for the future

Members of the Strategic Oversight Board have enthusiastically offered their help and advice and I'd like to thank them, and of course the leadership team and all staff, for everything they have done on Understanding Society. The last two years have demonstrated that good quality, timely data is worth its weight in gold so, last but by no means least, I thank the participants for their continued engagement – it really matters.

Simon is Director of The Data Analysis Bureau and Chair of Understanding Society's Strategic Oversight Board.

Good quality, timely data is worth its weight in gold

Introduction
by the Director, Michaela Benzeval

2021 was a busy year for the Understanding Society team and its users! This Annual Report provides a brief overview of the ways in which the Study continues to achieve the benefit goals the ESRC established when the Study was set up and provides some examples of the activities of the team, research from users, and some of the impacts of the Study.

Our benefit goals

- The Study promotes new waves of inter- and multi-disciplinary research
- The Study promotes and develops new forms of methodology
- The number and breadth of data users increases over time
- Recognition of the UK's reputation as an international centre of social science excellence
- The Study contributes to capability in quantitative methods and use of interdisciplinary data
- There are new insights into interactions between social and biological data
- The Study enables new forms of science over time
- The Study informs development of new policy over time
- The Study informs development of business practice in private and Civil Society sectors.

Understanding Society is the UK Household Longitudinal Study. It was established in 2009 but builds on its long running predecessor the British Household Panel Survey, which began in 1991. It tracks changes and stability in people's lives across wide-ranging domains, over time, by interviewing all household members annually. In 2021 Wave 11 was released and Waves 12–14 were at different stages of development, fieldwork and data production. As well as a large longitudinal sample representative of the general population in the UK (known as the General Population Sample), it includes two immigrant and ethnic minority boost samples (Ethnic Minority Boost from Wave 1 and Immigrant and Ethnic Minority Boost added at Wave 6). At Waves 2 and 3 we collected biological data to enable wide ranging research on the interaction between people's health and society. We also run an Innovation Panel which creates opportunities for methodological experimentation and research.

However, Understanding Society is far more than a collection of surveys and resulting datasets. The Study reflects the work not only of the team and fieldwork agencies, but also of wide-ranging researchers and policy makers with whom we work to ensure the Study meets their needs, and they are able to use it effectively.

In this Annual Report, in Section 1, we first outline the latest data on how successfully we meet ESRC's benefits for the Study. We then illustrate some of the achievements in 2021 in four broad areas.

Our activities

Producing high quality data – this is the core of our activities and includes: carrying out research, and evaluating our activities to inform the Study design, content, data collection practices, and value added resources; conducting fieldwork with our partners Kantar Public, NatCen and Ipsos to the highest standards; processing and releasing data; and producing wide-ranging supporting documentation and materials. In Section 2 we highlight three key achievements for 2021 including some of our methodological research, fieldwork response rates and development work for the new Wave 14 boost.

In Appendix 1 we list the key datasets we released in 2021 and provide links to the supporting materials and underpinning research.

Engaging and supporting users and policy organisations

As well as a wealth of data and documentation resources to support users, we provide user support, user newsletters and a range of general and tailored training courses. We produce different kinds of training materials and datasets and reach out to new audiences with specialist activities. We also focus on reaching policy users by summarising findings for the Study in different ways, facilitating engagement between researchers and policy organisations. In Section 3 we provide a general overview of our work and highlight three innovations introduced in 2021: a data dive, producing evidence for select committees and reaching out to school children.

Users' achievements

Central to the success of Understanding Society is the use of the data by researchers. In Section 4 we outline the growth in our user base in 2021 and illustrate some of the varied research findings that were published in 2021.

Policy uses and impact

In Section 5 we focus on the ways in which the Study data and findings have been used by government, the third sector and businesses, and the ways in which it has influenced policies.

All of our work is overseen by experts within our governance structure, led by the Strategic Oversight Board, and we have a network of topic champions who advise on content data and access issues. I am grateful to all of these colleagues for supporting the Study in the many varied ways that they do. In Appendix 2 we list advisory group members and topic champions who helped us in 2021.

I hope that this report provides you with some insights into the breadth and value of Understanding Society as a key social science infrastructure in the UK and internationally.

ESRC Benefits

The Benefits of Understanding Society

In the original business case for Understanding Society, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) set out the rationale and expectations for the Study. The ESRC identified nine key benefits which informed the design of Understanding Society and are used to measure the success of the Study as a whole, how users interact with the Study datasets and how Understanding Society is used by researchers and policymakers.

While the Annual Report gives a snapshot of our achievements in 2021, the benefits reporting gives more detailed data on the use of Understanding Society, the growth in data users and the range of activities carried out by the Study.

BENEFIT 1
### Promotes new waves of inter- and multi-disciplinary research

Understanding Society is used by researchers from a wide range of disciplines. Table 1 shows the number of users since the inception of the Study, broken down by areas of research. Highest use of the datasets come from users in economics and sociology, but the Study is also being well used by health sciences, humanities and arts disciplines.

Table 1: Understanding Society annual users by area of research, from 2011–2021

Discipline Group	Annual Users
Economics and Econometrics	16537
Sociology and Social Policy	7722
Health Sciences	2631
Geography and Environment	1743
Business and Finance	1589
Political Studies	1577
Statistics and Maths	1568
Education	360
Computer Sciences	242
Biological Sciences	153
Other	152
Law	80
History and Cultural Studies	66
Civil Engineering	54
General Engineering	46
Art and Design	40
Physical Sciences	20
Language and Literature	20
Philosophy	20
Total	**34620**

Figure 1 shows data downloads by sector in 2021. As in previous years, UK higher education researchers and students form the bulk of the Study users, but there is also growing use by UK government, commercial and third sector users.

Figure 1: Data downloads by sector

- Higher education 91%
- Government 4%
- Third sector 3%
- Commercial 2%
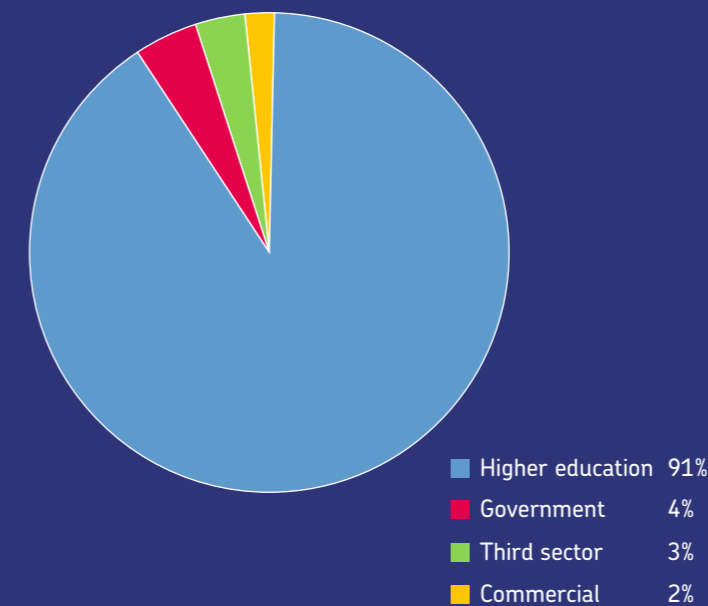
BENEFIT 2
### Promotes and develops new forms of methodology

Understanding Society has a programme of research and innovation which supports the development of the Study and provides insights on survey methodology for the wider research community. In 2021 the Study was used in 14 academic papers, 9 working papers and 10 book chapters on survey methods.

Working papers published this year include research on how the change in survey mode due to the Covid pandemic affected response rates, the impact the day of mailing has on response rate and speed, and bias prevent and adjustment for surveys with high frequency online data collection. The Understanding Society methods team also published research focusing on data linkage. These looked at how participants respond to requests for data linkage, the factors that affect consent and whether the mode of data collection has an impact.

A series of experiments are run on the Innovation Panel each year. In 2021 experiments focused on respondent incentives, consent to link to LinkedIn profiles, asking for contact details for partners not living in the household, individuals' intentions to prepare for automation and comparing different scales to measure mental health.

Use of the Innovation Panel dataset for analysis has declined in the last three years (see figure 2 below), perhaps reflecting the changing in research focus caused by the Covid pandemic. Each year the Innovation Panel competition invites suggestions from researchers for methodological experiments and from 2022 will also include suggestions for questionnaire content. We hope that adapting the scheme and making the Innovation Panel more visible to researchers on our website will increase data use.

Figure 2: Annual users for Innovation Panel data

UKDS Annual users for Innovation Panel Data
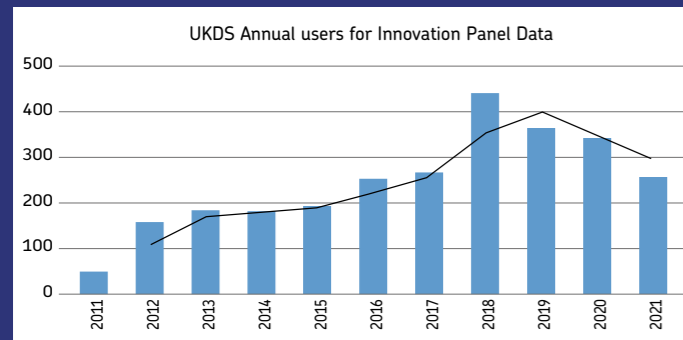
In addition to published outputs, the Understanding Society team are often asked to provide expert advice on survey design, question design and survey implementation. In 2021 the team have provided guidance to:

- The Ministry of Justice (advice on impact feasibility for the digital services evaluation)
- The Office for Students (survey design)
- The Higher Education Statistics Agency (on estimation methods)
- The ONS (economic experts working group)

Data linkage allows researchers to work with new kinds of data. In 2021 Understanding Society became part of the UK Longitudinal Linkage Collaboration, a research infrastructure designed to inform the UK's response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The UKLLC performs centralised data linkages across a range of longitudinal population studies to primary care, secondary care and Covid-relevant electronic NHS health records and keeps these up to date with regular updates. Anonymised linked data (the NHS records plus survey data) are stored within a Trusted Research Environment (TRE) hosted on UKSeRP (University of Swansea), from where they are made available for secure onward sharing (remote access) for approved researchers. Where our participants have consented (~8,000), Understanding Society has contributed its COVID-19 study data to the resource.

Linked Driver and Vehicle Licencing Agency (DVLA) data also became available in 2021, allowing researchers to analyse car ownership and use. Our education data linkage also developed, with new linked data from the Scottish Education Administrative Datasets. For researchers interested in education and pupil attainment, Understanding Society is now linked to data from England and Scotland. Welsh education data linkage is currently underway. The use of geographical data linkage continues to grow, with 350 users downloading the data with geographic identifiers.

