



# INSIGHTS 2017

Findings from the  
UK Household Longitudinal Study

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FOREWORD



**DAVID WALKER**  
Chair of the ESRC's Governing Board for *Understanding Society*

**The best social science doesn't just respond to questions of the day, as they are posed by policy- and decision-makers or aired by the public and in the media. It anticipates what will become pressing issues. In seeking the rhythms and dynamics of our social and economic life, researchers can identify pressure points and sores before they attract attention and discussion.**

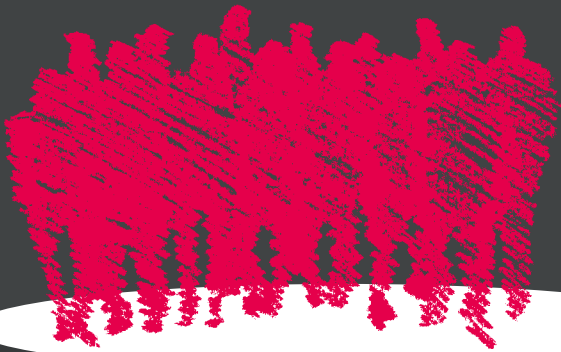
*Understanding Society*, uniquely, provides the data for such work. It has become an extraordinary resource during an unsettled decade. Launched just as the financial crisis unfolded *Understanding Society* has dealt with the impact on households of recession, austerity and other consequences of the crash.

Yet the damage to public finances and the macroeconomy caused by the bank collapse did not have straightforward or immediate effects on politics and policy. Perhaps it's only now, a decade on, that we see how attitudes, behaviour and expectations have been changed by the crash, with which the Brexit referendum result is itself intimately connected.

It's now, in the findings displayed in these pages, the particular benefits of the longitudinal character of *Understanding Society* are being realised. Since the start, the survey has asked questions about work and wellbeing but only recently have policy makers turned their attention to, for example, questions about the distribution of income, the extent of low pay and their connections with the UK's productivity and growth record.

On all sides of Westminster politics, prime minister and opposition included, and in the devolved administrations, there's new anxiety about anxiety – about depression, psychological malaise and other dimensions of mental health. As Paul Farmer of Mind puts it, this is an 'exciting moment' for a sector that has too often been marginalised within the NHS. The data *Understanding Society* has already collected is now highly relevant but, additionally, the raw material now being gathered will – it can confidently be predicted – undergird tomorrow's concerns and policy debates.

Understanding Society provides vital evidence for researchers and policy makers on the changes and stability in the lives of people in the UK.



# LOW PAY AND WORK

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## COMMENTARY



KATE BELL  
Head of Economic and Social Affairs, Trade Union Congress

**2017 has seen working life put centre stage in the political debate. Growth in real pay has gone into reverse, as price rises in response to the fall in the pound and the higher cost of imports have outstripped increases in workers’ pay packets. As new Prime Minister, Theresa May commissioned Matthew Taylor, a former adviser to Tony Blair, to review ‘modern working practices’. That has led to fierce debate about whether those on zero hours contracts, in low paid self-employment, or who have their work controlled through an app are there through necessity or choice. Politicians from all parties in the 2017 general election were keen to respond to the widespread feeling that working life in the UK could and should be better.**

The research findings provide valuable evidence for those asking how we could achieve this increase in the quality of working life. First, there is a welcome focus on low pay, long a scourge of the British labour market. In a league table of how successfully the 22 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries tackle low pay, Britain comes a poor 15<sup>th</sup>, with a working population that is five times more likely to be low paid than those in Belgium, and twice as likely as those in Switzerland. Those critiquing Britain’s low pay levels are often dismissed with the assertion that low paid jobs are simply a stepping stone into higher pay. But as D’Arcy and Hurrell show, for many, a low paid job is a permanent condition, with only one in four workers escaping from low earnings in each of the three final years over a ten year period.

D’Arcy and Hurrell emphasise that where you work – in terms of sector and size of workplace – really matters for your chances of escaping low pay, with those in the hospitality and retail sectors, and working in smaller firms, less likely to progress into better paying work. One welcome conclusion from Matthew Taylor’s review was that the Low Pay Commission should look specifically at how to boost pay and progression within the low paid sectors – going beyond the necessary but not sufficient step of raising the National Living Wage.

