





Contents

Welcome to our 2022 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

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Foreword

by Simon Briscoe

It is clear from this new annual report that Understanding Society has made progress on so many fronts in the last year.

The Study was set some challenges when it first began in 2009: nine benefits the ESRC wanted it to demonstrate. To pick out just a few of those, there has clearly been solid growth in the numbers of people using the data – from a few hundred a year in the early days to over 2,000 in 2022.

In that time, too, the number of users of the teaching datasets has risen impressively, and new users have been trained in significant numbers, fulfilling the objective of contributing to the UK's capability in quantitative methods. Government departments, think tanks and others have used the data, too, leading to real impact on policy and practice across the UK.

Throughout this, and in contrast to the case with many other surveys, response rates from participants have stayed healthy. We might think of this as the most important achievement, given that without Understanding Society's participants, none of the other work would be possible.

The Study is not resting on its laurels, though. Following the success of the first collection of biological data in Waves 2 and 3, there will be a new collection in Wave 16, beginning next year. This will encourage new biosocial research, and add a time point to the existing biomarker data, making longitudinal comparisons possible.

You'll find more highlights of 2022 throughout the report. Thank you to everyone at Understanding Society for what you have done. I'd also like to thank my fellow members of the Strategic Oversight Board, and – above all – the Study participants. As the UK continues to change, your annual interview is ever more important for tracking the experiences of our population.

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

“Response rates
from participants
have stayed healthy”



Introduction

by the Director, Michaela Benzeval

Preparing the Annual Report gives a welcome opportunity to reflect on everything that has happened in 2022. As with previous years, it's been busy with new data, new developments in survey methods and a steady flow of new research papers coming from the Study's data. Understanding Society is now well established as a vital source of information for researchers and analysts exploring life in the UK, and one of the leading data resources in the country.

Throughout the year the Understanding Society team has been working on a wide variety of projects.

Wave 13 and 14 continuing samples are in the field and response rates remain high. We re-introduced face-to-face interviewing for those who have not participated through the pandemic and are pleased to see some are returning to the Study. You can read more about our response rates on pages 20-21.

The Wave 14 general population boost has also been out in the field in 2022. Returning to face-to-face fieldwork has been challenging, with our fieldwork agencies having to manage interviewer capacity and turnover. Throughout 2022, we have been

working with Kantar Public and NatCen to improve participation and introducing a range of design changes which will help with year two of the boost.

Wave 15 started in January 2023 and includes the updated environmental behaviour questions based on the consultation led by one of our new topic champions, Wouter Poortinga from Cardiff University. In Wave 15 we have also restructured our family questions to better capture people's complex family dynamics. Linked to this will be the first iteration of our Significant Other Survey focusing on couples and parents who live apart.

The Innovation panel went in a new direction in 2022, with the annual call including, for the first time, proposals for new content to be added to the survey as well as the traditional call for methodological experiments. This call had a very high response from the research community, and we have included as many suggestions as is practical in Wave 16. Data from Wave 14 is soon to be released and includes a 'Living Apart Together' survey.

At the end of November, the UK Data Service released Wave 12 data, including Index of Multiple Deprivation quintiles, allowing researchers to further investigate area poverty in the UK. Earlier in the year, we released the first calendar year file for 2020, which will be a regular feature of the Study from now on. We also added proteomics data to our Wave 2/3 biomarker datasets – and you can read more about our biological data work later in this Annual Report.

“A vital source of information for researchers and analysts exploring life in the UK”

In 2022, we also ran a busy events and training programme, which you can read more about on page 37. Our policy report, Insights 2022, featured the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on three themes: economic effects, mental health and young people. We have also added a pathway to Understanding Society on the website to help new users navigate the information and help we provide with the Study.

Our Fellowship programme continues to bring new research ideas to the Study. In 2022, we ran a number of fellowship calls to 'catch up' on the time we missed doing this during the pandemic and have awarded 14 new fellowships. Fellows are working on diverse areas such as: healthcare outcomes for chronic illnesses, intergenerational transmission of wealth, place-based policies for levelling up life chances of young people in coastal towns. There is a strong focus (seven fellowships) on the lives of children and young people.

Finally, 2022 saw Understanding Society receive an independent 10-year evaluation commissioned by our funders, the Economic and Social Research Council. This independent review examined whether the Study had met key targets, and what impact the Study has had, and heard from researchers and policy makers who use Understanding Society data. The report was overwhelmingly positive about the impact that the Study has had in its first 10 years and is helping us develop new work that will support data users even better in the future.



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. Nine key benefits were identified by the ESRC, which informed the design of Understanding Society and are used to measure the ongoing progress of the Study. The benefits measure how users interact with Understanding Society data and how the Study is used by researchers and policymakers to create impact.

BENEFIT 1

Promotes new waves of inter and multi-disciplinary data

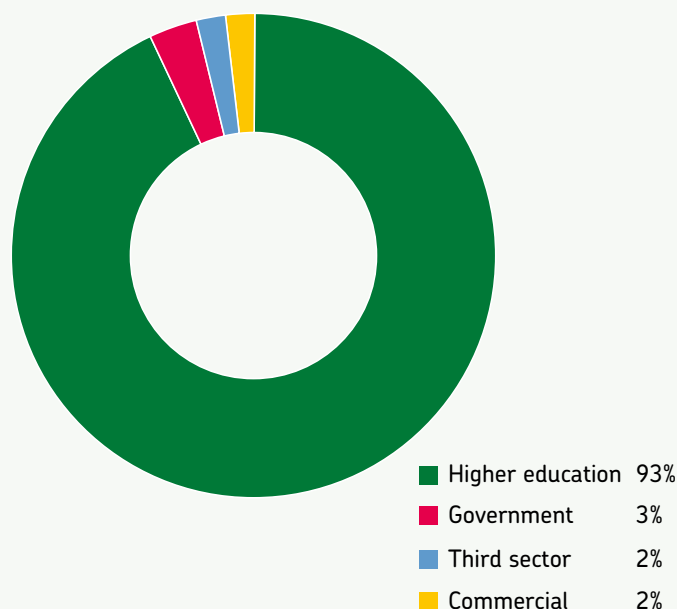
Understanding Society is a heavily used data resource, used by researchers from a wide range of disciplines. Table 1 shows the number of users since the inception of the Study, broken down by academic discipline. As expected for a social science dataset, Understanding Society is most used by researchers in economics and sociology, but there is also high use in health sciences, and geography and environment.

Table 1: Understanding Society annual users by area of research, from 2011-2022

Discipline Group	Annual Users
Economics and Econometrics	18217
Sociology and Social Policy	8735
Health Sciences	3066
Geography and Environment	1888
Business and Finance	1775
Political Studies	1770
Statistics and Maths	1692
Education	395
Computer Sciences	278
Other	186
Biological Sciences	172
Law	85
History and Cultural Studies	69
General Engineering	63
Civil Engineering	63
Art and Design	55
Physical Sciences	29
Language and Literature	26
Philosophy	25
Total	38589

Figure 1 show data downloads by sector in 2022. Understanding Society data was downloaded 3,772 times during the year. Higher education researchers and students form the majority of direct users of the datasets, but there continue to be steady download numbers for government, third sector and commercial users. These non-academic users often make more use of evidence from the Study, rather than the data themselves.

Figure 1: Data downloads by sector



BENEFIT 2

Promotes and develops new forms of methodology

To support the development of the Study, Understanding Society has a programme of research and innovation. The survey methods research carried out using Understanding Society benefits the wider methods research community and other longitudinal studies, as well as providing a sound basis for our own future work.

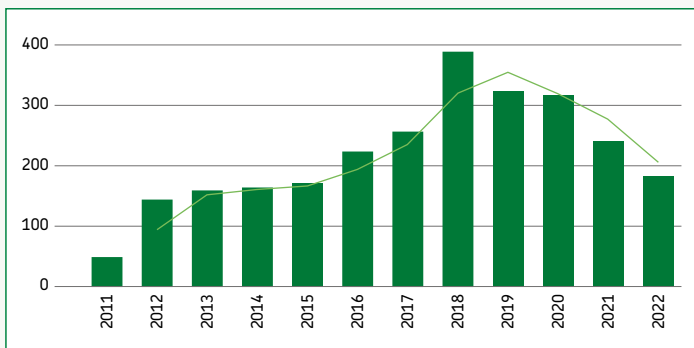
In 2022 Understanding Society was used in 18 papers on survey methods. Working papers published by the Understanding Society team this year included research on recruiting a boost sample, estimating mode effects, using text messages to incentivise response, and the role of interviewers in reporting health measures.

Each year a series of experiments are run using the Innovation Panel – a sample of households used to test innovative ways of collecting data and for developing new areas of research. In 2022 experiments were run on collecting body volume data via an app, seeking consent to link to Twitter data, consent for data linkage, and collecting contact details for parents living in separate households.

The Innovation Panel is also available for researchers to use as a dataset; Figure 2 shows the number of annual users for these data. Interest in the Innovation Panel for survey methods research remains high.

To allow for more experimentation on survey content in 2022 the Innovation Panel competition asked for suggestion for new content, as well as methodological experiments. This change in emphasis generated a number of interesting proposals for new content.

Figure 2: Innovation Panel data annual users



In addition to published outputs, the Understanding Society team provide expert advice on survey and question design and survey implementation. In 2022 the team have provided guidance to:

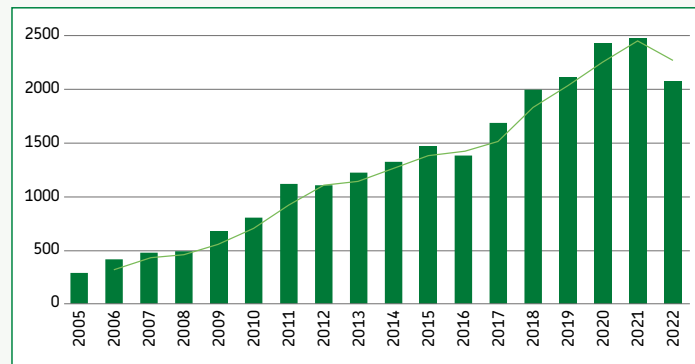
- The National Survey for Wales
- HMRC (on the feasibility of a longitudinal study)
- ONS (for the review of the Household Expenditure Survey)
- House of Commons Public and Constitutional Affairs Select Committee (on survey methods)
- Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Community Life Survey methods advisory group)
- Ministry of Justice
- European Social Survey (on sample design)
- GESIS, Germany (on survey design for greenhouse gas emissions)

BENEFIT 3

The number and breadth of data users increases over time

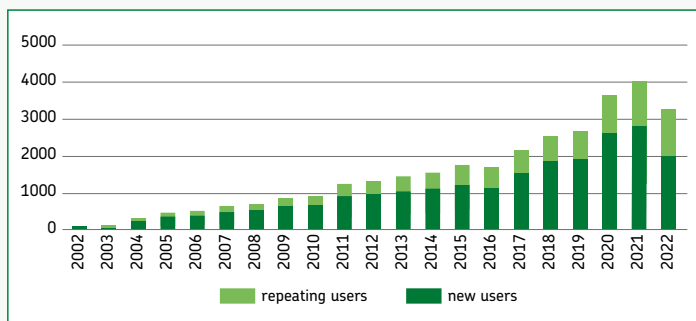
The number of users for Understanding Society has stabilised, following the extreme growth of data use during the Covid-19 pandemic. The urgent need for data during 2020 and 2021 drew new users to the dataset, but in 2022 there has been a rebalancing towards more restrained growth in users. Figure 3 shows the growth in the number of annual users for the Understanding Society main survey. During this 12-month period, 1,405 new users downloaded the dataset. When looking at all users, new and existing, over 2,000 researchers used the main survey in 2022.