Figure 3: New annual users for Understanding Society secure data

UKDS New annual users for secure data
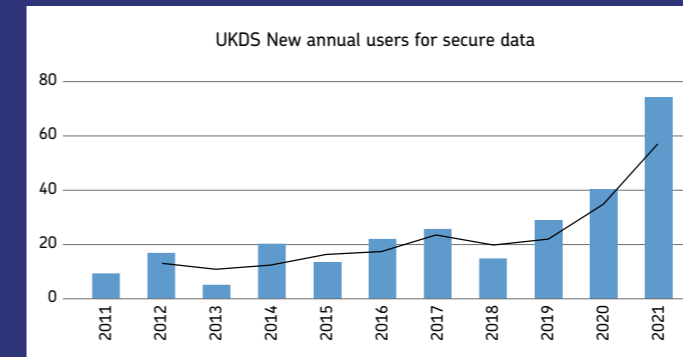
Figure 4: New annual users for main data
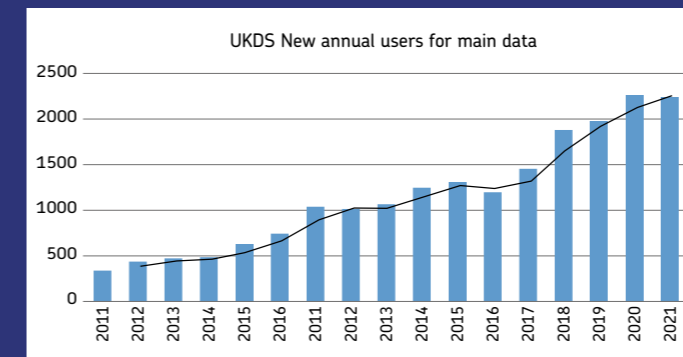

UKDS New annual users for main data

Figure 5: Annual downloads for the COVID-19 survey

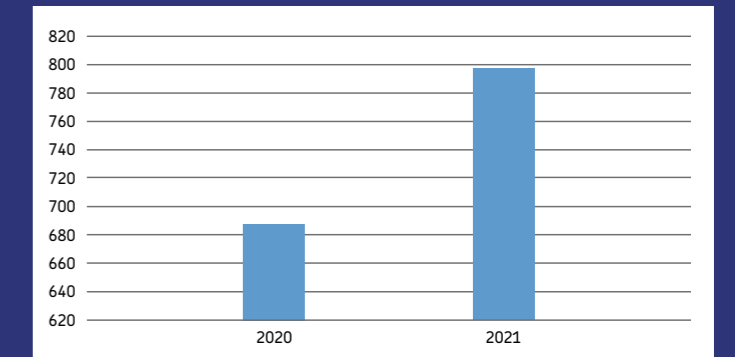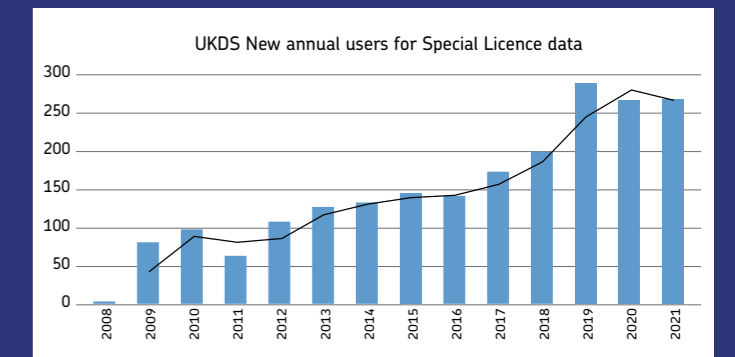
Figure 6: New annual users for Understanding Society special licence data

UKDS New annual users for Special Licence data

BENEFIT 3
The number and breadth of data users increases over time

In 2021 we saw an increase in the number of new users for the main Understanding Society survey. Our repeating users also increased over our 2020 numbers. In total the main survey had just over 4,000 users in 2021.

Use of the COVID-19 survey data grew in 2021, with the dataset being downloaded 797 times in 2021, compared to 689 times in 2020. Data from this survey is being well used by the research community and by policymakers. We recorded 1,383 unique data users for this dataset in 2021, 1,234 from the higher education sector, 69 government users, 61 from the third sector and 16 from commercial organisations. The COVID-19 survey was used in 194 publications in 2021.

Figure 7: Understanding Society main survey new and repeat users

UKDS Unique user by new vs repeating status

■ repeating users ■ new users
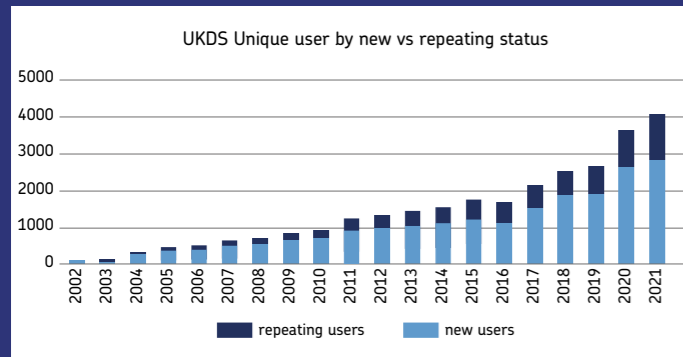
BENEFIT 4
Recognition of the UK's reputation as an international centre of social science excellence

Understanding Society has been part of the CNEF (Cross National Equivalence File) harmonisation project for many years, and in 2021, this work saw a significant step forwards with the development and open source publication of Comparative Panel File (CPF) code for international harmonisation of wider set of variables.

In 2021 13.4% of event attendees were international and our online resources were accessed by users from across the world. For our website, over 89,000 page views came from Europe, over 14,000 from Asia and over 8,600 from North America.

During 2021 staff from Understanding Society presented at, or worked with a range of international organisations, including:

- European Survey Research Association Conference
- Society for Longitudinal and Lifecourse Studies
- American Educational Research Association
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
- Economic Statistics Centre of Excellence
- The Oesterreichische Nationalbank
- Statistics Austria
- Open Innovation Team, Cabinet Office
- FORS, Swiss Centre of Expertise in the Social Sciences
- Italian Statistical Society

BENEFIT 5
Contributes to capability in quantitative methods and use of interdisciplinary data

The user support team continued to expand the training and support on offer to data users of all levels in 2021. Three hands-on, practical workshops are run each year, teaching new data users how to use the Study. Training takes place in multiple software, so users can choose to receive training in Stata, SAS, SPSS or R. For users wanting to progress with these data, the team also run workshops on specific issues, such as weighting and panel data methods.

In the last year 319 people attended one of our training courses and 274 accessed the online Moodle courses. Other events, such as policy relevant workshops and a data dive drew an audience of 658 people over the course of the year.

Figure 8: Event attendance by type

■ Event	31%
■ Conference	41%
■ Training	15%
■ Moodle	13%
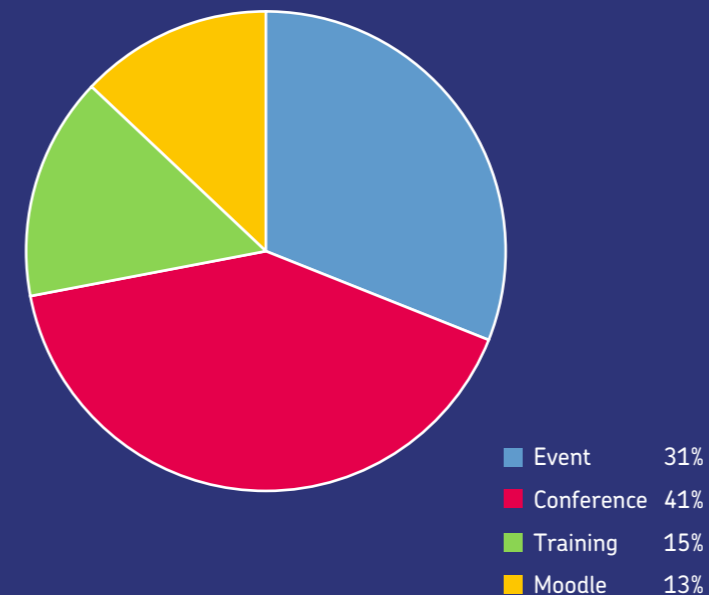
To support the development of quantitative methods and the use of the dataset for research, the user support team produce teaching datasets on specific topics. In 2021 we have seen a large increase in the number of users downloading these data, as shown in Figure 9. One teaching dataset is designed for those teaching longitudinal data methods and for data users who are new to using longitudinal data and would like more guidance in analysing Understanding Society. The second dataset focuses on ethnicity and health data. It is a step-by-step guide starting from exploring a survey, understanding the structure of the survey data and then using the data to do some simple exercises to measure differences in health and wellbeing across ethnic groups.

Figure 9: New annual users for teaching datasets

UKDS New annual users for teaching data
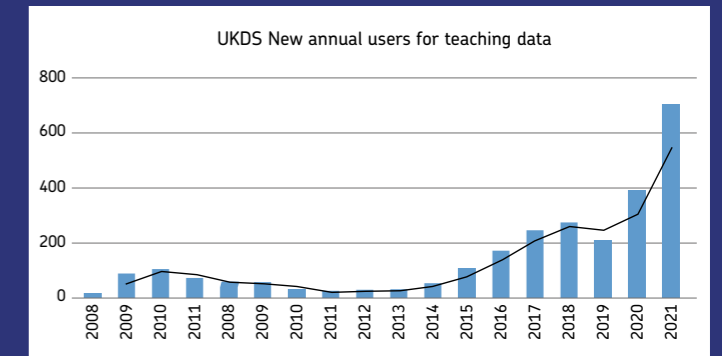
For researchers with specific questions about Understanding Society, the User Support Forum is available. In 2021 the user support team answered 154 queries on the support forum.

For the next generation of social scientists, a teaching pack for high school students was created. Understanding Society worked with Futurum Careers to develop this lesson plan and activities for school students aged 14–19. The resource introduces students to the basics of quantitative social science data, through the work of Understanding Society, and encourages students to think about the challenges of collecting and using longitudinal data.

BENEFIT 6
New insights into interactions between social and biological data

When looking at publications in 2021, the research area with the most publications was health, health behaviours, and wellbeing. Health and social science publications were also well represented in high impact journals, with 75.3% of papers being published in high impact journals. The Study supports a wide range of health research and is particularly well used as a source of evidence on the links between the social and biological. The Study was used for research on diverse topics, including how sleep problems affect sexual minorities, the effect of TV viewing on childhood obesity, the persistence of health inequalities over time, and how financial and housing conditions impact on health.