Knies and Plum show that geography also matters when it comes to your chance of better pay. It’s important to note that a low paid job is better than no job in terms of your

chances of staying in work. The research finds that a low pay–no pay cycle exists, but it is less common than a no pay–no pay flatline. But the boost to your chance of getting a *higher paid* job from working in low paid work comes only in areas where, due to high levels of unemployment, getting a job at all is difficult. That’s why tackling low pay will involve action not just at the individual level, but thought about the type of industrial strategy that could deliver more jobs to areas that have lost out from de-industrialisation and policy maker neglect.

Further research concentrates on hourly pay. But as Checchi, Garcia-Penalise and Vivian point out, the number of hours worked matters too when it comes to explaining pay inequality. They find an increased correlation in the UK between low hourly pay, and a low number of hours worked. While underemployment can take a number of forms, this speaks directly to the concern about the rise of zero hours contracts (ZHCs), now the main form of work for nearly a million people. As TUC research shows, those on zero hours experience a 34 per cent hourly pay penalty on average, as well as frequently not knowing how many hours they will work a week. It’s no surprise then that many, including trade unions, have called for stronger action than the ‘right to request regular hours’ that Matthew Taylor proposes kicks in after a year on a ZHC.

The increase in low paid self-employment has also hit the headlines, with debates over the employment status of those working for ‘platform’ companies, such as Deliveroo and Uber. Andrew Henley’s research provides a useful corrective both to those who think that self-employment is always an inferior option to a regular job, and to those who think that a new wave of entrepreneurship is the answer to all of Britain’s economic ills. Henley shows that the majority of the newly self-employed are unlikely to have been pushed into it through a lack of other options, given that they are primarily found in areas with a healthier local labour market and economy. But this also suggests that self-employment is not providing an answer to how to provide better jobs in the areas that need them most. Again, we need to go back to looking beyond individual solutions, and towards those that can make sure that firms are investing to deliver better jobs right across the country if we’re to achieve a better quality of working life for everybody.



ARE THE GROWING NUMBERS OF SELF-EMPLOYED VOLUNTEERS OR RELUCTANT RECRUITS?

ANDREW HENLEY, Cardiff University

The global financial crisis in 2008 and subsequent recession had a detrimental impact on economic growth in the UK; however, one of the standout features associated with the crisis in the UK is the relatively small impact the recession had on domestic employment levels. Part of the reason this is true is due to the rise in self-employment; according to the Office for National Statistics (ONS) the number of self-employed individuals since 2008 has risen by around one million. This accounts for half of all the jobs growth over that period. Almost one in six workers in Britain is now self-employed. However, over this period the UK has, compared to other OECD economies, experienced hardly any growth in average real earnings. This has led some commentators to raise the question of whether the growth in self-employment represents the increased casualisation of work, in a labour market in which many employment opportunities are unattractive and unrewarding. Are those choosing self-employment

reluctantly opting for “gig economy” work in places where the alternatives are not very attractive, or are they making active choices in places where business start-up opportunities look more attractive?

This research focused on the factors associated with individual’s choice of self-employment versus paid employment, using the detailed information available in *Understanding Society*. In particular, the fact that *Understanding Society* tracks the same individuals over time meant it was possible to identify individuals who transitioned into self-employment from one year to the next. The data revealed that three-quarters of the self-employed were in fact business owners, rather than working as subcontractors or freelancers. The research matched each individual in *Understanding Society* with ONS data on average unemployment and lower quartile earnings in their local authority district. Lower quartile earnings were used in the analysis because they captured the attractiveness of less well-paid jobs in the locality.