Figure 3: Annual users for Understanding Society main data



We have been pleased to note the strong growth in more researchers using Understanding Society repeatedly. In 2022 the Understanding Society datasets had 1,990 new users and 1,222 repeating users. Figure 4 shows how the balance between new and repeating users has changed as the Study has developed. As with the new users for the main survey data, this chart shows the heightened use during the pandemic period, but the total unique users for Understanding Society datasets was higher in 2022 than in the pre-pandemic 2019.

Figure 4: Users of all Understanding Society datasets by new vs repeating status



Value-added datasets have seen a particular rise in user numbers in 2022, see Figure 5. These datasets include the new Calendar Year data, teaching datasets, and the Cohabitation and Marital Histories file. In 2022 there were 382 users for value-added datasets.

Datasets of this type can be easier for researchers to analyse than the very detailed data from the main survey. We will be looking to produce more value-added datasets in the future.

Secure data and special licence data continue to perform strongly, see Figures 6 and 7, although with smaller user numbers due to the more specialist nature of these datasets. Access to Special Licence data was amended during the Covid pandemic to allow researchers to access these data from their home computer with additional, online agreement from the UK Data Service. This mode of access has been continued after the pandemic, allowing greater flexibility for researchers while maintaining high standards of data security. You can read more about working from home Special Licence access on the UK Data Service website: <https://ukdataservice.ac.uk/help/covid-19/covid-19-special-licence-faqs-and-permitted-datasets/>

Secure data is only available to researchers via the UK Data Service Secure Lab or ONS Secure Research Service due to the higher level of disclosure risk. Recently arrangements have been made by UK Data Service to enable international use by selected countries. Files available include very detailed geographies and linked administrative data.

Figure 5: Users for value-added data

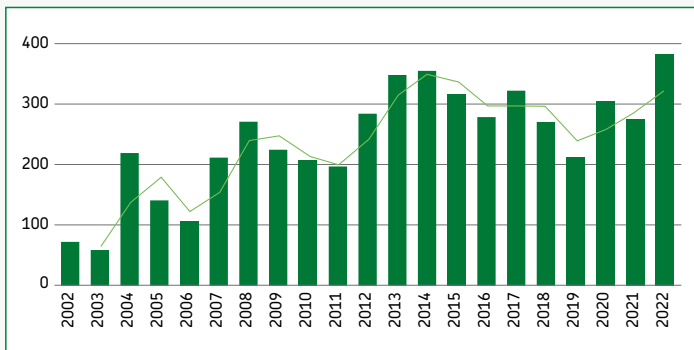


Figure 6: Users for secure data

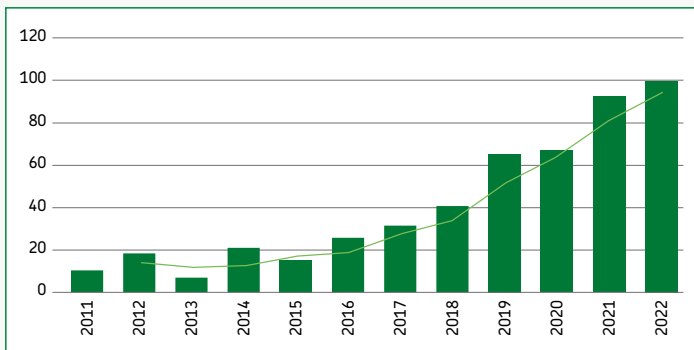
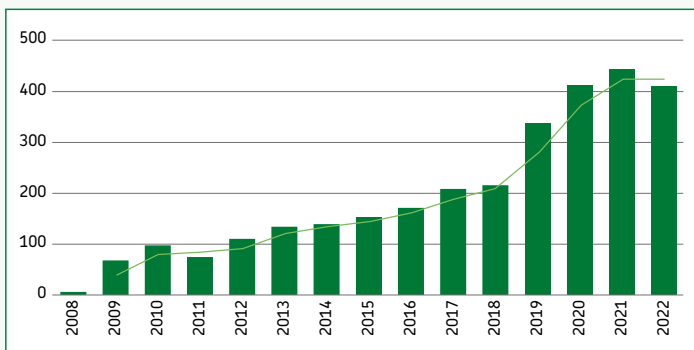


Figure 7: Annual users for Special Licence data



BENEFIT 4

Recognition of the UK’s reputation as an international centre of social science excellence

Understanding Society is used by researchers from across the world. In 2022, 13% of event attendees were international and our online resources were accessed from researchers in every continent. On our website, over 81,900 page views came from Europe, 16,800 from North America, and 12,800 from Asia. For the first time our website was accessed by researchers in Antarctica!

Staff from Understanding Society also worked with, and presented at, a range of international organisations. In 2022 these included:

- European Survey Research Association Conference
- Society for Longitudinal and Lifecourse Studies
- COORDINATE – Cohort Community Research and Development Infrastructure Network Access Throughout Europe
- Scientific Commission for the Swiss Household Panel
- Advisory Board for FORS, Swiss Centre of Excellence in the Social Sciences in Switzerland
- Board of External Overseers US Panel Study of Income Dynamics
- Scientific Advisory Board of Statistics Sweden
- Scientific Advisory Board of the GESIS-Leibniz Institute for Social Sciences, Germany

BENEFIT 5

Contributes to capability in quantitative methods and use of interdisciplinary data

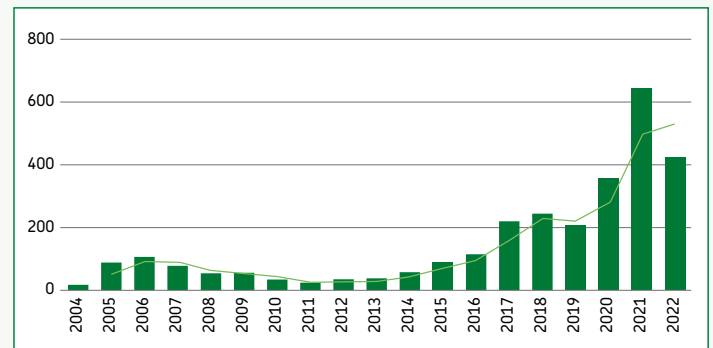
Our user support team provides comprehensive training on using Understanding Society. In 2022 the introduction to Understanding Society training course was run online and in-person, covering four statistical packages: R, Stata, SPSS and SAS. Training courses were also run on panel data methods, biology for social scientists, and using weights in Understanding Society. Over the 12 months, 369 people attended a training course – the highest number in any year so far.

Online training continued to be popular with data users, with 281 people using Understanding Society's MoodleX courses.

To support the development of the next generation of social science researchers, Understanding Society produces teaching datasets. These can be used to teach quantitative methods and to teach students how to use longitudinal data for research in different disciplines. Two teaching datasets were already available, one on longitudinal data and one on ethnicity and health data, and in 2022 a third dataset was added to this collection. The Covid-19 teaching dataset allows students to explore data from the Understanding Society Covid-19 survey to find out how the pandemic affected different people's lives. Students can research topics such as working from home and home-schooling, how the pandemic affected health and wellbeing, and what happened to social and neighbourhood cohesion.

The teaching datasets continue to be well-used resources. As Figure 8 shows, the annual users have dipped from the pandemic peak, but we still recorded over 400 users in 2022.

Figure 8: Annual users for teaching data



We also target some of our materials at school children to encourage an interest in data and social sciences. A second lesson pack for Key Stage 4 teachers was developed in 2022. Working with Futurum Careers, the teaching materials feature research from Professor Birgitta Rabe using Understanding Society data to look at the impact of pandemic school closures on pupil's mental health. The teaching pack introduces using longitudinal data for research on wellbeing and encourages students to think about how the study of economics helps researchers better understand families and households.

BENEFIT 6

New insights into interactions between social and biological data

Understanding Society provides vital data for exploring the interactions between the social and the biological. New bio data has been released in 2022, with proteomics, polygenetic, and epigenetic clock data being released. See page 35 for more details on these datasets. The new datasets have been accompanied by user guides, plus video training on using biological data as a social researcher.

Research on social and health interactions this year has included papers on social mobility and DNA ageing, the associations between diabetes and mental health, the impact of sleep problems on chronic health conditions, and whether polygenic risk scores for schizophrenia and major depression are associated with socio-economic indicators.

Table 2: Publications based on Understanding Society, 2009–2022

Subject Group	Publications
Health and Health Behaviours Wellbeing	2092
Household Finances	1568
Family Households	1483
Employment	1335
Political Beliefs, Attitudes and Civic Engagement	978
Social Stratification and Mobility	545
Neighbourhoods	419
Survey Methods and Statistics	415
Education	385
Ethnicity and Migration	383
Social Networks and Relations	268
Housing and Residential Mobility	260
Policy Relevant	212
Statistics	206
Technology and Computing	178
Time Use, Leisure and Arts	150
Business and Marketing	128
Genetics	87
Environmental Behaviours	83
Transport	80
Total	11255

More information about future biodata collection can be found on page 34.

BENEFIT 7

Enables new forms of science over time

Throughout the year we track the publications using data from Understanding Society. Table 2 gives a breakdown of the publications, with the key domains for research. From the start of the Study in 2009, over 11,200 have been identified which use data from Understanding Society. The largest number of publications come from the areas of health, household finances, families and employment. Other areas have shown growth: publications in environmental behaviours grew from 3 publications in 2021 to 13 in 2022.

When we look at publications in high impact journals, public health and epidemiology, public policy, and health and social science have the highest proportion of published papers in these journals. In total, 51.9% of papers using Understanding Society appear in high impact journals. Table 3 gives a breakdown of research areas in high impact journals.