The after effects of the COVID pandemic are also being studied using our health and biological data. Researchers have published on psychological distress during the pandemic, vaccine hesitancy, the effect of the furlough scheme on health, and the health impact of working from home.

The increased interest in using biological data by social science researchers has led the Study to deliver more training and resources in this area. We have published more training videos on the biological data available in Understanding Society and provided training, in collaboration with the National Centre for Research Methods, for researchers starting out with these data.

BENEFIT 7
Enables new forms of science over time.

We track the number of publications using data from Understanding Society. Table 2 gives a breakdown of the publications associated with the Study, with the key domains for research. From the start of Understanding Society in 2009 to the end of 2021, over 10,000 publications have been identified which use data from the Study. The largest number of publications comes from the areas of health, household finances, families, and employment – not unsurprising given the household nature of the Study. Alongside these key areas, the Study is also seeing growth in the areas of ethnicity and migration, housing, and social mobility.

Table 2: Publications based on Understanding Society, 2009 –2021

Subject Group	Publications
Health and Health Behaviours Wellbeing	1859
Household Finances	1474
Family and Households	1323
Employment	1255
Political Beliefs, Attitudes and Civic Engagement	872
Social Statification and Mobility	484
Survey Methods and Statistics	370
Neighbourhoods	364
Education	355
Ethnicity and Migration	353
Housing and Residential Mobility	244
Social Networks and Relations	240
Policy Relevant	194
Statistics	185
Technical and Computing	153
Time Use, Leisure and Arts	130
Business and Marketing	119
Genetics	76
Transport	73
Environmental Behaviours	69
Total	**10192**

Table 3: Number of papers in high impact journals by subject area

Discipline Group	High	Grand Total	% Hi
Economics	119	428	27.8%
Sociology and Political Science	214	301	71.1%
Survey Methods	142	230	61.7%
Medicine	50	182	27.5%
Health and Social Science	110	146	75.3%
Public Policy	107	144	74.3%
Demography	64	126	50.8%
Psychiatry, Mental Health, Psychology and Neuroscience	58	102	56.9%
Public Health and Epidemiology	94	98	95.9%
Environmental Science	62	97	63.9%
Biology and Genetics	52	69	75.4%
Business, Management and Accounting		60	0.0%
Statistical Methods	2	35	5.7%
Life Span and Lifecourse	2	34	5.9%
Education	9	33	27.3%
Geography	18	30	60.0%
Multidisciplinary	11	18	61.1%
Humanities	7	13	53.8%
Other	7	10	70.0%
Social Psychology	4	4	100.0%
	1132	2160	52.4

When we look at publications in high impact journals, public health and epidemiology, social psychology, health and social science, and biology and genetics have the highest proportion of published papers in these outlets. Table 3 gives a breakdown of research areas and the proportion of papers in high impact journals.

Informs development of new policy over time.

Government use of Understanding Society continues to be strong, with over 200 downloads from government data users. This is slightly below the peak of 2020, led by the Covid-19 pandemic, but still significantly above 2019 usage levels for the group.

Figure 10: UK government annual users for Understanding Society

UKDS Annual UK user downloads of any study group for UK Government
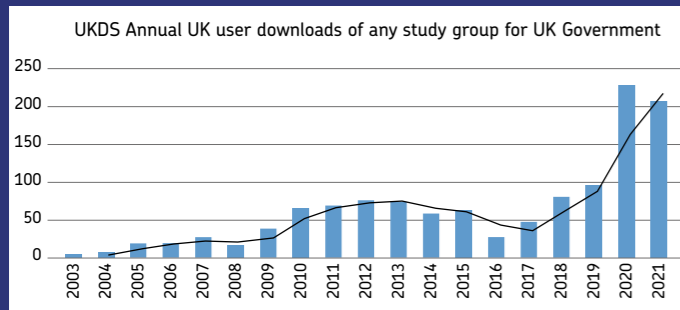
In addition to downloads of the dataset, we have identified the following uses of Understanding Society in policy development

1. **Factors influencing COVID-19 vaccine uptake among minority ethnic groups,** 17 December 2020, Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE), January 2021
https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/factors-influencing-covid-19-vaccine-uptake-among-minority-ethnic-groups-17-december-2020

2. **Impact on households: distributional analysis to accompany Budget 2021,** HM Treasury, March 2021
https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/budget-2021-documents

3. **House of Lords COVID-19 Committee report Beyond Digital: Planning for a Hybrid World** uses evidence from the What Works Centre for Wellbeing on loneliness based on UKHLS data, April 2021
https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld5801/ldselect/ldcvd19/263/26302.htm

4. **Quarterly Report on Progress to Address COVID-19 Health Inequalities**, Race Disparity Unit, Cabinet Office, May 2021
https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/third-quarterly-report-on-progress-to-address-covid-19-health-inequalities

5. **Chief Medical Officer's advice to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care on vaccination of children aged 12–15**, uses evidence on School closures and children's emotional and behavioural difficulties, September 2021.
https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/universal-vaccination-of-children-and-young-people-aged-12-to-15-years-against-covid-19/key-published-inputs-to-the-uk-cmos-advice-on-universal-vaccination-of-children-and-young-people-aged-12-to-15-years-against-covid-19

6. **Direct and Indirect health impacts of COVID-19 in England**, Department of Health and Social Care, 9 September
https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/dhsc-direct-and-indirect-health-impacts-of-covid-19-in-england-short-paper-9-september-2021

7. **Regulation of private renting**, National Audit Office, uses research from Shelter and the National Housing Federation using UKHLS, December 2021
https://www.nao.org.uk/report/regulation-of-private-renting/

Informs development of business practice in private and Civil Society sectors.

Data use by the commercial and civil society sectors grew in 2021. To support the development of third sector use of the dataset, the user support and policy and partnerships unit developed a training course specifically for charity data users. The two-day course ran for the first time in 2021, with analysts from 30 charities taking part. The course was well received by delegates. In 2022 we plan to launch the training as an online course, making it accessible to more people and allowing participants to learn at their own pace.

Figure 11: Commercial annual users for Understanding Society

UKDS Annual UK user downloads of any study group for UK Commercial
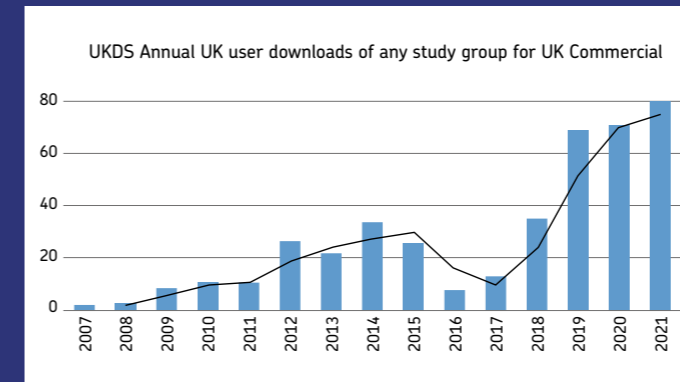
Figure 12: Third sector annual users for Understanding Society

UKDS Annual UK user downloads of any study group for UK Third Sector
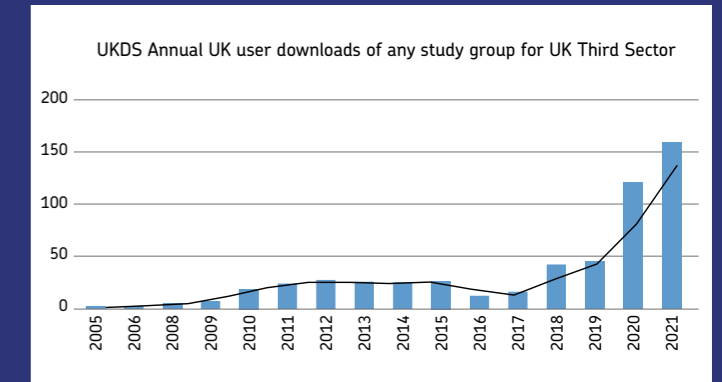
In addition to the use of Understanding Society data, in 2021 the staff from the Study also provided support for civil society through advice and guidance organisations including:

- Working Families Academic Advisory Board
- The Interdisciplinary Child Well-Being Network
- Scottish Carer's Assistance Discussion Event
- NESTA

Methods and innovations

Survey experiments and new survey tools

Throughout 2021 the Understanding Society survey methods and innovations team have been running experiments on the Innovation Panel (IP) and testing new survey tools. The experiments also include proposals from external researchers, selected via an annual competition.

They also continued to run long-term methods work on how to increase both participation in web surveys and consent to data linkage, on collecting event triggered data and biomeasures, and on using new technology such as apps and wearable devices in surveys.

Couples living apart together

To enrich the information we have on households, we plan to invite the 'significant others' of our participants to join the Study. These could be partners who live outside the household, parents living apart, or external carers or care recipients. As part of this initiative, we used the IP to explore how we ask participants for a partner's contact details if they live apart. An experiment on this had already run in the previous wave of the IP, so this one focused on improving the wording and investigating whether contacting participants between waves made a difference to response.

The results from Wave 13 and Wave 14 experiments suggest that participants are more likely to share their partner's postal address, than their email or phone number. Asking for contact details more than once did not give more response, but participants appreciate us wording the request so that it includes more information on why we are interested in living apart relationships and the real-world value of taking part.

COVID-19 and mode selection effects

The pandemic meant that face-to-face interviewing had to be suspended in March 2020, and all adult sample members were invited to complete their survey online. Those not able to do this were offered a telephone interview. These changes to mode and survey context have the potential to affect the representativeness of the sample members that did take part. To understand this more fully, the team analysed the sample from April to December, comparing participation in 2019 and 2020.

They found that three quarters of people who had a face-to-face interview in 2019 took part in an online survey in 2020. Interestingly, around a quarter of those who had not responded in 2019 did respond in 2020, suggesting that the change in mode was welcomed by some participants. Overall, the response rate for 2020 was just 1.5% lower than in 2019.

Linking to LinkedIn data

Previous work has suggested there is potential for improving research by linking survey data to social media content. It offers the possibility of collecting different types of data, and giving researchers a new perspective on people's experiences. An IP experiment was carried out to explore the feasibility of linking LinkedIn data to individual's survey responses. Participants were asked about their willingness to do this, and the experiment also tested whether the position of the consent question in the survey made a difference to response.

The results indicated that one in four people had a LinkedIn account, which is larger than Ofcom estimates, and 41% of those asked consented to their data being linked to the survey. The experiment also confirmed that asking for consent to link data earlier in the survey results in higher consent rates.

