

UNDERSTANDING SOCIETY: A LIVING LABORATORY OF LIFE IN THE UK



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How are people in the UK coping with increasing unemployment? Do current economic pressures weigh particularly heavily on some groups? How far does your gender, age or ethnicity make a difference? What do young people who are not in education, employment or training – the so-called ‘NEETS’ – feel about their situation and prospects? To what extent is stress increasing as people face potential unemployment and rising living costs? Are the increasing pressures in the workplace resulting in more bullying and harassment at work? Who do people turn to for support when under pressure?

These and hundreds of other questions about life in Britain today will be reported on when the second round of findings from *Understanding Society* are published on 27th February 2012. *Understanding Society* is the world's most comprehensive longitudinal household panel survey. Building on the long-standing British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) which has been providing insights into life in the UK for the last 20 years, *Understanding Society* will record the experiences, views and aspirations of the national population on a scale unprecedented anywhere in the world. Launched in 2008, the survey collects data on a longitudinal basis from a sample of 40,000 households drawn from all parts of the UK. The households have been carefully

selected to reflect social and economic differences among the population and a range of geographic areas. Its unique ethnic minority boost sample will provide as never before, particular insights into the life experiences of different racial communities including family life, employment and social integration.

Understanding Society will also be pioneering new methods of data-collection. Because of its unprecedented scale, it will be vital to keep data-collection costs down. Equally, it is vital to the longitudinal character of the survey that those households currently selected for study, continue to be willing to participate. To meet these dual challenges, the researchers are incorporating new methods of data collection including on-line questionnaires and telephone interviews.

As well as providing data on the 100,000 or so individuals who live in the selected households, *Understanding Society* is designed to track the vitally-important reality of relationships *within* the household. When the ‘First Findings’ of *Understanding Society* were published in February 2011, much was made, for example, of the revelation, that more than half of all siblings were involved in bullying in one form or another within the home. It was also found that married individuals were happier than those in cohabiting couples.

Other potentially important themes for future analysis that emerged from these early data included the fact that many people felt they experienced poor or short sleep and that this tended to affect both their work and their happiness. It also emerged that in relation to the perceived threat of climate change, whilst 60 per cent of respondents felt that current lifestyles would be likely soon to result in a major environmental disaster, they would only change their behavior patterns if it fitted with their existing lifestyle.

Interesting as these initial findings are however, the true potential of *Understanding Society* lies in the fact that it will follow the same households and the individuals within them over many years. Providing that funding continues to be available, it will follow the children growing up in the sample households today, through adolescence, school and further and higher education. It will document their entry or otherwise, into the labour market and the process of establishing their own households and families. Because it will collect data over time, *Understanding Society* will also be able to report on the lifestyles of the ever growing numbers of older people and the links between the health problems they may experience in later life with their earlier education and employment, as well as previous patterns of diet and exercise and the health of other household members.

Another pioneering aspect of *Understanding Society* is the collection of 'bio-marker' data based on biometrics, blood and saliva samples provided by volunteers from within the main sample. This means that, in due course, it will be possible to link information about people's life experiences and events to aspects of their genetic make-up and health behaviours. The collection of both individual and family health and social data across such a large sample and over time will provide powerful new insights into fields such as education and aging. Challenging as the collection of this kind of information undoubtedly is, given the serious ethical and privacy concerns involved, it is to be welcomed that *Understanding Society* has received the agreement of participants to help create this unique scientific resource for the nation.

Understanding Society will thus be nothing less than a living laboratory of life in the UK, providing policy-makers, researchers, the media and the population as a whole with a comprehensive picture of life in the many different communities that make up life in Britain today. Because of its scale, the collection of information from the same individuals over time and its focus on households, *Understanding Society* is not like other surveys. It will not merely report respondents' experiences; it will also provide understanding about some of the drivers behind these lived experiences and hence useful insights about potentially fruitful policy responses.

Clearly, such a 'laboratory' has great potential value for informing policy-making. It is this potential that has encouraged a significant number of Government Departments to provide co-funding for the study

alongside the Economic and Social Research Council, including the Department for Education, the Department for Work and Pensions, the Department of the Environment, the Department of Transport, the Department of Communities and Local Government and the Department of Health. This collaboration across such a wide span of Government departments and academic researchers will help to ensure that both the questions included in the survey and the subsequent analysis of the data generated will be genuinely useful in the development of Government policy.

Since November 2011, both academic and Government researchers have had access to the first full Wave of information collected across a 24 month period from January 2009 - January 2011. For the Department of Health and the Department for Education, for example, there is extensive data on young people's health related behaviours including their levels of drinking and smoking and patterns of diet and exercise. Over time, of course, it will be possible to trace the impact of these early adolescent behaviours on health and well-being later in life. Data from the special youth questionnaire documents other patterns in young people's behaviour in relation to, for example, how much freedom young people are allowed to stay out late without their parents' knowledge, in different socioeconomic and ethnic communities.

For many adults, these are challenging times in terms of managing the family budget, worries about pensions and employment prospects for the future. *Understanding Society: Findings 2012* will help to inform the work of the Department for

Work and Pensions and the Department for Health as well as the Department for Education in documenting changing patterns of unemployment across the different regions of the UK. How is the current economic crisis impacting on those claiming benefits? In what ways is the current employment situation affecting people's health and sense of well-being? Are attitudes to work and to finding work changing among young people in particular? Not only will *Understanding Society* provide Government with timely answers to some of these vitally important questions, it will also, crucially, trace the longer-term effects on both individuals and households of redundancy, poverty and for young people, of never having been able to enter the labour market. It will also provide insights into the current extent of debt in relation to mortgage payments and household bills and the factors associated with moving into or out of debt.

In difficult times, support networks are particularly important. *Understanding Society: Findings 2012* will document the distribution of perceived social support across the population and how this varies by individual and household characteristics. Do particular ethnic groups, for example, differ in the way they support each other? Or how does having someone to confide in affect overall life-satisfaction? Does this vary at different times of life?

Up to now, there has been a shortage of information about the particular experiences of ethnic minority groups. Most social surveys do not have samples that are big enough to provide for separate analyses of ethnic minority groups. *Understanding Society* by contrast, with its ethnic minority

boost sample, will uniquely make it possible to analyse diversity in the UK over time, exploring the degree to which particular cultures are being transmitted through the generations. *Understanding Society: Findings 2012* will provide a preliminary taste of the emerging picture concerning experiences among particular minorities, experiences of discrimination and harassment for example, as well as patterns of segregation and migration in different parts of the country and in different social classes.

As the data from *Understanding Society* accumulate over the years, they will provide ever more important insights into the factors that impact upon individuals, families and communities over time. It will provide insights into life in Britain today as never before in terms of the size of the sample, the range of topics covered and above all, the connection between various aspects of life in the home. For perhaps the first time, researchers across the spectrum of policy concerns from public health and the environment, to social policy, education and economics, will be able to work collaboratively to explore the ways in which different aspects of our lives are interrelated. In the creation of *Understanding Society*, social science now has the capacity to answer some of the most pressing questions of our age.