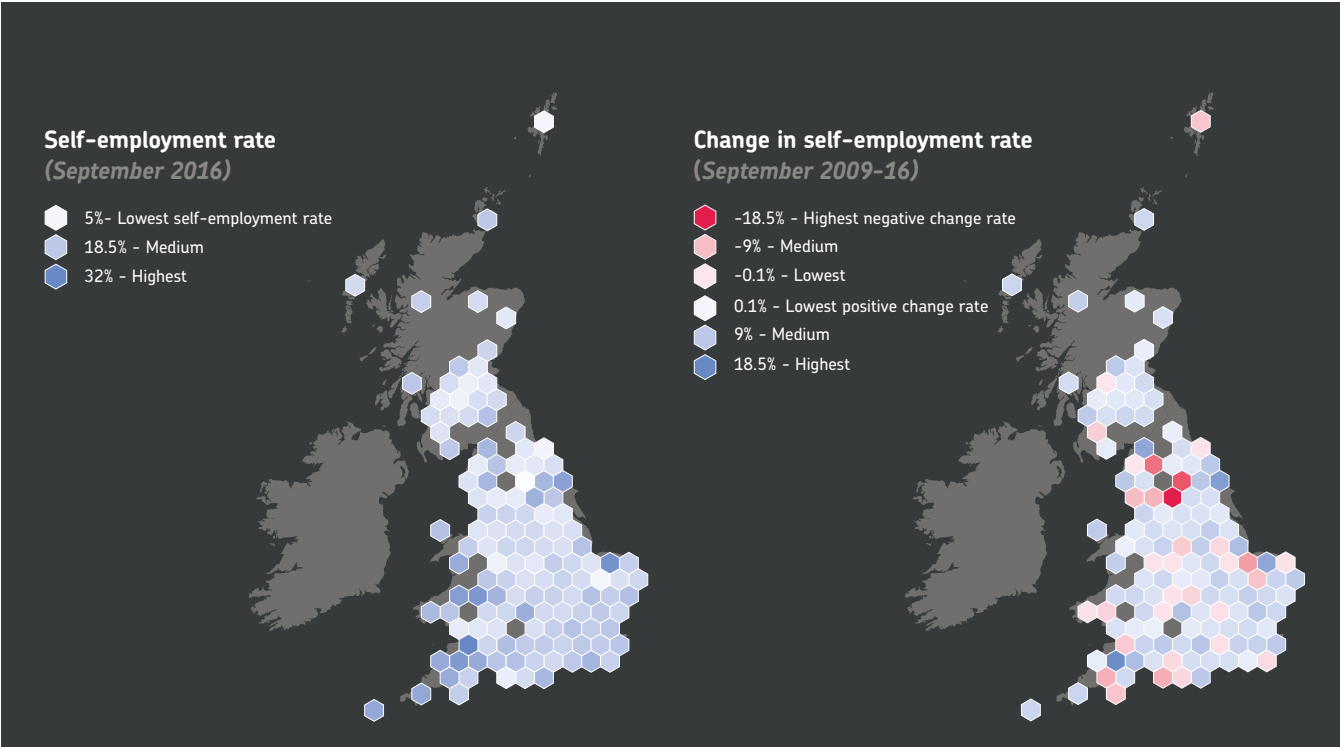
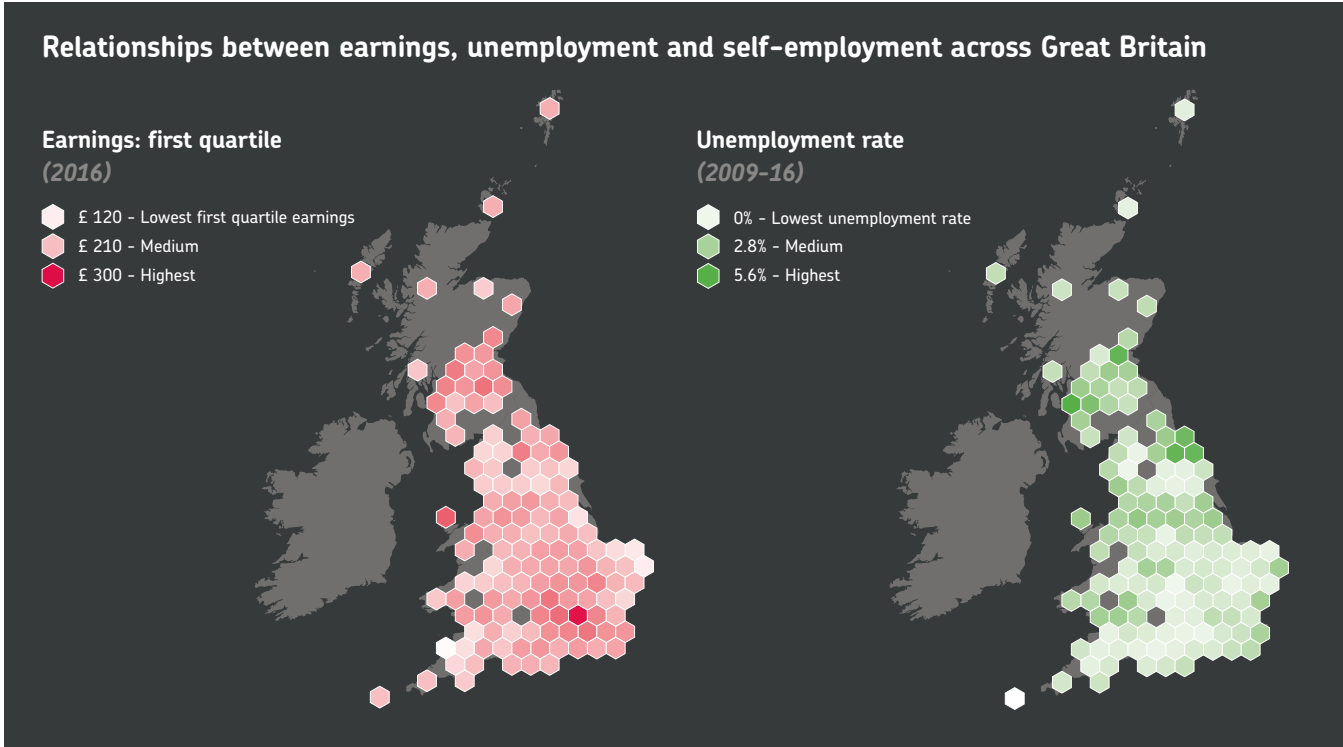
This allowed the analysis to take account of the extent to which an individual’s decision to choose self-employment depended on the conditions they faced in the local economy and labour market. If people were more likely to choose self-employment where the local unemployment rate had been high, and local earnings low in the past year, this suggested they were being “pushed” into self-employment. On the other hand, if people chose self-employment where unemployment is low and earnings high, self-employment looks to be “pulled” along by the vibrancy of the local economy.