Valuation of mental health outcomes

This was an external proposal led by Daniel Kopasker, University of Aberdeen, and Anju Keetharuth, University of Sheffield.

The allocation of health resources relies on policymakers being able to consistently measure and value outcomes. In the UK quality-adjusted life years (QALYs) are used as a generic measure of health and wellbeing outcomes, allowing a monetary value to be attached to a QALY to determine which treatments are cost effective. For mental health outcomes, methodological issues have caused uncertainty about the validity of QALY valuations, so preference-based instruments, involving a combination of responses on different aspects of health and wellbeing, are often recommended. Several preference-based instruments are available, and this experiment aimed to identify which was best.

Innovation Panel participants were asked to complete a range of instruments, with the sample divided into groups receiving different tests. The researchers looked at the relationships between utility scores for the different instruments. The results indicated important differences between the instruments, with one (the ReQoL-UI) providing higher utility scores for health states, and another (the EQ-5D-3L) indicating more people in perfect health. A suggestion from this research is that the measurement of psychological distress may account for these differences, but further research is needed to understand the complexity of this relationship.

Our Annual Report can only capture a snapshot of the new work that's being carried out. Details on all the survey methods work using the Study can be found on our website: www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/research/methods-publications

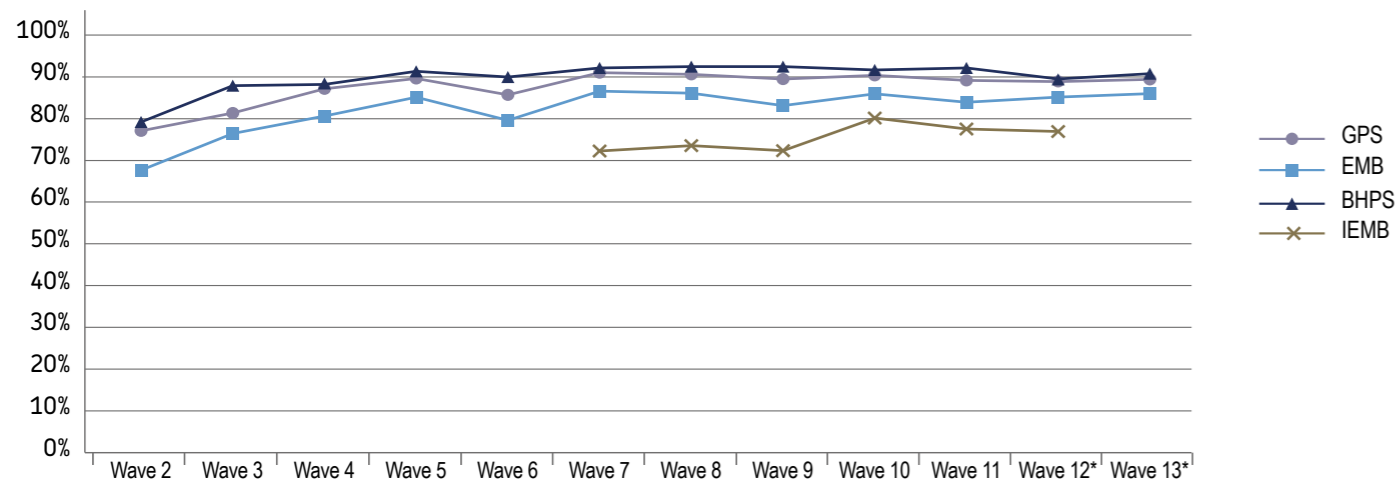# Maintaining response rates in a time of pandemic

The start of the Covid pandemic brought substantial changes to Understanding Society. The move away from face-to-face interviews, plus the new COVID-19 survey, meant that many of our participants were both completing their interview in new way and giving us much more regular information about their life during the pandemic.

Given the ongoing uncertainty around the pandemic in 2021 we wanted to reassure participants that they were vital to the Study and that their interviews were just as important to us, even if they were not having contact with their regular interviewer. Our Participant Liaison Team spent more time reassuring participants about the move to online and telephone surveys, dealing with the technical issues of participants logging on to their survey for the first time, and answering questions about the move to online incentives, where previously paper vouchers had been used.

Household response rates
The percentage of households who responded in the previous wave and who completed their survey in the subsequent wave. Also showing the response rates for the different parts of Understanding Society – the General Population Sample. the Ethnic Minority Boost, British Household Panel Survey, and Immigrant and Ethnic Minority Boost samples.

Legend: GPS, EMB, BHPS, IEMB

X-axis: Wave 2, Wave 3, Wave 4, Wave 5, Wave 6, Wave 7, Wave 8, Wave 9, Wave 10, Wave 11, Wave 12*, Wave 13*

* still in field

Encouraging our participants

To keep interest in participation high at a time when households were dealing with the difficulties of the pandemic we adapted our messaging to participants and emphasised the role they could play in helping the UK through Covid. We sent out a mailing specifically for older people, who we knew were less keen to take part in their survey online, and started a new magazine aimed at 10–14 year olds and their families – another key population group who were under additional pressure during 2021.

Our fieldwork documents were refreshed to make it clear how to access and login to the online survey. We also included motivational messages about taking part. We increased the length of our participant newsletters, to be able to include more stories about the research coming from the Study and to broaden the topics in each edition.

We have been pleased to see that our response rates have remained high. In 2021 Waves 12 and 13 were in the field. For Wave 12, 40% of households fully completed their interviews online, without having to be issued to interviewers for telephone follow-up. For Wave 13, this rose to 45%. Household response rates have been excellent, with just over 90% of the General Population Sample and BHPS sample who took part in the previous wave completing their interviews this year. The Ethnic Minority Boost sample also saw an increase in participation over Waves 12 and 13 with around 85% households completing their interviews.

Find information about all our response rates for each wave of the Study on our website: www.understanding society.ac.uk/documentation/mainstage/user-guides/main-survey-user-guide/response-rates

Participant Panel

In 2021 we also started our new Participant Panel, made up of people from a range of households that are part of the Study. The Panel provide feedback on our communications with participants, and comment on the survey process and the experience of being part of a longitudinal panel from a participant perspective. Our current Panel has 17 members, of all ages and from across the UK. The Panel are contacted twice a year with specific questions. In 2021 they provided us with feedback on the experience of moving to online surveys and the return to face-to-face interviews.

I definitely think that giving people the option [for online surveys] is best. It's letting us choose which way we'd prefer. It cuts down on the time it takes to do the face-to-face interviews. And the incentive to complete the questions to receive another voucher is brilliant for us! We love answering the questions here!

Boosting Understanding Society

The boost pilot has given us new insights into participant behaviour

O ver the course of 2021 we have been busy preparing to add new households to the Study.

As a longitudinal study, Understanding Society naturally loses some participants and households every year. Sometimes people decide to stop taking part, others may move away. A number of participants die each year too.

Response rates for the Study are very high, with most of the households who took part in one wave of the survey taking part in the next, but there is still a need to add more people into the Study to keep our sample size large so research can look at the experiences of subgroups of the UK population.

A new boost sample is being added to Understanding Society in Wave 14, with fieldwork starting in 2022. To prepare for this, and to test the most effective ways of carrying out the survey, we worked with Kantar Public and the National Centre for Social Research to develop and pilot the boost survey.

Maximising responses

It can be difficult to engage people with longitudinal surveys, so we experimented with different engagement methods, and worked with the Behavioural Insights team at Kantar Public to make the fieldwork materials easier to understand and act on.

The pandemic was an extra challenge, making fieldwork for the boost sample pilot more difficult, as it removed the option of face-to-face interviews – usually the best technique for engaging with people who are completely new to Understanding Society. Instead, a web-only trial was devised using a sample of 17,304 addresses in the UK.

The pilot sample was stratified by local measures of deprivation and ethnic diversity to make sure we captured hard-to-reach households that are less likely to take part in longitudinal studies over time. This large sample was broken down in to eight overlapping randomised controlled trials, each one evaluating a different treatment designed to raise response rates. Six of the eight experiments were designed to encourage households to start the Study, so were counted as successful if the household provided any data, while the other two were designed to encourage every adult in the household to take part.

Finding out what works

From the pilot sample, just over 13% of households gave us some data. Of those who responded, the vast majority submitted full data about their household and individual data from at least one adult.

The pilot tested responses to different incentive levels, the number of letters and reminders sent to the household, whether adding a small gift to the initial invitation encouraged response, and whether there were benefits to adding sponsor logos to letters and envelopes. We also tested asking the first respondent to provide contact details for others in the household and whether encouraging messages during the survey kept people going.

The only two treatments that had a measurable impact on participation were adding a pre-notification letter, which the potential sample member received before receiving their login details for the survey, and offering an early-bird incentive of £10 on top of the base incentive of £20. This was more effective than offering people a flat £30 incentive.

Taking the boost sample into the field

Our learning from the boost pilot has informed the design of the boost sample. Fieldwork for the boost started in early 2022 and the easing of pandemic restrictions has allowed us to include face-to-face interviews, as well as a web survey. The pilot has given us an insight into participant behaviour that we hope will help other longitudinal studies.

Growth in training and support

With the growth in new users during 2021, we have also increased the support and help we give to researchers and analysts.

In the last year we have seen significantly more people engaging with our training and support activities, (see ESRC benefits section page 13). When broken down by sector, our training and events were attended by over 1,400 higher education users, more than double the number from 2020. The number of government data users attending user support activities also jumped from 123 people in 2020 to 414 in 2021. Commercial data users also sought support in greater numbers, with 84 people taking part in training and events in 2021, compared with just 33 in the previous year.

Attendance at Understanding Society training and events by sector, 2021
As in previous years, higher education users attended the most events, but attendance by government, third sector and commercial users grew in 2021.

■ Higher education	67%
■ Government	19%
■ Third sector	10%
■ Commercial	4%
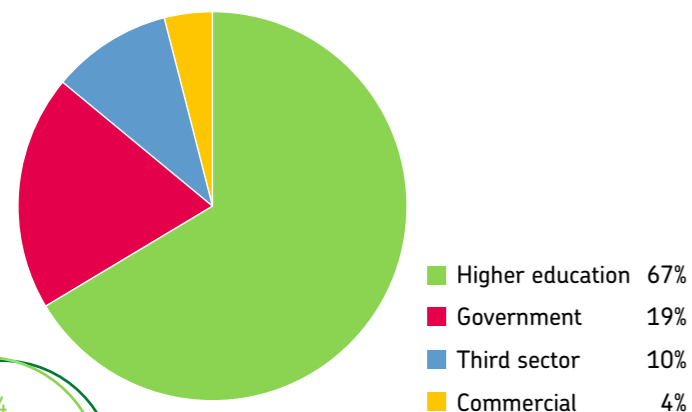
Working with the third sector

In 2021 User Support and the Policy and Partnerships Unit have particularly focused on engaging with third sector organisations and charities. These organisations can make good use of longitudinal household panel data, as they monitor changes in policy and track specific groups of the population over time. Most charities are not large enough to have dedicated research staff, or staff with the statistical research skills to interrogate datasets like Understanding Society, so there was a need to develop a training programme specifically for this group of potential data users.

