

Highlights of the Understanding Society Evaluation 2022

Understanding Society is a great national treasure. We should celebrate it and not be shy about it, boast about it, tell the world, and let the world use it. Academic user

Understanding Society, the UK Household Longitudinal Study, is the largest longitudinal household panel study of its kind and one of the UK's leading data collections. The study tracks changes in the lives of people related to a wide variety of economic, social and health issues. Data is collected annually from the same ~25,000 households across all four UK nations. It is primarily funded by the [ESRC](#), which launched the study in 2009 as the successor to the British Household Panel Survey and comprises 11 data waves as of May 2022.

ESRC commissioned this independent evaluation from [CFE Research](#). The evaluation explored how and why academics, policy makers and organisations use *Understanding Society* and collected stakeholders' views on the value derived from using the data, and any impacts arising. Interviews and focus groups were conducted with 70 stakeholders who use the study's data for research and to inform public policy.

What do users of Understanding Society think of the dataset?

"[Understanding Society is] well enough known in policy maker circles that they accept the authority of statistics generated using the data... Understanding Society is recognised as a reliable source of data."
Charity Sector user

Stakeholders using *Understanding Society* commend the study's longitudinal structure, household focus, wide content coverage and underlying data quality. The large sample size and survey design are important aspects of quality. These features create a credible and highly regarded dataset which supports reliable and novel analyses. The sample size allows researchers to analyse data from population subgroups who are otherwise hard to research.

The data structure enables sophisticated analyses. Collecting data on the same households every year facilitates better analysis of the causes of social change, alongside the ability to analyse combinations of variables for the same person that are not generally available together.

A large suite of support and learning materials are available to help users navigate and manipulate the data. Many users recognise the quality and value of these support materials especially compared to documentation accompanying other data collections.

"I don't think there's anything, anywhere, comparable that has the same sample size, the whole range of income variables that we need."
Government analyst

Impacts that arise from analysing *Understanding Society's* data

"Understanding Society provides academic and policy debates with more rigorous evidence."
Academic user

Stakeholders reported a variety of impacts achieved through using *Understanding Society* data, a few exemplars are presented below along with a signpost to the relevant case study (CS) in [Appendix A](#) in the full report.

Type of Impact	Key example(s)
Driving Social Research	Researchers have explored the paradoxical relationship between migrants who are concerned for climate change but have an increased need for air travel, advancing the theoretical knowledge of travel, environmental factors and social groups (CS4).
Informing policy decisions	The Bank of England considers data from Understanding Society when determining its financial stability policies, particularly in relation to cyclical fluctuations in savings (CS10). The Department for Transport used the data to understand working from home patterns during the COVID-19 pandemic (CS4). The Office for National Statistics used Understanding Society within their evidence packs that fed into the UK Government's Social Distancing Review during the COVID-19 pandemic (CS1).
Supporting third sector campaigns	Age UK produce headline statistics using Understanding Society during Carers Week to highlight the role and situation faced by carers in the UK. Age UK have also created an Index of Wellbeing in Later Life drawing on the data, to identify what is important for older people's wellbeing (CS12).
Facilitating public debate	Researchers have explored the link between working hours and mental wellbeing which has been published in over 350 worldwide news outlets and informed the UK Government's review of the Job Retention Scheme. This has led to UK companies trialling a 4-day working week (CS9).
Developing scientific methods	A team of US economists at the Institute of Defence Analyses has used Understanding Society to test and validate an advanced statistical modelling tool that will be used to predict military outcomes for the US armed forces (CS5). Researchers have used the study to test a new way of defining successful ageing, which has the potential to change how policy makers think about ageing in future decisions (CS3).
Enhancing our understanding of how our health and place in society interact	Researchers have used Understanding Society to explore how crime levels impact on stress across different neighbourhoods and communities (CS6). Combining social and biological data in Understanding Society has enabled researchers to show that married men typically have lower testosterone levels (CS7).

What limits the impact derived from analysis of *Understanding Society*

Complexity allows sophisticated analyses, but researchers invest significant time learning how to navigate and use the data. Non-academic stakeholders were especially time-poor and felt they could do less with the data. Some new to *Understanding Society* found the complexity of the data daunting. Time is also necessary to access secure and special licence files, containing more detailed data, limiting their use.

Variables associated with rapidly evolving subjects like climate change, travel behaviour and technology can become outdated quickly. Dropped, skipped or modified variables can be problematic for undertaking longitudinal analysis. Both issues can affect the value and relevance of longitudinal analysis in the eyes of some stakeholders.

“It’s such a wonderful, long-term, longitudinal dataset – but you can’t just start using it in an hour.”
Academic user

However, for nearly all stakeholders taking part in the study, the many strengths of *Understanding Society* far outweighed the challenges.

I think the UK would be much poorer place if we didn't have [Understanding Society] to be able to generate that evidence base to live a better society for everyone. **Academic User**