One of the main findings of the research was that there was little if any evidence for the “pushed” effect, in that people were significantly more likely to choose self-employment where their local economy and labour market was favourable. Instead, the evidence suggested that a stronger local economy indicated better local opportunities for creating and growing a business, and therefore pulled individuals into self-employment. This positive local opportunity effect was, if anything, stronger for women, and stronger for people who were choosing self-employment after a period of being economically inactive. The only evidence that the research found for the “pushed” effect was for men who had very recently become inactive or unemployed. They appeared to be more likely than others to choose self-employment if opportunities in the local labour market were not as good.

One potentially confounding influence here was that people thinking about self-employment in areas where the local economy was stronger might be individuals who happened to have better educational qualifications or a family background in business ownership because of a stronger local legacy of entrepreneurship. However, the research finding stood up to controlling for these other factors.

Self-employed business ownership is often used an indicator for entrepreneurial activity, albeit an imperfect one because entrepreneurship is not a particularly well defined statistical concept. *Understanding Society* provides a very valuable resource for looking at the choices of occupation that people make, and a wide range of potential influences on those choices. Governments have supported business start-up activity through a range of policies over the years, including the New Enterprise Allowance for those who start up a business venture usually by choosing to become self-employed. This research shows that such policies paradoxically benefit those areas, such as in the south of England, where local economic opportunities and earnings are already better. They may provide less benefit for individuals looking to find gainful income-creating activity through a successful self-employed business start-up in more economically deprived areas, such as the North and West of Great Britain.

**Data used**  
*Understanding Society* Waves 1-4 linked to ONS data on local unemployment and earnings in 380 local authority districts.



# IS LOW PAY A SPRINGBOARD TO HIGHER EARNINGS?

CONOR D'ARCY, Resolution Foundation  
ALEX HURRELL, formerly Resolution Foundation