The first two-day workshop for charities and the third sector was held in 2021. The workshop introduced the Study to users, gave insights on the areas that could be particularly useful, and allowed delegates to work through some practical exercises to give them confidence in their data skills. The course was fully booked, and the User Support team is now working to put the content into an online course, to allow more charities to use it. Over the course of 2021 we saw 214 people from the third sector engaging with training, workshops and the conference, an increase from the 73 people in 2020.

Scientific Conference – celebrating 10 Waves of data

Our Scientific Conference was held in 2021. This event is usually held in-person, every other year, but because of the pandemic the event was moved to a series of online mini-conferences held throughout 2021. The year celebrated the release of ten waves of Understanding Society data and drew on research from across disciplines. The online events had the themes of *Changing Families, People and Places, Transforming Social Policies* and *Survey Methods*. Each conference featured guest keynote speakers, paper presentations and discussion. In total 877 people attended the Scientific Conference events, with many more watching presentations on our YouTube channel after the event.

Training and support – the headline figures for 2021

Since 2020 our Introduction to Understanding Society two-day training workshops has been provided more frequently (three times a year) and in four softwares simultaneously – Stata, SPSS, SAS, R. Due to the pandemic these were provided as live online training courses (i.e., synchronous online learning). The same course material has been provided as online Moodle courses that can be accessed anytime (i.e., asynchronous learning). We have seen a sharp growth in the number and type of participants in these live online workshops. We have added an online Moodle course for creating bespoke weights which includes training videos, syntax files.

- 319 people attended an live online training course
- 274 registered for an online Moodle courses

- 441 people came to the launch of Insights, our publication on policy relevant research
- 16% of higher education training and events attendees were from outside the UK
- 10% of commercial attendees were from outside the UK
- 558 signed up to our mailing list
- 105 new users registered for the User Support Forum

Online support

Our website continues to be vital resource for Understanding Society data users. In 2021 we implemented improvements to our index terms and variable notes, to help users better understand the variables they may need for their analysis. User Support also expanded the main survey user guide and provided more training videos for specific aspects of the dataset.

The Understanding Society COVID-19 Survey which started in April 2020 and ended in September 2021 has been very popular, and to help data users we provided online documentation for this survey (FAQs, introductory video, user guide, interactive variable search facility) very quickly, constantly updating with each new wave and provided timely user support. On the website, our data documentation area received over 26,000 unique page views in 2021, the user guide was viewed over 9,900 times and the index terms 3,800 times. User Support also encouraged users to send us their syntax to share on the website, alongside syntax from the Understanding Society team. This feature is becoming increasingly used, with over 2,200 views in the last year.

New 'data dive' event brings sectors together

In November 2021, we launched a new style of event for Understanding Society: the 'data dive'. These bring together subject expert speakers, the Understanding Society team and people from across academia, government departments and charities to research a subject in depth. The first took place on three days over two weeks, and focused on what the Understanding Society dataset can tell us about tackling climate change.

Although new technology and green energy will help us to reach the targets set at COP26, households are the highest contributor to UK greenhouse gas emissions compared to other major sectors. By allowing researchers and policymakers to understand daily life, household data can help examine how policy affects our behaviour and be important in tackling climate change.

There were over 40 contributors at the first data dive, followed up by a range of analytical activities. Findings shared in the sessions included the fact that policy can change behaviour – the plastic bag charge being an excellent example – but there is little spill-over between different types of pro-environmental behaviour. Although people started reusing shopping bags, they didn't show an increase in switching off lights in unused rooms or turning the tap off while brushing their teeth.

Another finding was that the actions people are most likely to take are those that have the smallest impact on decarbonisation. This is partly because people are often confused about what to do to have the biggest effect, but also because some behavioural changes require more effort. Changes such as walking or cycling to work instead of driving, or taking fewer flights, require much greater effort than switching lights off in empty rooms or saving water, but have far greater impact.

The event was a very effective way of bringing together different audiences united by a common interest, and we will do more data dives in future to increase our reach and the use of our data.

People are often confused about what to do to have the biggest effect

Putting evidence to policymakers

We submitted evidence to several parliamentary select committees in 2020-21, many of them focusing on the effects of the Covid pandemic on people's lives.

In May 2021 the **Public Accounts Committee** published its report COVID-19: Support for children's education, referring to "*unprecedented disruption to our school system*" and stating that the Department for Education "*has much work to do to help children recover from the effects*". Alongside the report, they published our written evidence, which included research showing "*the unequal impact of school closures on advantaged and disadvantaged children, and on ethnic minorities, as well as the impact on children's mental health*".

In February that year, the same committee published the results of its inquiry into the free school meals voucher scheme. The measure aimed to continue giving eligible children free meals while schools were closed, but the committee's report talks of "*serious problems in the early weeks*" and how "*the Department recognises that … it should have done more testing before the scheme went live*". Again, they also published our evidence, which cited research showing that half of UK children eligible for free school meals could not access the scheme during the first lockdown.

The **Health and Social Care Committee** published a report in December 2021 on children's and young people's worsening mental health during the pandemic.

They said there had been "*progress in expanding the provision of children and young people's mental health services in recent years, with significant additional funding*", and recommended a Cabinet sub-committee to coordinate cross-departmental efforts to do more. They also published our evidence, which showed that, while most 10-15-year-olds are happy with life, that the figure fell significantly between 2009 and 2018.

During 2021, we also submitted evidence to: the **House of Lords Environment and Climate Change Committee** about what drives pro-environmental behaviour; the **Lords Built Environment Committee** about the difficulties young people face buying a home; and the **Treasury Committee** about the unequal economic impact of COVID-19.

Unequal impact of school closures

Inspiring the next generation of social scientists

During 2021 we worked with Futurum Careers to develop a teaching and resource pack for high school students. The materials explore quantitative longitudinal data and the social science career paths of two of the Understanding Society team.

Futurum Careers materials are developed to be used in schools where there are fewer opportunities for pupils to engage with the sciences and social sciences. They may be rural schools, who are a considerable distance from museums or science parks. Or they may be schools in more deprived areas, where there a fewer role models for teenagers who might be considering going to university or looking at careers in science or social science. With the unexpected closure of schools during the Covid pandemic, there was also an increase in teachers and parents downloading these resources to support online learning.

Working with us, Futurum Careers developed a lesson plan and activities aimed at Key Stage 4 and Key Stage 5 students, aged 14-19. The resource introduces students to the basics of quantitative social science data though Understanding Society. Students are encouraged to think about the challenges of collecting and using longitudinal data, prompted to reflect on current research and devise their own longitudinal survey. The lesson plan links to the KS4 and KS5 curriculum for social science, economics, sociology, psychology, maths and computer science. It can also be used as a careers resource.

The lesson plan also features the career paths of two very different members of the Understanding Society team: Dr Alita Nandi, Associate Director for Outreach, and Nicole James, Survey Data Officer and ISER PhD student. They highlight the different routes they have taken in to working with social science data and the skills that are useful when working for a study like Understanding Society. The lesson also reflects the individual research that Alita and Nicole do and how their work impacts on the wider world.

In the first six months after its release, the teaching resource was downloaded over 100 times and its use continues to grow. The materials are available for free from www.tes.com/teaching-resources and directly from Futurum Careers.

Teenage social media use linked to alcohol consumption

10-15-year-olds in the UK who don't use social media, or use it for less than an hour a day, are less likely to drink alcohol at least once a month than those who are on social media for one to three hours or four hours or more.

Among 16-19-year-olds, those with no social media profile were at lower risk of binge drinking three or more times a month, compared to those on social media more than four hours a day.

Using our longitudinal data, the researchers found that over time, people in both groups who had increased their social media use were more likely to have increased the frequency of their drinking than those who hadn't changed their social media habits.

The researchers say it may be that posts showing people drinking help to normalise it, or that greater sociability could affect alcohol use – or more alcohol use could encourage social media use – and the research is relevant to the discussion about regulating social media.

Linda Ng Fat, Noriko Cable and Yvonne Kelly, Associations between social media usage and alcohol use among youths and young adults: findings from Understanding Society, Addiction, November 2021: https://doi.org/10.1111/add.15482

Growth in our user base

Use of Understanding Society continues to grow, with more researchers than ever using the dataset, as shown below and in the ESRC benefits section.

The main Understanding Society survey is the most used element of the Study, but our COVID-19 data, teaching datasets and linked data are also well-used by the research community. More niche datasets, such as data on interviewers and nurse health assessments from the early waves of the Study, are routinely used and although we do not see the large increase in

data users that we have for other datasets, there is a consistent user base for these data.

In 2020 we saw a dramatic increase in annual users for Understanding Society, driven by the new COVID-19 Survey. In 2021 the Study continued to see a rise in annual users, with new and existing researchers using our datasets. In total we recorded just over 7,000 annual users for the Understanding Society datasets.