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

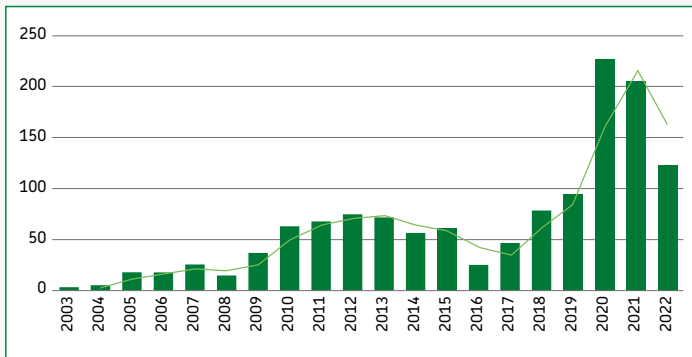
Discipline Group	Low	High	Grand Total	% HI
Economics	320	128	448	28.6
Sociology and Political Science	88	234	322	72.7
Survey Methods	97	146	243	60.1
Medicine	159	53	212	25.0
Health and Social Science	44	119	163	73.0
Public Policy	38	114	152	75.0
Demography	65	65	130	50.0
Psychiatry, Mental Health, Psychology and Neuroscience	51	67	118	56.8
Environmental Science	44	65	109	59.6
Public Health and Epidemiology	4	102	106	96.2
Biology and Genetics	23	56	79	70.9
Business, Management and Accounting	62		62	0.0
Statistical Methods	36	3	39	7.7
Life Span and Lifecourse	36	2	38	5.3
Education	25	9	34	26.5
Geography	13	19	32	59.4
Multidisciplinary	12	14	26	53.8
Humanities	6	8	14	57.1
Other	3	8	11	72.7
Social Psychology		4	4	100.0
Total	1126	1216	2342	51.9

BENEFIT 8

Informs development of new policy over time

Government use of Understanding Society has dropped in 2022 after the peak during the Covid pandemic. In 2022 we recorded 122 data downloads from government users, less than the 205 recorded in 2021, but greater than the pre-pandemic use of the datasets. Figure 9 shows the number of downloads recorded for government users.

Figure 9: Annual data downloads for UK government users



Government use of Understanding Society is also tracked through the impact the Study has on policy. In 2022 we have identified the following uses of Understanding Society for policy development:

- **What teachers do after leaving and implications for pay-setting**, Office of Manpower Economics, January 2022 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/what-teachers-do-after-leaving-implications-for-pay-setting>
- **Meeting Housing Demand**, House of Lords Built Environment Committee, January 2022 <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/8354/documents/85292/default/>
- **Consumer Protection Study 2022**, Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, April 2022 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/consumer-protection-study-2022>
- **Reimagining where we live: cultural placemaking and the levelling up agenda**, Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, June 2022 <https://committees.parliament.uk/work/1744/reimagining-where-we-live-cultural-placemaking-and-the-levelling-up-agenda/publications/>

- **The Pensions Dashboard Regulations (Northern Ireland)**, the Department for Communities of the Northern Ireland Executive, December 2022 <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/pensions-dashboards-regulations-northern-ireland-2022>
- **Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the health and access to health care of disabled people: a rapid review**, Health and Care Wales, March 2022 <https://healthandcareresearchwales.org/impact-covid-19-pandemic-disabled-people>
- **Grassroots participation in sport and physical activity**, House of Commons Public Accounts Committee, November 2022 <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/111047/html/>
- **Income Dynamics: 2010 – 2020**, Department for Work and Pensions, March 2022 <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/income-dynamics-2010-to-2020>

BENEFIT 9

Informs development of business practice in private and Civil Society sectors

Data use by commercial organisations remained steady in 2022, but dropped among third sector users. We recorded 68 data downloads by commercial users and 72 downloads by third sectors users during the last year.

When looking at the impact Understanding Society has for commercial and civil society sectors, in addition to data downloads, the Study use has included:

- **Longer-term pensioner poverty and poverty transitions**, part of Poverty in Later Life, Independent Age, January 2022. <https://www.independentage.org/poverty-later-life-how-people-older-age-move-and-out-of-poverty-and-what-should-be-done-to-reduce>
- **Overcoming health inequalities**, Northern Health Alliance, January 2022 <https://www.thenhsa.co.uk/2022/01/new-report-shows-almost-30bn-health-cost-of-englands-most-deprived-communities/>
- **Human development report**, United Nations Development Programme, September 2022 <https://hdr.undp.org/content/human-development-report-2021-22>
- **Employee Wellbeing, Work Behaviours and Work Outcomes in a Hybrid Work Context**, RAND Corporation, October 2022 https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA2083-1
- **The invisible family: the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on single parents living in London**, Gingerbread, June 2022 <https://www.gingerbread.org.uk/policy-campaigns/publications-index/the-invisible-family-the-impact-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-on-single-parents-living-in-london/>
- **Volunteering together: inclusive volunteering and disabled people**, Spirit of 2012, June 2022 <https://spiritof2012.org.uk/insights/volunteering-together-inclusive-volunteering-and-disabled-people/>
- **Anxiety nation? Economic insecurity and mental distress in 2020s Britain**, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, November 2022 <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/anxiety-nation-economic-insecurity-and-mental-distress-2020s-britain>

Figure 10: Annual UK user downloads of any Study group for UK Commercial

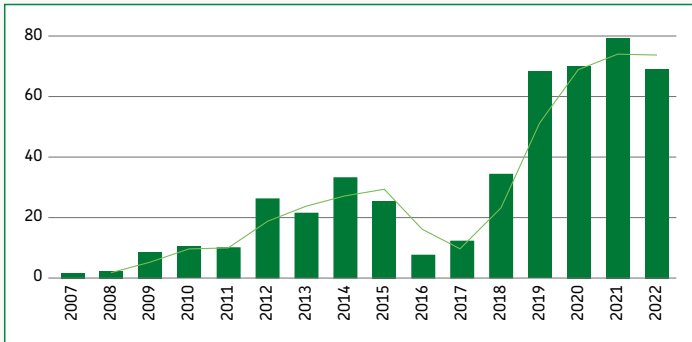
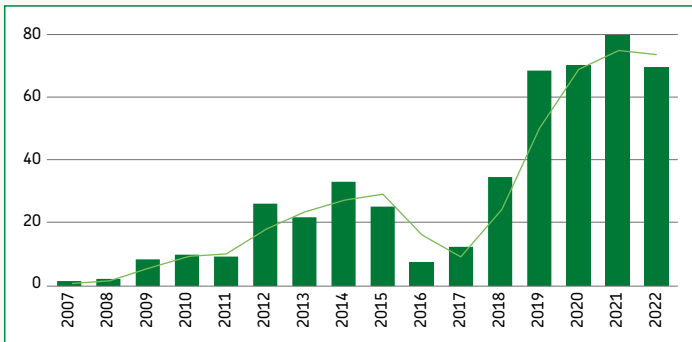


Figure 11: Annual data downloads for third sector users



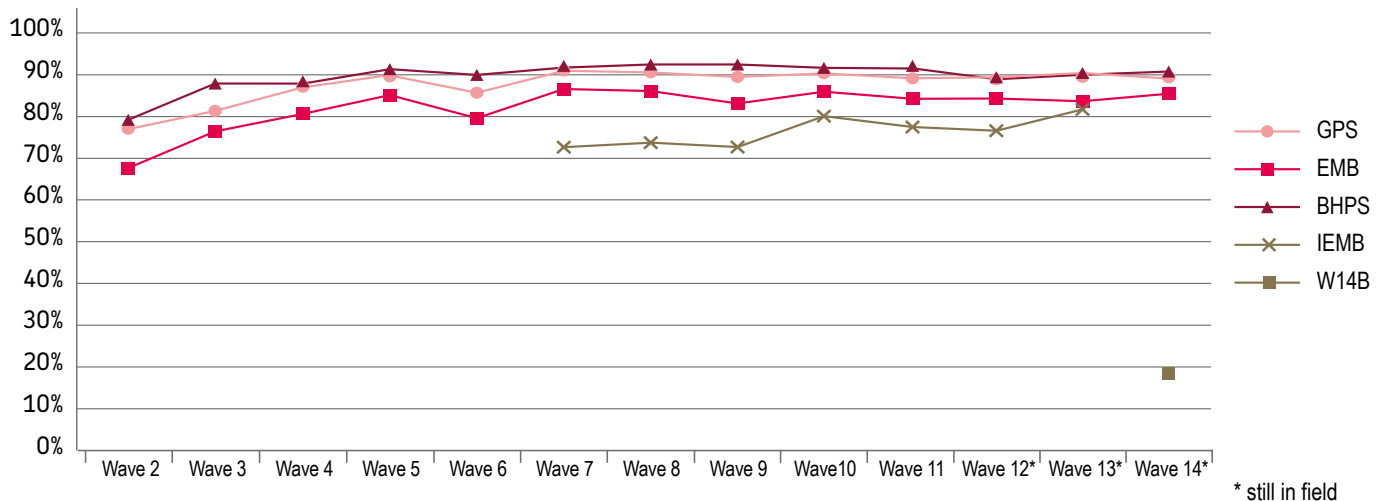
Stable response rates

After the slight dip in response during the Covid-19 period, participants have returned to Understanding Society and response rates have risen again during 2022

Although many participants complete their survey on the web every year, the return to face-to-face interviews has been welcomed by other participants who like the personal contact that it gives them. The option to visit homes again has also helped reach households who find completing an online survey more difficult.

Household response rates

The chart below shows the response rates for people who completed a survey in the previous wave 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.



Find information about all our response rates for each wave of the Study on our website:

www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/documentation/mainstage/user-guides/main-survey-user-guide/response-rates

Response rates remain high across all the Understanding Society samples. In 2022, Waves 13 and 14 were still in the field. For Wave 13, 45% of households completed their interview online, without having to be issued to an interviewer to follow-up. For Wave 14, this rose to just over 50%. While the General Population Sample and the British Household Panel Survey sample retained steady response rates of around 90%, we were pleased to note an increase in the Wave 13 response rate for households from the Immigrant and Ethnic Minority Boost, rising to over 80%.

Wave 14 Boost

In 2022, Understanding Society, Kantar Public and Nat Cen started the Wave 14 boost. This general population boost sample aims to increase the number of households in the Study, across a wide spectrum of the population. Fieldwork for the boost has been difficult post-pandemic, with a decrease in experienced interviewers available for the Study and a reduced public appetite for completing new surveys.

The boost will continue into 2023, and new strategies have been put in place to encourage recruitment. Boost invitation letters now include a QR code for fast access to the survey, and the HM Government logo is being used on invitation letters, to give the survey further legitimacy for new entrants. Incentives have also been revised. Early indications show that these targeted measures are increasing initial response.



Participant Panel

Our Participant Panel, which started in 2021, is now well-embedded in the Study. In 2022 they gave the Study feedback on collecting biological samples, in particular how they would feel if asked to send a poo sample to Understanding Society, and the practicalities of completing their interview.

New website for our younger participants

Children and young people are a vital part of Understanding Society and we wanted to create an interactive website that would allow them to see how their survey answers are used by researchers.

The new site is targeted at 10-15-year-olds and focuses on five key areas: school, screen time, mental health, money, and sports and fitness. Young people can use the site to find out how their homework time compares to the average for their age, find out what research says about developing good mental wellbeing, and how much time different age groups spend online. The site also shows who's spending, and who's saving, their pocket money.

You can explore the site here:

<https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/youth/>





“So, this year my daughter is 10, so will be able to complete the survey too. Previously it was just me and she was always wanting to be involved!”

New dataset for calendar years

Supporting research that tracks changes over time

To analyse how people's lives change over time, information needs to be collected from our participants at fixed intervals. In Understanding Society, each set of annual interviews is referred to as a wave. The fieldwork period for each wave stretches over 24 months, but the time interval between interviews for each household is generally around one year. Sometimes individuals are difficult to contact, or are away during the entire fieldwork period, and these participants are interviewed later increasing the gap between interviews. We manage this fieldwork structure by having overlapping waves, so in any year two waves of the Study are in the field.

