

Datasets

Access, uses and management

Introduction

Social science research findings are important because they affect everyone. They are an invaluable resource for policymakers in every area of government, from childcare and education to employment, health, welfare and pensions.

Social scientists rely on high quality collections of data as a major tool to analyse what is happening in our lives today. Data collections are usually described as datasets, in which digital information collected from people or organisations is stored in tabular form and where each column represents a different attribute or variable. An example of a variable would be the age of a person or what kind of work they do. These datasets are used to track how our behaviour is changing within the family, in the workplace, the street and in our leisure time. They also provide invaluable feedback about how people respond to changes in policy.



Questions that might interest social scientists include:

- What prompted the street unrest of Summer 2011?
- Why do so many people say they don't trust politicians?
- How have social media changed the relationship between young people?

How are datasets used?

One of the major collections of data in the UK is the Economic and Social Data Services (ESDS) Catalogue www.esds.ac.uk/findingData/aboutCat.asp which contains over 5,000 datasets, including 35 tailor-made social survey datasets for teaching purposes.

The ESDS studies range from broad overviews of our changing society to more specific studies of particular groups, such as children or residents of a particular region. One of the broadest and biggest studies is Understanding Society, formerly known as the United Kingdom Household Longitudinal Study, which follows the socio-economic circumstances and attitudes of 100,000 individuals in 40,000 British households.

This major dataset, which is funded by ESRC, is led by the Institute for Social and Economic Research (ISER), at the University of Essex.

Understanding Society is a form of longitudinal study, which means that interviewers return at regular intervals to the same people and collect detailed information about their lives and how they are changing. As well as providing information about the composition of households, Understanding Society data can be used to measure phenomena such as patterns of poverty, unemployment, and marriage or cohabitation, and analyse the factors that affect them.

A snapshot view of each household

The first large data hoard from the survey is now available to researchers. It gives a detailed (anonymous) snapshot of all the individuals in a household including their gender, date of birth and employment status. Questions about housing, mortgage or rent payments, material deprivation, and consumer durables and cars are also included.

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Close up view of individuals

The survey also conducts individual interviews with every person in the household aged 16 or over, which provides further details such as:

- family background, ethnicity and language;
- migration, partnership and fertility histories;
- health, disability and caring;
- current employment and earnings;
- employment status, parenting and childcare arrangements;
- family networks; benefit payments;
- political party identification;
- household finances;
- environmental behaviours;

The results from the survey provide an invaluable source of information for academic research and policymakers and is often linked to the results of other data collections held by organisations such as the Medical Research Council (MRC) and the Office for National Statistics (ONS).



International datasets

One of the most significant research trends in recent years has been the growth of comparative and international studies, often in collaboration with universities and research groups across the world. The datasets generated by these studies allow researchers to compare the attitudes and behaviour of people in different parts of the world. There has been a parallel growth of interest in international datasets, which enable data from international sources to be shared and used.

One example is the ESRC-funded European Social Survey, (the ESS) www.europeansocialsurvey.org which is run by a team headed by the Centre for Comparative Social Surveys, City University, London working with institutions in Norway, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, Belgium and Slovenia. The central team is funded by the European Commission, with part funding from the ESRC (who also fund the UK's participation in the project).

The ESS is a social survey designed to chart and explain the interaction between Europe's changing institutions and the attitudes, beliefs and behaviour patterns of its diverse populations. The survey, which began in 2002, covers more than 30 nations (UK sample size: 2400) and a core set of topics, which include: political engagement;

trust in institutions; moral and social values; social capital; social exclusion; national, ethnic and religious identity; well-being, health and security.

In addition to the core module, each round includes specific topics in particular detail. For example, the 2010 round focuses on the areas of:

- Work, family and well-being including: the impact of the recession on households and work; job security; housework; wellbeing; unemployment; work-life balance.
- Trust in criminal justice including: confidence in the police and the courts; cooperation with the police and the courts; contact with the police; attitudes towards punishment.

Why should we care what people in other countries think?

Comparative surveys help us put our own experience in a wider context. For instance, if we know how voter turnout in the UK compares with that across Europe, we can explore why Britain is in line with - or different from - other countries. We can also look at how attitudes to education, employment and health vary across different welfare regimes. This helps our understanding of why Britain is how it is.