### Annual users for Understanding Society – all data types
Annual users for Understanding Society continue to grow, particularly for our teaching datasets and special licence data. The main survey and COVID-19 data are also heavily used.
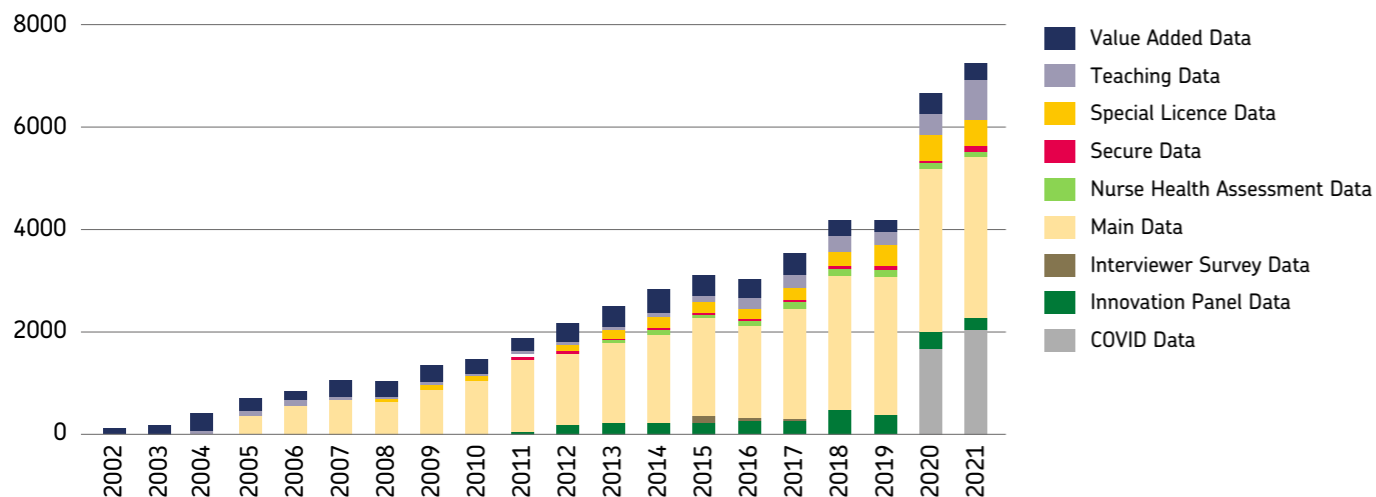
Multi-discipline research use

Understanding Society is used in a wide and growing range of academic disciplines, including economics, sociology, health sciences, and geography and environment. The wide scope of the Study makes it valuable to researchers in many areas. In the last year our data users have come from fields as diverse as psychology, civil engineering, language and literature, and law. Many researchers are repeat users. Since the first wave of data became available, at least 500 authors have published four or more times using the dataset.

Top Ten subjects for publications in 2021
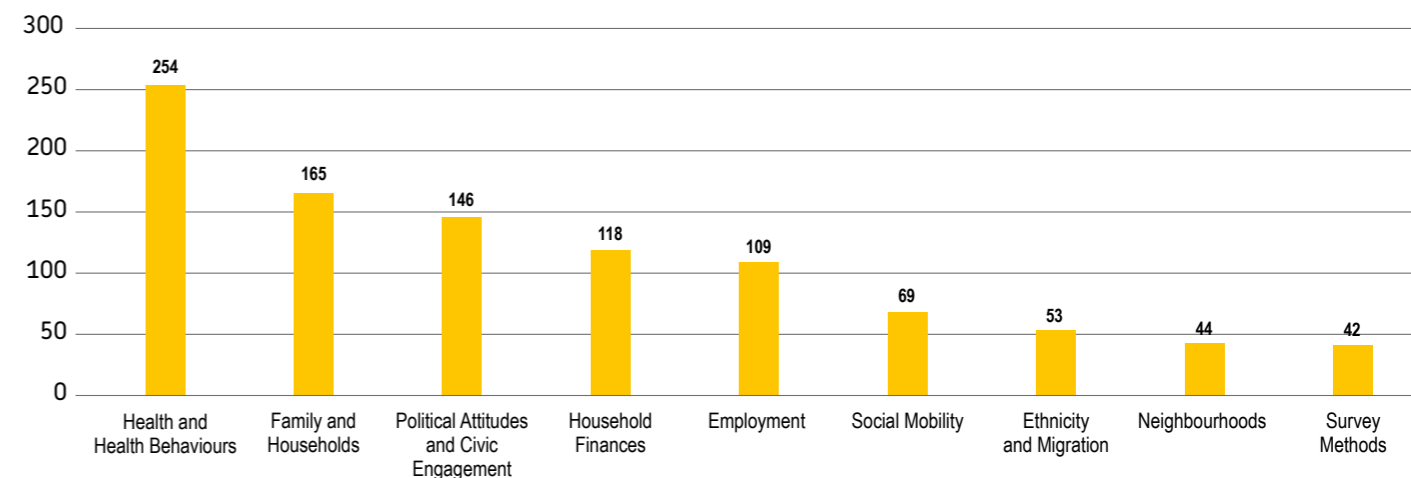
When we look at publications in 2021, the subjects with the most published work using the Study were health and health behaviours, followed by family and households, and political attitudes and civic engagement. Research using Understanding Society data features in high impact journals: 51% of published papers in 2021 were in the top 10% of journals, based on CiteScore metrics, and 30% were in the top 10% of the most cited journals in the world. Academic publications using Understanding Society data are more highly cited than expected for their subject fields, receiving on average 2.95 times the rate of expected citations.

Our data is used by an international community of researchers. For papers published between 2013 and 2021, 38% included some international collaboration. Our data users come from across the globe, working in the USA, Europe, India and Australia, as well as the UK and Ireland.

Find more information on our data users and publications in the ESRC Benefits section.

Covid data for research and policy

Understanding Society has enjoyed two years of significantly increased use of our data – from both our COVID-19 Survey and our Main Survey.

By the end of December 2021, 1,486 unique users had downloaded one or more COVID-19 studies, and over 1,300 associated project titles or abstracts mentioned Covid directly. We identified 366 publications using our data which mentioned COVID-19 (including 145 academic papers, 73 reports, 18 working papers, 11 parliamentary papers, and six books).

The Covid data releases also proved to be a significant boost for our Main Survey. Final figures for 2021 show downloads of all our data 6% above 2020's final levels, and 58% higher than 2019.
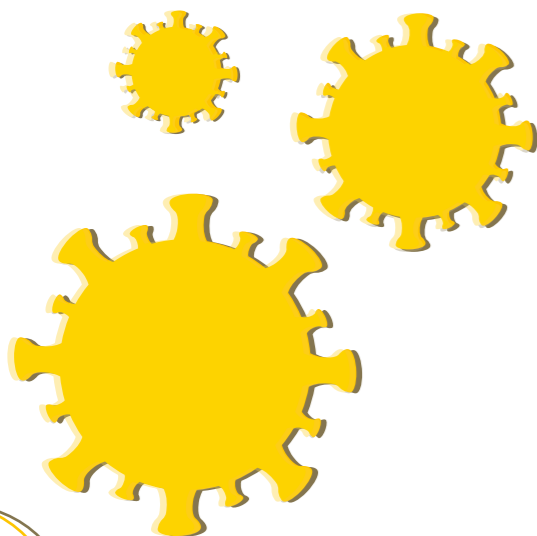
Faster pace

The success of the COVID-19 Survey has been gratifying for a team used to working in a very different way. A wave of Understanding Society's main survey takes four years from start to finish: a year of planning, two and a half years in the field and six months to get the data ready for release. With the Covid data, the first lockdown began in March 2020, the survey was in the field the following month, and the first data were released in May.

Over 17 months, we carried out nine waves of the COVID-19 survey, and issued eight briefings on the data, starting in April 2020 with one on the economic effects. We followed this with summaries of what the data told us about:

- ethnic differences in the pandemic's effects
- family relationships
- families beyond households
- health and caring
- home schooling
- social cohesion
- working from home.

Greater engagement

Briefing papers on specific aspects of the dataset helped to raise Understanding Society's already high profile further – with another upswing in Covid data downloads after the end of the COVID-19 Survey. Downloads stood at around 60 a day before we published the final data release in October 2021, at which point they peaked at around 200 a day.

The majority of users have been in the UK, with EU-based researchers the next largest group. Those working in economics and econometrics; sociology and social policy; and health sciences were the most likely to use our Covid data.

Researcher input

We also saw significant engagement from researchers when we offered the chance to submit questions to our COVID-19 Survey, beginning in May 2020. There were 80 submissions in the first month, and 40 the next – with other input coming from our co-funding government departments and organisations from the Bank of England to the Money Advice Service.

We managed to include about half of what came in, but had to keep the survey short, given that it was going out to participants every month initially. Our COVID-19 Survey was online, and needed to take no longer than 20 minutes to complete, if possible, and to build on longitudinal data the Study had already collected.

Policy and practice

As well as hundreds of academic publications using the data, we have seen:

- HM Treasury use our data to model changes in household income under the furlough scheme
- independent think tank Bright Blue use Understanding Society to assess the financial difficulties of Universal Credit claimants
- energy regulator Ofgem cite research using our data in its consultation on the tariff cap during the pandemic
- Public Health England use us in its Covid-19 mental health and wellbeing surveillance
- our data used in the Institute for Fiscal Studies' living standards, poverty and inequality report.

The Chief Medical Officers of England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales also used research based on Understanding Society data on school closures and children's difficulties as a 'key input' for their guidance to the Health Secretary on vaccinating 12-15-year-olds against COVID-19.

Find more information about the number of data users and data downloads for all our surveys in the ESRC Benefits section.

Mental health inequalities exacerbated by Covid-19

People in the lowest income areas in the UK were more likely to see declines in their mental health during the pandemic, suggesting that existing mental health inequalities were being exacerbated.

A team of 11 scientists compared Understanding Society data from before Covid with data from our COVID-19 Survey gathered from April to September 2020, and identified five distinct mental health trajectories in the first six months of the pandemic.

Most people had either consistently good (39.3%) or very good (37.5%) mental health, and about 12% saw their mental health worsen initially and then recover. However, the mental health score of one group – 4.1% – fell and remained worse, and 7% experienced a steady, sustained decline.

The researchers concluded that people who were struggling financially, who had pre-existing conditions, or who'd had Covid were all likely to benefit from government policy to support their mental health.

Matthias Pierce et al, Mental health before and during the COVID-19 pandemic: a longitudinal probability sample survey of the UK population, and Mental health responses to the COVID-19 pandemic: a latent class trajectory analysis using longitudinal UK data, The Lancet Psychiatry, 2020 and 2021: https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366(20)30308-4 and https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366(21)00151-6

Existing mental health inequalities were being exacerbated

Housing crisis weakens link between buying property and starting a family

Research has long shown that couples prefer to be homeowners before having children, but this has been undermined in recent decades by rising house prices and housing uncertainty.

A study of women aged 18-42, using British Household Panel Survey and Understanding Society data from 1991-2016 examined the effects of Britain's falling homeownership rates, which have been caused by low wages, unemployment, reductions in mortgage availability, and unaffordable housing. In comparison with the 1990s, the likelihood of becoming a parent has declined among homeowners, but childbearing rates among private renters have remained stable.

The researchers found that private tenants have traditionally had lower rates of fertility than owner-occupiers because of their housing uncertainty, but that uncertainty has increased for owner-occupiers due to economic circumstances, problems getting a mortgage, and the need to borrow from parents. This is weakening the link between owning property and having a family.

Valentina Tocchioni, Ann Berrington, Daniele Vignoli and, Agnese Vitali, The Changing Association Between Homeownership and the Transition to Parenthood, Demography, 2021: https://doi.org/10.1215/00703370-9420322

Problems getting a mortgage and the need to borrow from parents is weakening the link between owning property and having a family

Find all the publications using our data on our website:
www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/research/publications

Fuel poverty linked to financial distress during pandemic

Research has found a link between fuel poverty and financial distress both before and during the pandemic.