Researchers examining change over time will tend to use the waves of Understanding Society to look at longitudinal trends. However, there are occasions when researchers would like to analyse what happens to people in a particular year and how this changes from previous years.

Up until now, anyone wishing to do this type of analysis would have to combine the data from the consecutive waves that were collected in the year they wanted to study. To enable cross-sectional analysis for calendar years to be carried out more easily, we now provide a calendar year dataset, which includes the variables that are collected in every wave. Appropriate weights for the dataset are also included. This new release starts with data collected in 2020 and a new dataset will be released for each year from now on.

There are two versions of the 2020 calendar year dataset: an End User Licence version, which is suitable for the majority of research, and a Special Licence version, which contains more detailed variants of some variables, such as non-top-coded income variables and more detailed occupations. Both datasets can be downloaded from the UK Data Service.

“ A dataset designed to enable timely cross-sectional analysis of individuals and households ”



Capturing the complexity of family life

Updating our questionnaire content to reflect different types of family relationships

Family content in the Understanding Society questionnaire was based on original questions in the British Household Panel Survey. These questions focused on the household as the driving force of family relationships and the survey was designed to capture information about the family members living in that one home. Families are complex, though, and changing relationships mean that many families are split over two or more households. Family dynamics have also changed, with more single-sex families, blended families, and multi-generation households.

This year we have reviewed our content on families to make it more inclusive of different family types and to make it easier for participants to tell us about the significant people in their lives, whether they live in their household or not. In previous waves of the Study, people living outside the Understanding Society household would be recorded because of their link to the participant, but we wanted to look more holistically at family life and develop questions that tell us about their lives too.

We have updated some of our questions about family life, making them more inclusive and less heteronormative. It is now easier for same-sex couples to record their relationships and we now ask women and men the same questions about fertility and new babies.

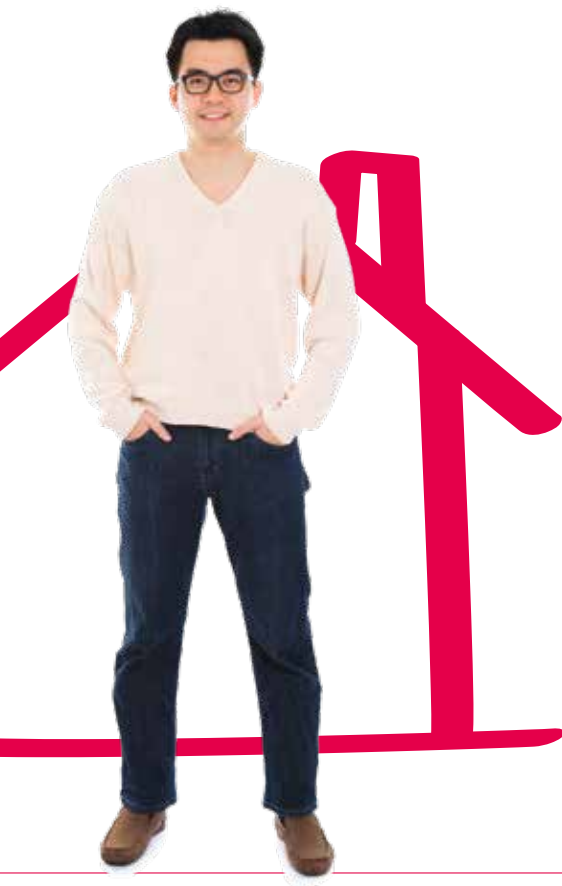
We have also restructured the content on families, creating a new 'child summary' which allows adults in the survey to record details of all their children more accurately – whether they live in the household with them or not. The new content allows children to be recorded as living in two households, without having to name one as their 'main' home. For the first time, the Study now captures information on participants who are acting as guardians and asks specific questions about the guardian/child relationship, parental contact, access to support services and how long they expect the guardianship to last.

The plan is for the detailed family content to rotate, but the child summary will be asked every wave, so participants have the option to record changes each time they are interviewed.

Living apart together

A pilot project has been finding out about the significant relationships participants have outside their household. Many couples choose to live in different homes, but there is little research that has been done on 'living apart together' relationships. Understanding Society is ideally placed to capture information about couples living apart together, but it requires extra information from participants and their partners.

In 2022, we experimented using the Innovation Panel to see whether participants would share information about Understanding Society with their partner and whether their partner would complete a short survey. Initial results suggest that some participants are willing to share information about their living apart together relationships. We are rolling this project out to the main sample at Wave 15 and including parents who live apart, as well as couples.



New methods research

Does giving feedback on blood samples influence response rates and consent?

In medical studies, it is usual for participants to be given feedback on any biological samples they donate, but for observational studies, like Understanding Society, it is less common due to concerns about changing observed behaviours. Evidence suggests that not giving feedback may be deterring some participants from giving biological samples, so the Innovation Panel was used to test this.

Innovation Panel participants were invited to take part in a biomeasures data collection. Three modes of collection were used: collection by a nurse, collection by an interviewer, and participant collection alongside a web interview. In each group, participants were randomly selected to receive feedback and the three modes, plus the feedback or no feedback, were analysed.

Just over 80% of individuals in responding households took part in the survey, and of these 48% agreed to provide a blood sample. Being offered feedback had little effect on overall participation in the study, but did increase consent for providing a blood sample.

Participants who were interviewed by a nurse were much more likely to consent to give blood, and offering feedback only made a 2% difference to their blood consent rates.

For those interviewed by an interviewer, while a high percentage of people asked for a blood spot collection kit to be left with them (80% for the non-feedback group and 76% of the feedback group), only 36% of the non-feedback group and 43% of the feedback group actually returned a blood sample.

The effect of offering feedback was strongest for the web-mode group, with 33% of the feedback group giving blood samples, compared with 27% of the non-feedback group. When the researchers looked at the mode of actual participation, compared with the mode initially allocated, feedback had less effect on those who actually took part with an interviewer than those allocated to one, and the opposite was true for the web; feedback had a bigger effect for those who took part by web than those allocated to it.

Read this research

Michaela Benzeval, Alexandria Andrayas, Jan Mazza et al. **Does the feedback of blood results in observational studies influence response and consent? A randomised study of the Understanding Society Innovation Panel, 19 July 2022**, PREPRINT (Version 1) available at Research Square <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-1847006/v1>

“ With the increasing use of web surveys for data collection, evidence that feeding back results has the greatest impact on this group of participants is welcome ”

Requesting consent for data linkage – does asking multiple times make a difference?

In Understanding Society, we ask participants for their consent to link their survey responses to various administrative datasets. Each dataset that is linked to requires individual consent from the participant, so several consent questions need to be included in each survey. Little is known about how participants process multiple consent requests in a single survey – do participants weigh up each consent individually? Or does the first consent response set the tone for the remainder of the consent questions?

Using the Innovation Panel, this experiment varied the format of the consent request, with some participants having a sequence of one consent question per page, others having all five consent requests on the same page, and a final group having a single request covering all the consents. The order of the consents was also tested, with some participants receiving a less sensitive – or easier to comply with – request first.

The research team found that average consent rates did not differ by format, so asking one consent question per page, or five sequentially did not alter consent rates. What appeared to make some difference in this experiment was the nature of consent asked for – asking for consent for HMRC linkage first slightly reduced consent, compared to asking for NHS linkage first. But in a second experiment looking at consent ordering, participants asked to agree to all consents at once, NHS linkage did not improve consent levels. While quicker for participants, asking a joint consent request of yes/no for all five domains did not have significant advantages in terms of consent rates.

“ From a practical perspective, it is clear that practitioners need to take care when asking for consent to multiple domains within a single survey... While the effect is not yet clearly understood, it is clear that order matters ”

Read this research

Sandra Walzenbach, Jonathan Burton, Mick P Couper, Thomas F Crossley, Annette Jäckle, **Experiments On Multiple Requests For Consent to Data Linkage in Surveys, Journal of Survey Statistics and Methodology, 2022:** <https://doi.org/10.1093/jssam/smab053>

Estimating mode effects

Understanding Society now uses three modes to collect survey data. Up until Wave 8, the vast majority of participants were interviewed face to face, but the Study has now introduced a mixed-mode design where participants have the option of completing the questionnaire using web or telephone mode, as well as face-to-face interview.

One drawback of this change is that survey mode may affect whether someone answers a question and the answers they give. For some variables, this can have a positive effect – for example, where a participant might feel more comfortable answering without an interviewer present – but for others it can have a negative effect – such as when an interviewer being present to explain a complex question can help the participant give a more accurate response.

But the key point is that changing modes over time may mean the survey data would be different, so the switch to a mixed-mode design potentially makes longitudinal comparisons with earlier waves difficult. If we find that the participants have changed answers between Waves 7 and 8, is it because they really changed or because of the switch to a mixed-mode design?

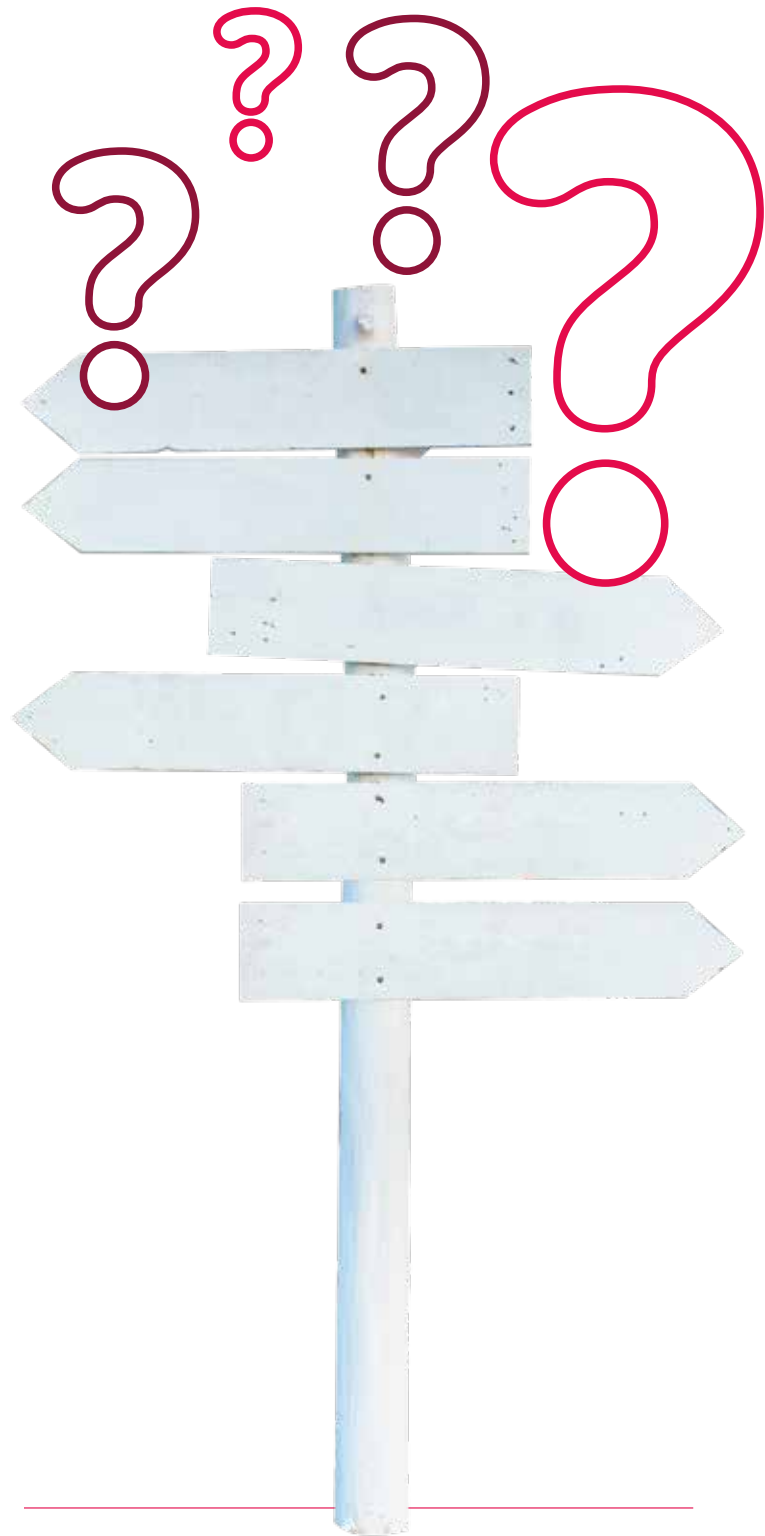
To investigate the impact of the mixed-mode design, our researchers developed a general methodology for estimating mode effects in mixed-mode surveys. While previous research on mode effect used linear regression and instrumental variable regression to estimate the effect of mode on the means of survey variables, this new methodology extended this idea – by developing a family of ‘structural moment models’ which can be estimated using the generalized method of moments – to mode effects on means, variances, covariances, associations and the parameters of statistical models.