There has been rising concern in government and among advocacy groups about the precarious financial situation of people who cannot afford to pay for the energy they need – the 'fuel poor' – and fears that the situation may have worsened due to the economic impact of Covid.

Research using data from before and during the first wave of the pandemic shows "a statistically robust relationship between fuel poverty indicators and self-reported measures of current financial distress". The researchers also examined a potential link between fuel poverty and expectations about future financial circumstances, but this was less statistically robust.

They say that "well targeted and effective policy measures" to tackle fuel poverty and its effects on mental and physical wellbeing "will be even more important during the economic recovery from the current pandemic".

Andrew Burlinson, Monica Giulietti, Cherry Law and Hui-Hsuan Liu, Fuel poverty and financial distress, Energy Economics, 2021:
https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eneco.2021.105464

Arts and culture may promote health

Research using our biomarker data has found that 'cultural capital' may promote health by reducing the frequency of risky health behaviours such as alcohol consumption and smoking. Previous research has shown a link between leisure time activities such as arts and cultural activities and self-reported health over the life course – but that measure of health is subjective.

Understanding Society's biomarker data is taken from blood samples and the results of a health assessment carried out by a nurse, so the data are objective. They can be used to create a 'score' for allostatic load – the wear and tear on the body caused by our lives and lifestyles.

Using these data, the researchers found that frequent participation in the arts, frequent attendance of cultural events, visits to museums or galleries, and visits to historical sites are linked to lower allostatic load. They also examined risky health behaviours, including alcohol consumption and smoking, to see what effect they had. The results suggest that 'cultural capital' may reduce the frequency of these behaviours, with implications for policy which promotes healthy leisure activities.

Senhu Wang, Lambert Zixin Li, Juan Zhang, and David Rehkopf, Leisure time activities and biomarkers of chronic stress: The mediating roles of alcohol consumption and smoking, Scandinavian Journal of Public Health, 2021:
https://doi.org/10.1177/1403494820987461
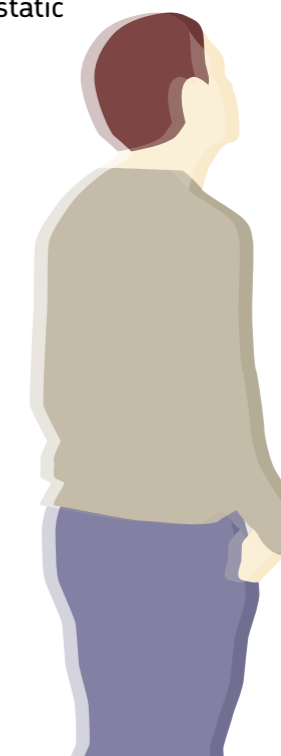
Benefit cuts reduce the system's ability to cushion loss of earnings

Research shows that incomes in the UK became more stable from 2009-2017, following the financial crash of 2008 and government austerity, but cuts to working age benefits during this time reduced the tax and benefit system's ability to protect people from earnings shocks.

The volatility of individual earnings fell by around 6% among people of working age between 2010 and 2017, largely because people stayed in their jobs and didn't leave the labour market. There was strong employment and earnings growth among low-income households during this period.

However, self-employed people's incomes were around twice as volatile as those of employed people – and this volatility increased as time went on. Also, social security benefits and tax credits tend to reduce income volatility. During this time, though, taxes and benefits became less well correlated with earnings, reducing their ability to counteract swings in labour income.

Silvia Avram, Mike Brewer, Paul Fisher and Laura Fumagalli, Household Earnings and Income Volatility in the UK, 2009-2017, The Journal of Economic Inequality, 2021: https://doi.org/10.1007/s10888-021-09517-3

Self-employed people's incomes were around twice as volatile as those of employed people

Ethnic minorities see more harassment in Whiter areas

Minorities in areas with a higher share of White people report a higher likelihood of harassment, and this increases when the area they live in is less integrated. There is also strong evidence that socio-economic disadvantage and residential instability foster harassment.

Using data from Understanding Society, including our Ethnic Minority Boost Sample, and geographical data from the 2011 Census, the researchers looked at self-reported harassment data rather than police statistics, and measured both actual experiences of harassment and fear of harassment.

They found that the kind of place people live in is important for minorities' fear of harassment, both because their experiences of it increase their fear of it happening again, and because their experiences affect their friends' and families' fear of harassment.

Government policy focuses on addressing harassment and fear of it by aiming to integrate minorities and reduce crime, and the researchers say national policy should include community-level measures, too.

William Shankley and James Laurence, Spaces of harassment: a multilevel analysis of the role of community ethnic composition, segregation and social disorganisation among ethnic minorities in Britain, Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 2021: https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2021.1974823

Think tanks examine policy using Understanding Society

"We need to take seriously the challenge of social disparities that underpin economic success"

Throughout 2021 think tanks have been using our data to assess subjects as diverse as the financial difficulties of Universal Credit claimants and the country's 'social fabric'.

In June 2021, Bright Blue, which describes itself as "*an independent think tank for liberal conservatism*", used data from our COVID-19 Survey and Wave 10 of our Main Survey to compare household finances before and during the pandemic. They showed that almost half of long-term Universal Credit (UC) claimants had fallen behind on household bills.

The analysis showed:

- a significant minority of Universal Credit claimants not up to date with household bills
- a significant minority of both new and existing UC households not up to date with rent or mortgage payments
- better life satisfaction scores for non-claimants than for new and existing UC claimants throughout the pandemic.

They said there was "*some evidence for improvement as the pandemic progressed ... [but] even with the Government increasing financial support provided through Universal Credit in March 2020, many claimants have continued to face significant financial difficulties*".

Bright Blue followed this up in October 2021 with research showing that "s*ignificant minorities of UC claimants have received informal financial support during the first year of the pandemic*" – that is, they had borrowed money from friends or family, despite the £20 uplift to Universal Credit.

In the first report, Bright Blue called on the government to keep the £20 UC uplift beyond September 2021. Although it was withdrawn, the Autumn Budget 2021 included a reduction of the Universal Credit taper rate from 63% to 55% and an increase in working allowances to £500 a year.

Onward, a think tank which produces research on economic and social issues, used Waves 1–9 of Understanding Society and Waves 1–18 of our predecessor the British Household Panel Survey for its Social Fabric Index, part of a research programme to understand what was happening to local communities around the country.

Our data showed falls in the share of people who are members of a group, and in the share of parents engaging in activities or outings with their children – and a rise in the number of people living alone. Other sources indicated that church attendance has more than halved, the average individual contribution to charity has fallen, and highlighted the closures of pubs and post offices.

In the words of Onward's director, Will Tanner, "*the United Kingdom has experienced a broad-based and long-term decline in the networks and institutions that make up the fabric of local communities*". This matters, he said, because "*there is a clear relationship between the political volatility of recent elections and Britain's fraying social fabric ... [and] because a growing body of research associates social capital with prosperity and human happiness*".

He adds that the work has implications for the government's 'levelling up' strategy in England, because "Local authorities in 'Red Wall' constituencies score 9 per cent lower on average than the UK average, and 13 per cent lower than the Conservative average."

Tanner said of the research, "*It is not enough to talk about tackling economic inequality or regional disparities in productivity; we also need to take seriously the challenge of social disparities that underpin economic success. The more we can understand these changes within society, and find new ways to create enduring civic networks and institutions that imbue society with belonging, the better equipped we will be to respond.*"

Benefit to all? Financial experience of Universal Credit claimants during the pandemic, June 2021 http://www.brightblue.org.uk/benefit-to-all/; Beyond the safety net? Informal sources of support for Universal Credit claimants during the COVID-19 pandemic, October 2021 http://www.brightblue.org.uk/beyond-the-safety-net/; The State of our Social Fabric, September 2020 https://www.ukonward.com/reports/the-state-of-our-social-fabric/

PUB CLOSED

Measuring poverty in the UK

The Social Metrics Commission used Understanding Society data to examine the persistence of poverty, and the experiences of people who live in poverty, to help prepare its *Measuring Poverty* 2020 report.

It concluded that there are many different types of poverty, and that the government therefore needs a range of policy responses to tackle the problem effectively. The report shows that rates of poverty have changed little in 20 years, and that 14.4 million people in the UK are living in families in poverty – 33% of children and 22% of all working age adults.

When the Commission's report came out, the Department for Work and Pensions announced that it would use this new measure of poverty to help develop experimental statistics on poverty. These would be the first step towards official National Statistics on the subject.

The DWP said: "*The Social Metrics Commission makes a compelling case for why we should look at poverty more broadly to give a more detailed picture of who is poor, their experience of poverty and their future chances of remaining in, or entering, poverty. … In the long run this could help us target support more effectively.*"

Measuring Poverty 2020, Social Metrics Commission, July 2020:
https://socialmetricscommission.org.uk/measuring-poverty-2020/

Rates of poverty have changed little in 20 years

Older people eating less during the pandemic

1 in 10 people aged over 60 ate less during the Covid pandemic and 3.7 million older people reported that they were unable to eat healthy and nutritious food.

Age UK used data from Understanding Society and the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing to find out how older people were coping with buying and eating food during the Covid outbreak.

Before the pandemic it was estimated that 1.3 million older people were already suffering from or at risk of malnutrition in the UK. COVID-19 restrictions instantly and dramatically increased the amount of time older people were isolated from family, friends, and carers. People were left alone and vulnerable, with the anxiety of catching the virus, restricted access to food shopping and a reduction in essential health care and daily support.

The Understanding Society COVID-19 Survey asked participants about their ability to eat healthy and nutritious food. Of those aged 60 and older, 72% reported that there were not able to eat healthy and nutritious food and only 28% of older people reported that they were.

Age UK called for more awareness of pandemic eating and food shopping for older people and more targeted support for the vulnerable elderly. The charity also encouraged the public to check on older relatives and neighbours to make sure they were eating enough.

1 in 10 aged 60+ have been eating less since the start of the pandemic
https://www.ageuk.org.uk/latest-press/articles/2021/1-in-10-1.4-million-aged-60-have-been-eating-less-since-the-start-of-the-pandemic/
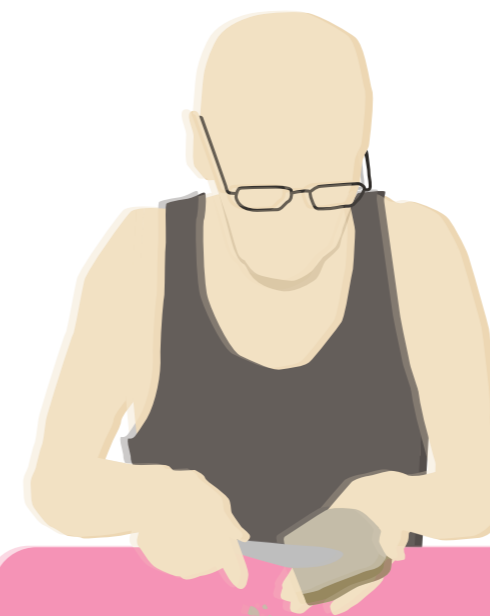
Ofgem's decision on price cap

The UK's energy regulator, Ofgem, used research based on Understanding Society data in its consultation on the default tariff cap during the pandemic.

In March 2021, it referred to research by Thomas Crossley, Paul Fisher and Hamish Low, saying: "*There is evidence that COVID-19 … is having a disproportionate impact on the most vulnerable … Almost half of the population have experienced declines in household earnings of at least 10%, but declines are most severe in the bottom pre-pandemic income quintiles.*"

Ofgem decides the level of its tariff cap in February and August each year, setting an upper price which energy suppliers can charge customers for each unit of energy they use. Prices fluctuate depending on wholesale prices of oil and gas. The regulator had reduced the cap in October 2020 to reflect changes in wholesale energy prices, and increased it the following April 2021 to allow suppliers to recoup some of their costs.

In a follow-up publication in May, Ofgem referred to the paper by Crossley, Fisher and Low again, saying: "*research findings … indicate that the Covid 19 pandemic has led to considerable financial impacts for many customers*". The cap remained at the same level until March 2022.

Price Cap consultation – Reviewing the potential impact of COVID-19 on the default tariff cap: cap period seven
https://www.ofgem.gov.uk/publications/price-cap-consultation-reviewing-potential-impact-covid-19-default-tariff-cap-cap-period-seven

A disproportionate impact on the most vulnerable

Home working and productivity

The Bank of England's Monetary Policy Report for November 2021 used Understanding Society data to examine the question of productivity when people work from home, suggesting that it could increase by up to 0.7%.

The committee considered the increase in working from home caused by the pandemic, and said some surveys of people working from home reported lower productivity, but that this might be accounted for by caring responsibilities and people adapting to new circumstances.

Citing Understanding Society, the report said "*workers that wish to work more from home after Covid had experienced greater productivity gains when working from home during the pandemic than those workers not planning to work more from home.*"

The Bank's analysis of our data, and data from a survey of Chief Financial Officers from UK businesses, found that working from home could boost potential productivity by around 0.5% to 0.7% – although these figures were "*likely to represent an upper bound impact*".

The committee said that, while "*more complex or urgent tasks, that may require more collaboration, can be harder from home … a quieter and more convenient working environment may boost the productivity of some workers*".

Monetary Policy Report – November 2021
https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/monetary-policy-report/2021/november-2021

Productivity when people work from home could increase by up to 0.7%

HM Treasury uses our data for Covid income modelling

HM Treasury used data from Understanding Society's COVID-19 Survey to model changes in household income after furlough was introduced.

They found that the government's response to the pandemic in March 2020 supported the poorest working households the most.

The Treasury used our data to compare employment status and any change in take-home pay in May 2020 compared with February that year, before lockdown was introduced. They also calculated the probability of people at different earning levels losing their job, being furloughed, or seeing their earnings/profit drop, again using our Study.

Once the Treasury had calculated the probabilities of the various effects the lockdown was likely to have, they used these statistics to simulate a 'shock' to employment and earnings on a similar scale using their Intra-Governmental Tax and Benefit Microsimulation model (IGOTM). They ranked households in net income deciles – ten groups, from lowest earning to highest – and calculated average gains and losses in each group.

In the first nine deciles – in other words, all but the highest earners – the various types of government support kept any drop in household income below 10%.

Household income for the lowest decile actually increased slightly in May 2020, compared to February the same year, as a result of extra welfare support, the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS) and Self-Employment Income Support Scheme, and other existing welfare payments.

Without 'furlough' payments, household incomes would have fallen by almost 20% on average, with those in the lowest income decile losing about £100 per week. The Treasury findings were published in their document, *Impact of COVID-19 on working household incomes: distributional analysis as of May 2020*.

HM Treasury also used our data for its distributional analysis for the March 2021 Budget. On this occasion, they were able to use our COVID-19 data up to November 2020 to estimate job and earnings losses and furloughing. Again, the modelling shows that government interventions were supporting the poorest working households the most (as a proportion of pre-Covid income). Earnings losses for the lower income deciles were smaller, and were "more than offset by government support".

The Treasury's use of Understanding Society data formed part of a report which showed that the UK suffered its biggest annual fall in output in 300 years during the pandemic, but that the labour market stayed surprisingly steady compared to previous recessions.

> The report also found that, in the years before COVID-19:
>
> - real median household income growth was greater for households in the lower- and middle-income quintiles than in the highest income quintile
>
> - the UK labour market was performing strongly, with earnings growth strongest among the lowest earners and employment reaching a record high.

Other research using Understanding Society found that the level at which CJRS was set (covering 80% of salary) was the optimum level for preventing financial distress. The paper – Furlough and household financial distress during the Covid-19 pandemic, by Christoph Görtz and Danny McGowan at the University of Birmingham, and Mallory Yeromonahos at Westminster Business School – found no difference in the probability of financial distress between people who saw their income fall by up to 20%, but that above this level the probability of financial distress rapidly increases.

The UK suffered its biggest annual fall in output in 300 years during the pandemic

Find out about the impact Understanding Society has on our website: www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/research/impact

Government mental health monitoring

The Office for Health Improvement and Disparities (formerly Public Health England) has been using Understanding Society as one of the sources for its COVID-19 mental health and wellbeing surveillance. The organisation compiles routinely updated indicators from multiple sources and summarises findings.

During the pandemic, the research has highlighted research using Understanding Society which has shown that:

- three-quarters of adults reported consistently good (46.2%) or very good (30.9%) mental health between April and October 2020. 15.8% reported large initial declines in mental health but recovered to their pre-pandemic levels by October. 4.8% reported a steady deterioration in mental health over the period, and 2.3% reported very poor mental health throughout

- people from ethnic minorities were at higher risk of reporting deteriorations in mental health that were sustained or worsened between March and September 2020

- around 14% of respondents who faced financial struggles and took advantage of financial support reported a new mental health diagnosis between May 2020 and January 2021. Among adults who benefitted financially during the pandemic, just 4% reported a new mental health diagnosis.

The quarterly report aims to inform policy, planning and commissioning in health and social care.

COVID-19 mental health and wellbeing surveillance: report, Office for Health Improvement and Disparities, September 2020: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-mental-health-and-wellbeing-surveillance-report
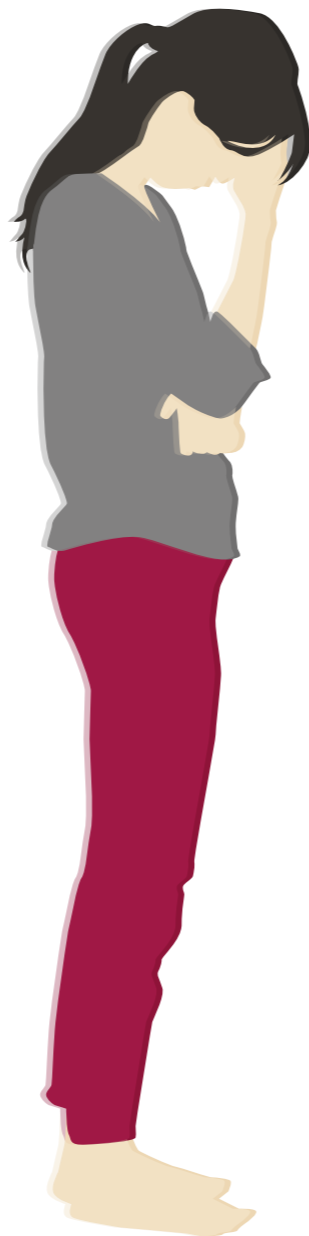
Understanding Society data underpins child vaccine guidance

The Chief Medical Officers (CMOs) of England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales used research based on Understanding Society data as a 'key input' for their advice on vaccinating 12–15-year-olds against Covid.

The letter to Sajid Javid, Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, followed advice from the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) at the beginning of September that "*the benefits from vaccination [for 12–15-year-olds] are marginally greater than the potential known harms*" – but the JCVI added at the time that it was not within its remit to consider "*wider societal impacts, including educational benefits*". As a result, the Health Secretary asked the CMOs to "*consider the matter from a broader perspective*".

The CMOs consulted bodies such as the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, the Royal College of General Practice, and the Faculty of Public Health – and examined data from the Office for National Statistics, and "*published data on the impact of COVID-19 on education*".

They cited *School closures and children's emotional and behavioural difficulties*, published by the Institute for Social and Economic Research in March 2021, as one of their 'key inputs'. The research used data from Understanding Society's main survey, as well as our COVID-19 Survey, to track how children's mental health had changed over the previous three years.

The report found:

- a significant rise in emotional and behavioural difficulties among primary school children following the 2020 spring and summer term school closures

- a rise that was greater for children who were not prioritised to return to school for six weeks before the summer holiday

- a slight improvement in wellbeing once schools reopened in September, but not to pre-pandemic levels

- that the gap between those who missed out on more vs. less time in school during the summer term remained stubbornly wide.

The CMOs' advice says the "*likely benefits of reducing educational disruption, and the consequent reduction in public health harm from educational disruption, on balance provide sufficient extra advantage ... to recommend in favour of vaccinating this group.*"

Universal vaccination of children and young people aged 12 to 15 years against COVID-19, Department of Health and Social Care, September 2021: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/universal-vaccination-of-children-and-young-people-aged-12-to-15-years-against-covid-19/universal-vaccination-of-children-and-young-people-aged-12-to-15-years-against-covid-19; School closures and children's emotional and behavioural difficulties https://www.iser.essex.ac.uk/files/projects/school-closures/SDQnote2021_final.pdf

Key data

Mainstage Waves 1–11: https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/documentation/mainstage

Innovation Panel Waves 1–13: https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/documentation/innovation-panel

COVID-19 Study Waves 1–9: https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/documentation/covid-19

Health, biomarkers, genetics and epigenetics: https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/documentation/health-assessment

Linked data: https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/documentation/linked-data

Teaching datasets: https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/documentation/teaching-datasets

For more information on the work of Understanding Society see our website.

About the Study: https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/about

Survey methods publications: https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/research/methods-publications

User Support: https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/help

Our Impact: https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/research/impact

Research publications: https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/research/publications

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