The biggest challenge to estimating mode effects is the presence of selection effects which arise when participants are allowed to choose their preferred mode, such that participants selecting one mode may differ systematically from those selecting another. However, Understanding Society implemented an experiment at Wave 8 to enable the robust estimation of mode effects, by excluding a 20% ring-fenced sample from the experiment, which allows us to adjust for these effects robustly using instrumental variables.

Read this research: Paul S. Clarke, Yanchun Bao, **Estimating mode effects from a sequential mixed-mode experiment using structural moment models**, *The Annals of Applied Statistics*, September 2022: <https://doi.org/10.1214/21-AOAS1557>

Another hidden challenge, unacknowledged in the mode-effect literature, is that all instrumental variables estimation makes implicit assumptions about differences between individuals in the effect of mode: unless mode really affects everyone in exactly the same way, the mode effect estimates will potentially be biased.

This new methodology was applied to a wide range of variables from Wave 8 of Understanding Society. Using the most robust estimation techniques available, researchers found some evidence for mode effects on the means of some survey variables but the impact was not widespread. Furthermore, there was even less evidence for significant effects of mode on the variances and bivariate associations of the survey variables, which indicates that the results from multivariable analyses involving variables will generally not be affected by mode.



Environment module consultation and improvements

Understanding environmental choices and behaviour is becoming an increasingly important topic for research

Understanding Society has included questions on environmental attitudes and actions from Wave 1 of the Study, and this data allows researchers to look at environmental choices as part of a wider socioeconomic picture. Thirteen years after the first environmental module was fielded, we invited our Topic Champion for Environmental Behaviour, Professor Wouter Poortinga from Cardiff University, to lead a review of our environmental content and suggest improvements for the next waves of the Study.

The review recommended keeping many of the existing measures to enable the investigation of longitudinal change. However, it proposed redesigning the environmental attitudes module and replacing items with questions that are more direct measures of concepts commonly used in environmental research.

The new module is designed to better capture attitudes towards climate change and participants' personal willingness to change their environmental behaviour. The nutrition module will include questions on meat and dairy consumption, so that researchers can better calculate household carbon emissions.

The new environmental content will be included in Wave 15.

“Our home life, whether we're in employment, our wellbeing, and the time we have available, all impact on our environmental choices”

Read the Working Paper on the consultation on our website:
<https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/research/publications/547252>



New biological data

Wave 16 will see a new range of biological data collected from our participants

Understanding Society is ideally placed to enable the study of the causes of change in society and health, how the two interact, and the consequences for different population groups. Although participants answer questions about their health at each wave, adding regular objective measures of health will provide different research opportunities on the two-way relationship between health and society.

In the last year, Understanding Society has been working with the ESRC to create a framework for the ongoing collection of biomarkers, to make sure the measures collected are the most useful for biosocial research.

Four research themes were identified where new biomarker data would be particularly effective:

- **Understanding the biological pathways that connect society and health.** The Study captures detailed information about the lifespan and intergenerational health within families. Collecting biomarkers provides indicators of a variety of important health outcomes that may be influenced by people's social environment.
- **Identifying the prevalence of undiagnosed and sub-clinical measures in different population groups.** The large sample size of Understanding Society across all life stages allows for the study of particular diseases and comparing long-term social and health outcomes by diagnosis.
- **Measuring the impacts of macro-change in society.** As society changes, this can affect health. Longitudinal, representative data from Understanding Society can capture immediate and long-term impacts.
- **National representativeness and benchmarking.** Because Understanding Society is representative of the whole population, it can be used as a benchmark for other biomedical studies or routinely held clinical data.

The ESRC has confirmed that additional funding will be given to Understanding Society for Wave 16 to enable the collection of biomarkers by participants and interviewers. In 2023, we will be piloting the collection of various health measures, including cognition, blood samples, poo samples, body volume and blood pressure to inform the final design of Wave 16.

Read more about the framework on our website:

<https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/research/publications/547469>

Proteomic panels and epigenetic clocks

New data from previously collected blood samples

In Wave 2 Nurse Health Assessment data was collected. The data collection was conducted in 2010-12 and 15,646 adult participants took part, with blood samples being collected from 9,920 individuals. An additional 3,366 blood samples were collected in Wave 3.

A range of blood analytes have been available to researchers for several years, but in 2022 two new proteomic panels have been produced and epigenetic clock variables have been derived. Polygenic scores were also made available in the Special Licence version of this dataset.

For the proteomic data, 184 proteins were measured in 6,180 adults. These proteins focus on cardiometabolic health and neurological processes. They can be used for studying cardiovascular health and metabolism.

The epigenetic clocks are associated with chronological age, or age-related health outcomes. Researchers are interested in these clocks because they offer the possibility of quantifying rates of biological ageing. The difference between a person's chronological age and epigenetic age calculated by these clocks has been used as an indicator of whether an individual is aging faster or slower biologically than expected, given their actual age. Differences between actual age and biological age may be related to life circumstances and environment.



Find out more about accessing biomarker data on our website:
<https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/documentation/health-assessment>

Improving our user support

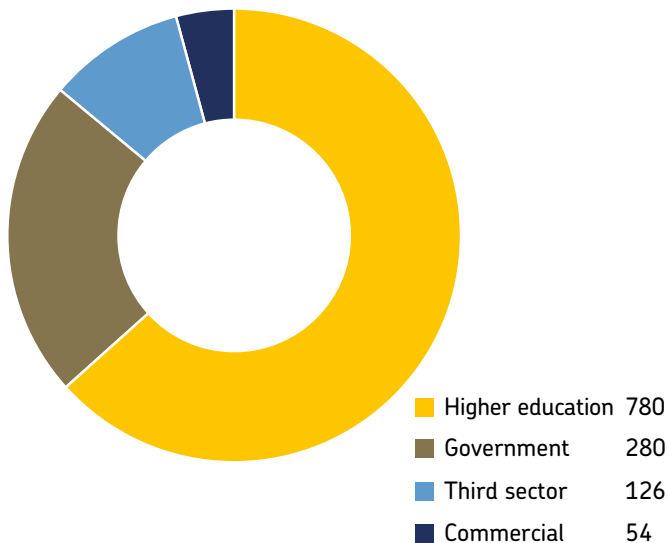
In 2022, we have been expanding our user support for all our data users – new and experienced

Our training and support activities have been accessed by over 1,200 data users, with 590 people attending an event, 369 receiving training from us and 281 completing an online Moodle course.

As in previous years, those from the higher education sector were the majority of those attending events and training, but we also had users from government departments, the third sector and commercial users. In 2022, 14% of our event and training delegates came from outside the UK.

In addition to our regular training on using Understanding Society, in 2022 we introduced a new workshop for social science researchers who want to use our biological data and a course teaching panel data methods. We also ran a one-day course aimed at third sector and commercial data users, providing a basic introduction to the dataset and how it can be used by different sectors. This course was attended by people who had not previously used the Study, with many planning to delve further into the data and additional training in the future.

Figure 1: Number of attendees at events and training in 2022, by sector



“Thanks for the workshop, it was great and offered a very useful first glimpse into Understanding Society without being overwhelming”

Accessible events and training

During the pandemic, restrictions moved our events and training online and we saw a large increase in users participating. Once it was practical to deliver events face-to-face again, we wanted to keep the advantages of online, so our training and events moved to a hybrid format. We have invested in technology and in upskilling staff to deliver in the new format, and we hope it offers data users the flexibility to choose how they engage with us. We have also refreshed and expanded our Moodle courses, so users can take part in training at a time convenient to them.

The User Forum is available for data users to ask questions and contact the user support team, and in 2022 was refreshed to make it easier for users to find the video training most referred to in responses to questions. In 2022, another 140 users joined the forum.

Online code creator

Understanding Society is a large dataset, and we know it can be time consuming for users to hone in on the data they need. To help users get started with their research, we've built a code creator as part of the variable search area on our website. The code allows users to create their own data file containing their chosen variables, plus a handy set of commonly

used sociodemographic variables and cross-sectional and longitudinal weights. Running the code enables users to extract data from the main end user licence Understanding Society dataset to produce a simple flat data file. The code creator was launched in October 2022, and in the three months to the end of the year was used 205 times.

You can find the code creator on any of the variables for the main Understanding Society survey.

Expanding variable notes

As a longitudinal study, variables in Understanding Society tend to remain stable over time, but there are occasions when questions are amended to update them to current situations, where variables are dropped, and when additional information can be made available to users to help them make the best choice of variables for analysis. A major project was carried out in 2022 to review and extend our variable notes, giving users more information about variable changes and the reasons why changes have been made.

Our data documentation area is one of the most heavily visited sections of our website. In 2022, it received over 50,300 views, with over 9,700 views for index terms for the main survey.

Policy evaluation

According to the National Audit Office, only 8% of ‘major government projects’ are robustly evaluated, while 64% are not evaluated at all.

The realities of the policy making environment, the perpetual drive for new ideas and initiatives, and the challenges of cost-effectively estimating the impact of policies or programmes, mean that policy evaluations are under-used as a way of working, strategic learning, driving change and celebrating successes.

There remain many barriers to undertaking and using evaluative evidence, including lack of political demand, lack of incentives for departments, and capacity concerns. Other sectors face different or additional challenges.

The consequence is that it is not always clear how policies are making a difference to the lives of citizens and communities. Policy evaluations and social impact assessments are a vital tool for improving citizen services, resources, opportunities and outcomes – and learning lessons plays an important role in the durability, coherence and legitimacy of policies.

Understanding Society’s new policy evaluation project aims to promote awareness among researchers and policy audiences of using multi-topic panel data in policy evaluations. The project includes a combination of events on policy evaluation, a call for Policy Evaluation Fellows, and sharing use cases and findings.

The project started in 2022 with a hybrid event for policy professional and government analysts on using household panel data for evaluations. Our keynote speaker was Andy Haldane, Chair of the Levelling Up Advisory Council, and delegates also heard from the What Works Centre for Wellbeing, the Learning and Work Institute, and researchers actively working on policy evaluations.

Policy Evaluation Fellows have now been appointed, and further work on this project will take place over the next two years.

“A culture of reflective policy making is vitally important to drive change in people’s lives”

Read more in this blog

<https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/blog/2022/12/02/we-need-a-long-term-evaluation-culture>

Policy and Partnerships Forum

A new group supporting our engagement with policy makers

Understanding Society has established a new Policy and Partnerships Forum of policy experts and practitioners to help the Study get the best possible policy impact from our data and evidence. The new body is chaired by Jo Bibby, Director of Health at The Health Foundation.

The Forum brings together representatives from diverse organisations such as the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, Frontier Economics, the Trades Union Congress, West Yorkshire Combined Authority, Family Action, and many others.

Members of the Forum support Understanding Society's Scientific Leadership Team and give advice on subjects such as maximising the Study's reach with particular sectors and building longitudinal research capacity among policy users. The group also highlights key opportunities for data and evidence to be used to address emerging policy challenges, and will work with Understanding Society on demonstration projects that could showcase creative policy applications of the data.

Jo Bibby comments on the development of the Forum:

“My work at The Health Foundation is focused on using evidence to create change. If we look at good health as an asset, for example, rather than poor health as a burden, we can promote policies and encourage local action that bring opportunities for a healthy life to people across the UK.

Understanding Society is one of our vital data sources in this work, and it, too, aims to influence policy and practice. It's my hope that the new Forum will help to shape and direct research so that we can find the answers to a host of challenges we face in the 21st century.”

Keep up to date with the work of the Policy and Partnerships unit
<https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/research/policy>

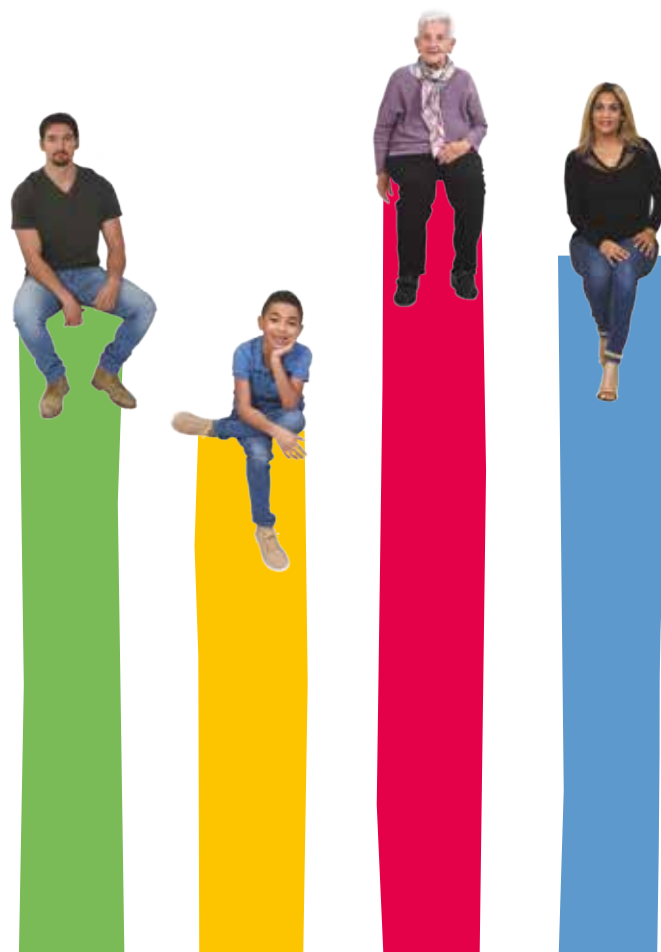
Covid-19 data dashboard

Who was affected by the pandemic? Our new tool allows users to build charts to show trends over time and compare different population groups

The dashboard uses variables from the Understanding Society COVID-19 study, which ran between April 2020 and September 2021. Users can select variables of interest on various topics and plot these against sociodemographic indicators such as age, sex, ethnicity, income decline, and region.

Topics the dashboard can help explore include how health conditions, including treatment for Covid, vary across different groups, and how mental health was affected by the pandemic. The dashboard also creates charts on how working lives varied, and where the financial pressures of the pandemic were felt.

Further dashboards are currently being created, using data on household finances, mental health and wellbeing, and the experiences of young people.



You can explore the COVID-19 dashboard on our website:
<https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/topic/covid-19/data-dashboard>

Using data on Covid to teach

In collaboration with the UK Data Service, we have launched a new teaching dataset designed to introduce students and lecturers teaching longitudinal data methods to our COVID-19 survey data

The new resource includes data from the Understanding Society COVID-19 Study, along with background information about the participants collected during their main Understanding Society annual interviews.

The COVID-19 survey set out, from April 2020, to find out how the pandemic was affecting people's lives. As the UK went into the first lockdown, Understanding Society developed a way to capture these experiences by asking participants to complete a short web survey – initially monthly. The 20-minute questionnaire had core questions to track changes in people's lives, plus content that varied as the situation developed.

The teaching dataset allows students to investigate issues such as working at home and home-schooling, Covid symptoms, health and wellbeing, and social contact and neighbourhood cohesion.

The teaching dataset is a collaboration between Understanding Society and the UK Data Service, and was created after a request from Sin Yi Cheung, Professor of Sociology at Cardiff University, who wanted a teaching resource for her students.

“Our COVID-19 study is a good introduction to longitudinal data. With its large, representative sample it allows students to explore how the pandemic affected individuals, families and communities”

You can download the teaching dataset from the UK Data Service:
<https://beta.ukdataservice.ac.uk/datacatalogue/studies/study?id=9019>

Health in ‘left behind’ communities

A report from the Northern Health Science Alliance said people in England’s most deprived neighbourhoods work longer hours than those in the rest of the country, but live shorter lives, and spend more years in ill health. This costs the country an estimated £29.8bn a year in lost productivity.

The Alliance is a partnership between NHS trusts, universities and academic networks in northern England, and the report was released jointly with the All-Parliamentary Party Group for ‘left behind’ neighbourhoods.

They used Understanding Society data to assess mental health, and found it was worse in deprived neighbourhoods than the national average during the first wave of the pandemic, and that mental health fell further in deprived areas.

Their report says:

“Investment in the social infrastructure which ‘left behind’ neighbourhoods lack is a key policy solution. It can transform the physical and social environment ... and strengthen residents’ capacity to address the health disparities and other poor outcomes that they experience.”

Luke Munford, Lily Mott, Hannah Davies, Vic McGowan, and Clare Bambra, **Overcoming health inequalities in ‘left behind’ neighbourhoods, Northern Health Science Alliance and the All-Party Parliamentary Group for ‘left behind’ neighbourhoods, January 2022:** <https://www.thenhsa.co.uk/2022/01/new-report-shows-almost-30bn-health-cost-of-englands-most-deprived-communities/>

Meeting the UK's demand for housing

The House of Lords Select Committee on the Built Environment issued a report in January 2022 on meeting the UK's housing demand which cited research using Understanding Society.

The report mentioned research by the Resolution Foundation showing that home ownership has fallen in the last 30 years, but that children with parents who have property wealth are more likely to be homeowners themselves by the time they are aged 30.

In its report, the Committee wrote:

“The increased cost of owning a home is reflected in the fact that, between 1991 and 2003, about 40% of people whose parents were homeowners had become homeowners themselves by the age of 30; this dropped to 25% between 2004 and 2017. Over the same period, the figures decreased from 19% to 9% for those whose parents were not homeowners.”

This was based on the Resolution Foundation's *An intergenerational audit for the UK*, which examined “generational living standards differences in Britain according to the latest data”. The committee concluded that “the Government must address barriers to building much needed new homes.”



House of Lords Built Environment Committee, Meeting housing demand, January 2022:
<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld5802/ldselect/ldbuiltenv/132/13202.htm>

Pension policy closes ‘mental health savings gap’

Researchers have used Understanding Society data to show that auto-enrolment in workplace pensions has closed the gap between those who save for retirement and those who don't – particularly affecting workers with mental health problems.

An estimated 1 in 6 people in the UK has a mental health condition and evidence shows that individuals with poor mental health have a lower income over their lifespan than those whose mental health is better. Previous research has also shown that workers with poor mental health were much less likely to take part in company pension schemes than other workers, potentially leading to financial hardship later in life.

In 2012, the UK Government changed pension policy so that workers are automatically enrolled in their workplace pension scheme. This change in the law allowed researchers Karen Arulsamy and Liam Delaney to look at the wellbeing and financial habits of participants in Understanding Society between Wave 1 (2009-10) and Wave 8 (2016-17), comparing the period before and after the law changed.

After the introduction of automatic enrolment in 2012, there was a big increase in workplace pension participation for private sector employees who were eligible, from about 65% to almost 90%. There was also a significant increase for those in the private sector who weren't eligible (because they didn't earn enough or were under 21), but chose to opt in anyway.

For workers reporting mental health conditions, before the law changed, people who weren't experiencing psychological distress were over 5% more likely to be enrolled in a workplace pension scheme than those who were. After 2012, there was a large increase in enrolment for both groups – but, most importantly, the gap between the two groups closed.

The intended consequence of automatic enrolment was to increase savings rates in general, and the policy has achieved this. But the change also had a successful unintended consequence: closing the mental health gap in workplace pension participation.

Karen Arulsamy, Liam Delaney, **The impact of automatic enrolment on the mental health gap in pension participation: Evidence from the UK**, *Journal of Health Economics*, December 2022:

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhealeco.2022.102673>

Black people over three times more likely to experience homelessness

Researchers at Heriot-Watt University have found that Black people in England are over three times more likely than white British people to experience homelessness – and that a history of experiencing discrimination is linked to elevated risks of homelessness.

The report was compiled using data from Understanding Society and other sources, such as the English Housing Survey, the Scottish Household Survey, the Labour Force Survey, and official statistics on homelessness.

Other findings include that:

- in England the highest risk of homelessness is experienced by people from Black and Mixed ethnic groups
- Asian people in England are more likely to experience ‘hidden homelessness’, such as living in over-crowded housing or ‘doubling up’ with other households

- the disproportionate risks of homelessness for Black and Mixed ethnicity people in particular are heightened in London
- Black and minoritised ethnic communities’ greater risk of homelessness can’t be fully explained by economic, social, or other factors.

The research forms part of a three-year programme to give a full statistical picture of homelessness among people from Black and minority ethnic communities.

Glen Bramley, Suzanne Fitzpatrick, Jill McIntyre and Sarah Johnsen, **Homelessness and Black and Minoritised Ethnic Communities in the UK: A Statistical Report on the State of the Nation, November 2022:**

<https://www.hw.ac.uk/news/articles/2022/black-people-are-over-three-times-more.htm>

Poorest parents spend three times as much on childcare

The Social Market Foundation (SMF) has used Understanding Society to reveal the extent of childcare poverty, finding that the poorest parents in Britain must spend three times as much of their income on childcare as the richest.

The think tank carried out its analysis for a cross-party Commission on Childcare. The findings showed that parents from the lowest income group who use formal childcare spend 17% of their net household income on childcare. For parents in the highest income band, the figure is 5%.

A third of the poorest parents who are using childcare are in 'childcare poverty', meaning they spend over 20% of their household income on the service. The SMF said the unaffordability of childcare affects the economy and maintains gender inequality, as SMF's analysis found childcare costs were the leading reason among mothers of young children not to be in work. Over half (54%) of part-time working mothers who wished to work more also said they needed affordable childcare to increase their hours.

The commissioners are working with the SMF to analyse the impact of poor childcare provision on wages and poverty, and ways to improve provision.

“The poorest parents in Britain must spend three times as much of their income on childcare as the richest”

Scott Corfe, Childcare costs and poverty, Social Market Foundation, July 2022:
<https://www.smf.co.uk/publications/childcare-costs-and-poverty/>



Government research identifies loneliness and mental health links

New research finds a direct two-way link between the impacts of loneliness and greater mental health distress.

The Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS) commissioned NatCen to carry out the research. The findings, which used data from Understanding Society, found that chronic loneliness played a significant role in the onset and continuation of mental health distress.

The analysis also showed that mental health distress can play a significant role in the onset and continuation of chronic loneliness. Chronic loneliness is defined as people reporting they 'often' or 'always' feel lonely.

“Young and disabled people, alongside those with long-term health conditions, are disproportionately affected by loneliness”

Key findings

- Young people between 16-34 were found to be particularly at risk, with research showing they were at five times greater risk of chronic loneliness than those aged 65 or older. Drivers of loneliness in young people were identified as negative social experiences, such as bullying from peers and siblings and arguments with parents.
- People with a disability or long standing health condition were 2.9 times more likely to experience chronic loneliness, and were less likely to move out of loneliness than those without a disability.
- Those in the LGBTQ community were also disproportionately affected, with people who identified as gay or lesbian 1.4 times more likely to be lonely, and people who identified as bisexual 2.5 times more likely to be lonely.
- Those in the lowest income quintile were 50 per cent more likely to experience chronic loneliness when compared with the wealthiest quintile.

Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, Mental health and loneliness: the relationship across life stages, and Investigating factors associated with loneliness in adults in England, June 2022: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/mental-health-and-loneliness-the-relationship-across-life-stages/mental-health-and-loneliness-the-relationship-across-life-stages> and <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/factors-associated-with-loneliness-in-adults-in-england/investigating-factors-associated-with-loneliness-in-adults-in-england>

These findings suggests that targeted early intervention may play a more significant role in combating the effects of loneliness on mental health in the short term.

The Minister for Civil Society and Youth will now bring together ministers from a range of government departments to drive forward a renewed effort to tackle loneliness. The group will develop a delivery plan which will draw on this new evidence and set out new government action on loneliness early next year.

It will build on the 2018 Tackling Loneliness Strategy and the Government's work to tackle loneliness during the pandemic through its £750 million charity funding package.

Minister for Civil Society and Youth Nigel Huddleston said, "Loneliness can affect all of us and the research published highlights that young and disabled people, alongside those with long-term health conditions, are disproportionately affected by loneliness."



More pensioners being pushed into longer-term poverty

National charity Independent Age commissioned research using Understanding Society which found that two in five (40%) pensioners spent at least one year of the last decade in poverty.

The report, by Matt Barnes at City, University of London, found that many people in later life live precariously, and a significant number fall into poverty after they retire. As many as one in twenty (6%) pensioners spent more than seven years in poverty between 2010 and 2019. A further one in ten (10%) spent four to six years in poverty. Specific groups are more vulnerable, including Asian and Black pensioners, and those who live alone.

Independent Age is calling for government action to increase the take-up of Pension Credit – a means-tested benefit for people of State Pension age who

fall below an income threshold. Research conducted before the cost-of-living crisis predicted that if everyone eligible received Pension Credit, 440,000 older people would be lifted out of poverty, and it would have reduced the number of people living in severe poverty by half at that time. They added that making sure eligible people receive Pension Credit would also reduce pressure on health and social care services, as higher incomes improve people's health.



Matt Barnes, **Longer-term pensioner poverty and poverty transitions: A quantitative analysis of the Understanding Society survey, Independent Age, January 2022:** <https://www.independentage.org/longer-term-pensioner-poverty-and-poverty-transitions-a-quantitative-analysis-of-understanding>

West Midlands councils use Understanding Society to study travel patterns

A research partnership between Transport for West Midlands, Warwickshire County Council, Coventry City Council and Understanding Society has produced a report on walking and cycling in the region.

The report, *Determinants of and Barriers to Active Travel in Coventry and Warwickshire*, showed that people in the West Midlands are less likely to cycle to get somewhere (not for recreation) compared to the rest of the UK, and that they cycle or walk to work less too.

The research found that:

- women are less likely than men to cycle in order to get somewhere, and when commuting, but are more likely to walk to work
- people with higher socio-economic status are less likely to cycle and less likely to use active travel when commuting than those with less advantaged backgrounds
- people from ethnic minority groups are less likely to cycle for transport and commuting, and more likely to walk to work than people not from minority groups.

The researchers have made presentations on the report to the West Midlands Cycling Charter Group and Coventry Council staff, including recommendations for active travel in the region, such as:

- cheap cycle/e-scooter hire
- hybrid and remote working
- safe cycle parking and cycling safety campaigns.



Sonkurt Sen and Raj Patel, **Determinants of and barriers to active travel in Coventry and Warwickshire**, June 2021:

<https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/research/publications/546949>

Cold homes increase mental health risk

People living in cold homes are more likely to experience severe mental health problems, according to research from Amy Clair and Emma Baker at the University of Adelaide.

The study found that people's risk of severe mental distress significantly increased when their home was cold. The risk doubled for those with no prior mental ill health, and tripled for those previously on the borderline of severe mental distress.

The study also found that the risk of living in a cold home differed greatly across the UK. Lone parents and people who are unemployed or long-term sick were much more likely to live in cold homes.

There was also significant inequality across ethnic groups. For example, more than 12% of black people live in cold homes compared with under 6% of white British people. Those who rent rather than own their home were also far more likely to live in cold homes.

Writing in *The Conversation*, the authors said:

“There are, therefore, many areas for potential government intervention, and clear evidence that failing to intervene will cause harm to health.”



Amy Clair and Emma Baker, **Cold homes and mental health harm: evidence from the UK Household Longitudinal Study**, *Social Science and Medicine*, December 2022: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2022.115461>

Why do people believe in meritocracy?

People on low incomes in areas of high inequality express stronger belief in meritocracy – the idea that people advance on the basis of their own merits – according to research using Understanding Society.

The researchers measured meritocratic beliefs using participants' responses to the question of how much they agreed or disagreed with the statement “I have always felt like my hard work would pay off in the end”. Meritocratic beliefs were generally high, with the most common response being ‘strongly agree’.

Local income inequality, measured at the local authority district level, found that Kensington and Chelsea was the most unequal place in Britain, while Boston in Lincolnshire was the most equal. Low-income respondents living in unequal places were more satisfied with their income than similar respondents in more equal areas.

The research found that respondents with household incomes of £10,000 were five points (on a 100-point scale) more likely to believe in the idea if they lived in the most rather than the least unequal places, irrespective of how the researchers measured local income inequality.

The researchers suggest that, while meritocratic ideology “legitimizes their current position at the bottom of the economic hierarchy, it also holds out the promise that advancement is possible”. As such, it may help to make people resilient – but that resilience potentially helps to maintain the economic order that produces these economic vulnerabilities.

“I have always felt like my hard work would pay off in the end”

Katy Morris, Felix Bühlmann, Nicolas Sommet and Leen Vandecasteele, **The paradox of local inequality: Meritocratic beliefs in unequal localities**, *British Journal of Sociology*, March 2022:

<https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.12930>

Relationship happiness the most important factor in marrying

Cohabitation has increased in the UK in the past few decades, as it has in many Western countries, so is living together now a substitute for marriage? New research suggests not: on average, couples with happier relationships who lived together were quicker to marry.

The study, by Brienna Perelli-Harris and Niels Blom, used Waves 1, 3, and 5 of Understanding Society, which asked about relationship happiness, and found that, by the early 2000s, 80% of UK couples lived together before marrying. This was not long-term, though – within five years, 36% had married, and 35% had split up. Couples who said they were extremely or perfectly happy with their relationship were more likely to marry than those in a lower happiness category.

Previous research has found that marrying and having children are linked to educational level and economic situation. Couples with stable economic conditions and higher levels of education are more likely to marry, while those with lower education and disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to have a child while living together, and to have a less stable relationship.

This research brought relationship happiness into the equation, and found that, overall, relationship happiness was a more important factor than economic situation in making people likely to marry – a new insight into family processes in the UK.



Brienna Perelli-Harris and Niels Blom, **So happy together ... Examining the association between relationship happiness, socio-economic status, and family transitions in the UK**, Population Studies, 2022: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00324728.2021.1984549>

Education during the pandemic disrupted most for poorest children

Education was most disrupted for children with disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds and children with Pakistani and Bangladeshi heritage, according to research using our COVID-19 Survey data. However, schools' efforts to provide online and offline distance learning reduced some inequalities.

Education plays a significant role in creating equal opportunities for people from different backgrounds, so the researchers wanted to examine whether lockdowns increased inequalities, or if distance teaching and parents' efforts to help made up for the disruption.

They found that children who received free school meals, came from single-parent families, or from Pakistani or Bangladeshi backgrounds, or whose parents had lower formal education qualifications spent less time on their schoolwork than their classmates. However, schools' provision of distance teaching and homework checking significantly increased the time spent on learning and reduced some inequalities.

Children with Indian, Black-Caribbean or Black-African heritage spent more time on schoolwork, perhaps reflecting the high aspirations of some ethnic minority groups. However, distance learning provision was patchy, perhaps because some schools have fewer resources, or were more affected by the pandemic. The researchers say the results show that the government should work to eliminate the digital divide between privileged and underprovided groups and prevent learning losses in future school closures.

“Distance learning provision was patchy, perhaps because some schools have fewer resources, or were more affected by the pandemic”

Sait Bayrakdar and Ayse Guveli, **Inequalities in Home Learning and Schools' Remote Teaching Provision during the COVID-19 School Closure in the UK, Sociology, October 2022:** <https://doi.org/10.1177/00380385221122444>

Does environmental protest work?

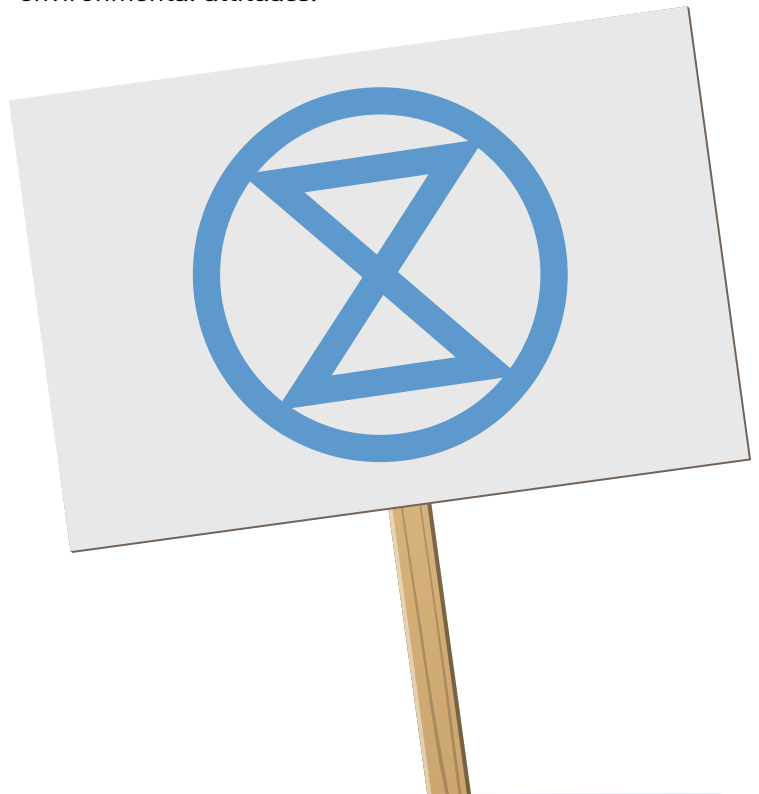
Climate activists made the news in 2022 when Just Stop Oil members threw soup over Van Gogh's Sunflowers, but how effective are such actions? Two researchers used our data to look at an earlier "campaign of mass civil disobedience": Extinction Rebellion's (XR) April 2019 occupation of five sites across central London

Because they can see at what point during the year people answer our survey, the researchers were able to compare answers given before and after the 11-day protest in April 2019.

The researchers found no evidence that the protest alienated the public from sustainable lifestyles. Indeed, there was some evidence that XR's actions "influenced the public's attitudes towards sustainable behaviour and their willingness to approve of climate change mitigation policy".

However, they also found that responding to the survey after the protest was related to lower likelihood of being willing to pay a premium for environmentally friendly products.

This might seem inconsistent, but it may be that the public took on board XR's message that government and business should bear the burden of climate change mitigation instead of, rather than alongside, individual actions. The research concludes that protests may not always deliver their intended outcomes and can have unanticipated influence on individual environmental attitudes.



Yiannis Kountouris and Eleri Williams, **Do protests influence environmental attitudes? Evidence from Extinction Rebellion**, *Environmental Research Communications*, October 2022: <https://doi.org/10.1088/2515-7620/ac9aeb>

Why happy children can become grumpy teenagers

The moody teenager is a common cultural image, but do young people really become unhappy when they hit the teenage years? A research team from the UK, USA and the Netherlands used survey answers from young people aged 10 to 24 in the UK (using Understanding Society) and Germany (using the German Socio-Economic Panel) to see what happens to life satisfaction during this stage of life.

Understanding Society asks young people about how they feel about different aspects of their life and how they feel about life as a whole. This analysis shows that young people really do become more unhappy as they move from late childhood into the teenage years, showing the steepest and most pronounced drop in life satisfaction across the whole adult lifespan.

The researchers suggest that three things might make a difference:

- worsening life conditions – teens may experience more social insecurity, or more uncertainty in their lives
- greater awareness of the larger social world around them and comparing their life satisfaction to more unrealistic or competitive alternatives
- cognitive changes, as teenagers develop their 'social brain' which allows them to better understand how others think and feel.



Amy Orben, Richard E Lucas, Delia Fuhrmann and Rogier A Kievit,
Trajectories of adolescent life satisfaction, Royal Society Open Science, August 2022
<http://doi.org/10.1098/rsos.211808>

Long Covid's significant impact on the UK workforce

Research using the Office for National Statistics' Covid Infection Survey and Understanding Society to look at the effects of Long Covid on the UK workforce found that 80,000 people had left employment due to Long Covid by early March 2022. This has had a significant impact on labour supply, which the researchers believe could last some time.

Since the start of the pandemic, cumulatively 2.9 million people of working age (7% of the total) in the UK have had, or still have, Long Covid. In the same period, economic inactivity due to long-term sickness

rose by 120,900 among the working-age population, fuelling the UK's labour shortage. When the research was published, the most recent monthly labour market figures showed that there were more job opportunities in the UK than unemployed people, for the first time since records began.

The researchers suggest that governments need to tackle the twin challenges to public health and labour supply and provide employment protection and financial support for individuals and firms affected by Long Covid.



Darja Reuschke and Donald Houston, **The impact of Long COVID on the UK workforce**,
Applied Economics Letters, July 2022: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504851.2022.2098239>

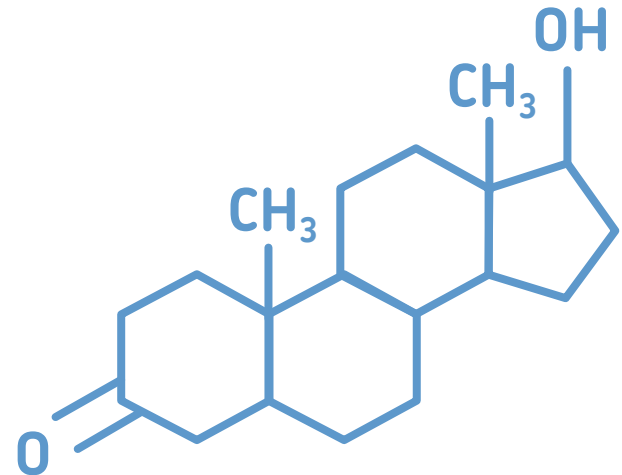
Men with higher testosterone less likely to be unemployed

Higher testosterone levels reduce the risk of becoming or staying unemployed, according to research using Understanding Society's biomarker data. Existing research has shown that testosterone can affect earnings and career choices, but this paper looked at moves in and out of the labour market over time.

The findings suggested that unemployed men with medium and high testosterone levels were significantly more likely to find work than those with testosterone levels in the lowest decile. However, in the sample of employed men, testosterone did not significantly affect the risk of becoming unemployed.

Evidence shows that testosterone is linked to cognitive and non-cognitive skills, such as numerical ability, attitudes to risk, and persistence, and the researchers say it's possible that these skills could also account for the effects of testosterone on moves in and out of work.

The findings have implications for policy, in that some men may need different kinds of help finding work than others. Men with less testosterone may get more from individual coaching than group sessions, for example – and those with more testosterone may find jobs more easily, but not match their counterparts' productivity. Also, awareness of how personality and behavioural traits can affect job interviews can potentially help in matching people to jobs.



“Higher testosterone levels reduce the risk of becoming or staying unemployed”

Peter Eibich, Ricky Kanabar, Alexander Plum and Julian Schmied, **In and out of unemployment – labour market transitions and the role of testosterone**, *Economics and Human Biology*, August 2022:

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ehb.2022.101123>

Key data

Mainstage Waves 1-12: <https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/documentation/mainstage>

Innovation Panel Waves 1-14: <https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/documentation/innovation-panel>

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

Health, biomarker, genetics and epigenetics data: <https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/documentation/health-assessment>

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

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/about-the-study>

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>

Previous Annual Reports: <https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/about/annual-report>

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Professor Simeon Yates	Topic Champion – Digital life

Understanding Society Team

Ann-Marie Abong'O	Research Assistant, questionnaire content	Jay James	Project Assistant and Event Support
Edith Aguirre	Senior Research Officer, pregnancy and early childhood	Nicole James	Survey Data Officer
Tarek Al Baghal	Deputy Director	Graham Jolliffe	Research Data Manager
Sara Bellamio	Survey Data Officer	Olena Kaminska	Survey Statistician
George Bennett	Survey Data Officer	Eirini Koraki	Survey Data Officer
Michaela Benzeval	Director	Meena Kumari	Associate Director, Health, Biomarkers and Genetics
Cara Booker	Senior Research Fellow	Peter Lynn	Associate Director, Surveys
Hannah Brightman	Participant Liaison Officer	Piotr Marzec	Senior Data Analyst and Training Officer
Jonathan Burton	Associate Director, Surveys	Memory Mhembere	Research Data Manager
Pablo Cabrera Alvarez	Senior Research Officer, representativeness	Louise Miles	Senior Web and Communications Officer
Roberto Cavazos	Senior Data Analyst and Training Officer	Lewis Mitchell	Survey Officer, Questionnaire Development Team
Chris Coates	Research Impact and Project Manager	Jamie Moore	Research Fellow, missing and linked data
Thomas Crossley	Associate Director, Scientific Content	Alita Nandi	Associate Director, Outreach
Rosa Cullen	Senior Web and Communications Officer	Jonathan Nears	Web Developer
Emily Dix	Survey Officer, Questionnaire Development Team	Sarah Parbury	Survey Officer, Questionnaire Development Team
Glenn Dunn	Survey Database Manager	Becky Parsons	Associate Director, Communications and Public Engagement
Paul Fisher	Associate Director, Income	Violetta Parutis	Assistant Associate Director, Surveys
Laura Fumagalli	Research Fellow	Raj Patel	Associate Director, Policy and Partnerships
Paul Garcia Hinojosa	Senior Data Analyst and Training Officer	Cheryl Pasfield	Project Support Officer and Committee Secretary
Kristijan Garic	Survey Data Linkage Officer	Annette Pasotti	Senior Web and Communications Officer, user engagement
Dipanwita Ghatak	ISER PhD student	John Payne	Associate Director, Data
Kelly Goodyear	Participant Liaison Team Leader	Kelly Reeve	Research Officer, families living apart
Karon Gush	Senior Research and Content Development Officer	Lorraine Roberts	Finance and Contracts Officer
Isobel Hibbard	Participant Liaison Officer	Paulo Serodio	Senior Research Officer, new data
Daniel Horn	Senior Research Officer, Innovations	Robin Vanner	Policy and Partnership Manager
Ryan Holmes	Survey Officer, Questionnaire Development Team	Jim Vine	Senior Research Officer, innovations
Omar Hussein	Research Assistant, income data	Christine Woods	Senior Survey Officer, enhancement projects
Jane Ismail	Library and Information Officer	Catherine Yuen	Survey Applications Manager
Annette Jäckle	Associate Director, Innovations		



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