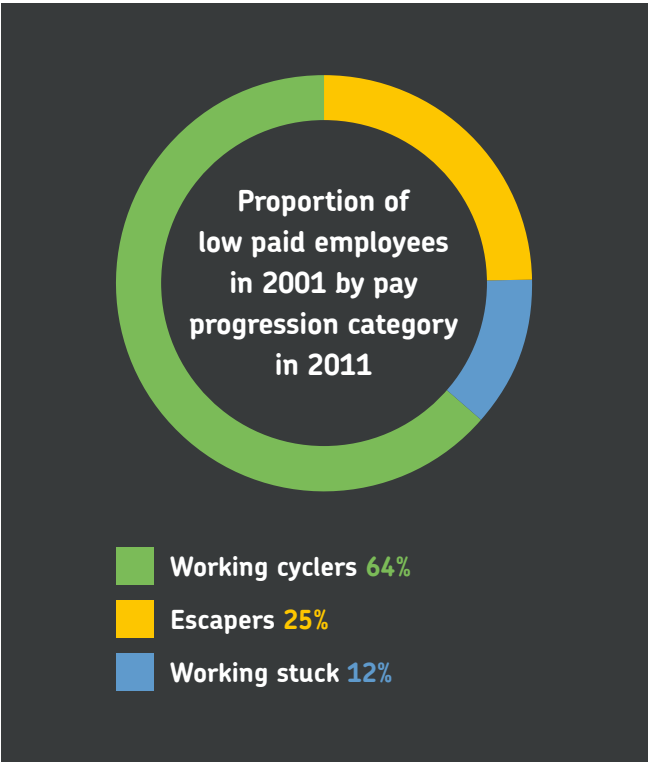
Low pay regularly features among the issues the public think are most pressing. But while much is known about who is low paid today, what is less clear is whether it represents the first rung on the pay ladder with low earners moving onto better wages over time, or if it is more of a dead end. The answer has important consequences for how policy attempts to help people progress and whether specific groups appear to be finding it more difficult to move up the ladder.

Research carried out by the Resolution Foundation for the Social Mobility Commission used 20 years of survey data from the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) and *Understanding Society* to address these questions. Taking the commonly used definition of low pay as being hourly earnings below two-thirds of the median hourly wage, the analysis identified all those who fell into this category in 2001. It then tracked these workers across the following decade to explore their pay trajectories.

Three categories were defined: 'escapers' who had earned above the low pay threshold in each of the final three years of the decade; the 'stuck' who had never earned above low pay across the period; and an in-between group called the 'cyclers' who had been on higher wages at some point during the decade but had not escaped in each of the final three years. In order to focus on progression while in work rather than other important issues like the so-called 'low pay-no pay' cycle, the sample was restricted to those who were in work for at least five years of the period.

Focusing just on this group, one in four individuals escaped low pay. Just 12 per cent remained consistently stuck across the period. The remaining 64 per cent were cyclers, although the end of the analysis period could make it more difficult to escape as it coincided with the financial crisis and its aftermath. These findings suggest that low pay isn't necessarily a permanent state but only a minority of workers do 'escape'.

While these results on *how many* people progress are helpful to understanding the dynamics of low pay, just as vital from a social mobility perspective is *who* progresses? Somewhat unsurprisingly, having or completing a degree over the analysis period was found to be positively linked with escaping low pay, controlling for other factors.



Looking further at education and training, although a variety of other kinds of qualifications were examined, none emerged as having a statistically significant link to escaping low pay.

An individual's personal characteristics were also linked to pay progression; the findings again are unsurprising but underline the challenge faced by some groups. Older workers, people with disabilities and single parents were all less likely to progress. Qualitative work conducted alongside the quantitative analysis drew attention to the lack of better-paying part-time jobs, all of which are more common among these groups.

The kind of firm and industry worked in also mattered. Those who stayed working in hospitality or sales were less likely to escape low pay while those working for larger firms were more likely to do so. Hospitality in particular is a low-paying sector with relatively few better-paying positions to move into.

There are few easy answers to helping workers move out of low pay. This research however draws attention to the need for greater support overall and for certain groups in particular. And there are responses from government and employers that would help: better quality part-time jobs, clearer progression routes in low-paying sectors and a further education and training system with simpler routes. In tandem with the ambitious National Living Wage, such policies could help to make low pay less of a cause for concern and more of a springboard to better-quality work.

What would help workers move out of low pay? Better quality part-time jobs, clearer progression routes in low-paying sectors and training systems with simpler routes.



**Data used**  
BHPS Waves 1-18 and *Understanding Society* Waves 2 and 3. The study also used qualitative data.

DOES IT PAY OFF TO WORK ON A LOW WAGE?

GUNDI KNIES, University of Essex  
ALEXANDER PLUM, NZ Work Research Institute (AUT)

One in five workers in Britain is employed on a low wage. Whilst some view low-wage jobs as a necessity to increase economic productivity, a paramount question for the affected individuals and their families is whether low pay reduces the risk of becoming unemployed and improves the prospects of getting a higher paid job. Or, whether accepting low pay is “sending out the wrong signal” and entering a low pay-no pay cycle which will be difficult to escape from in the future.

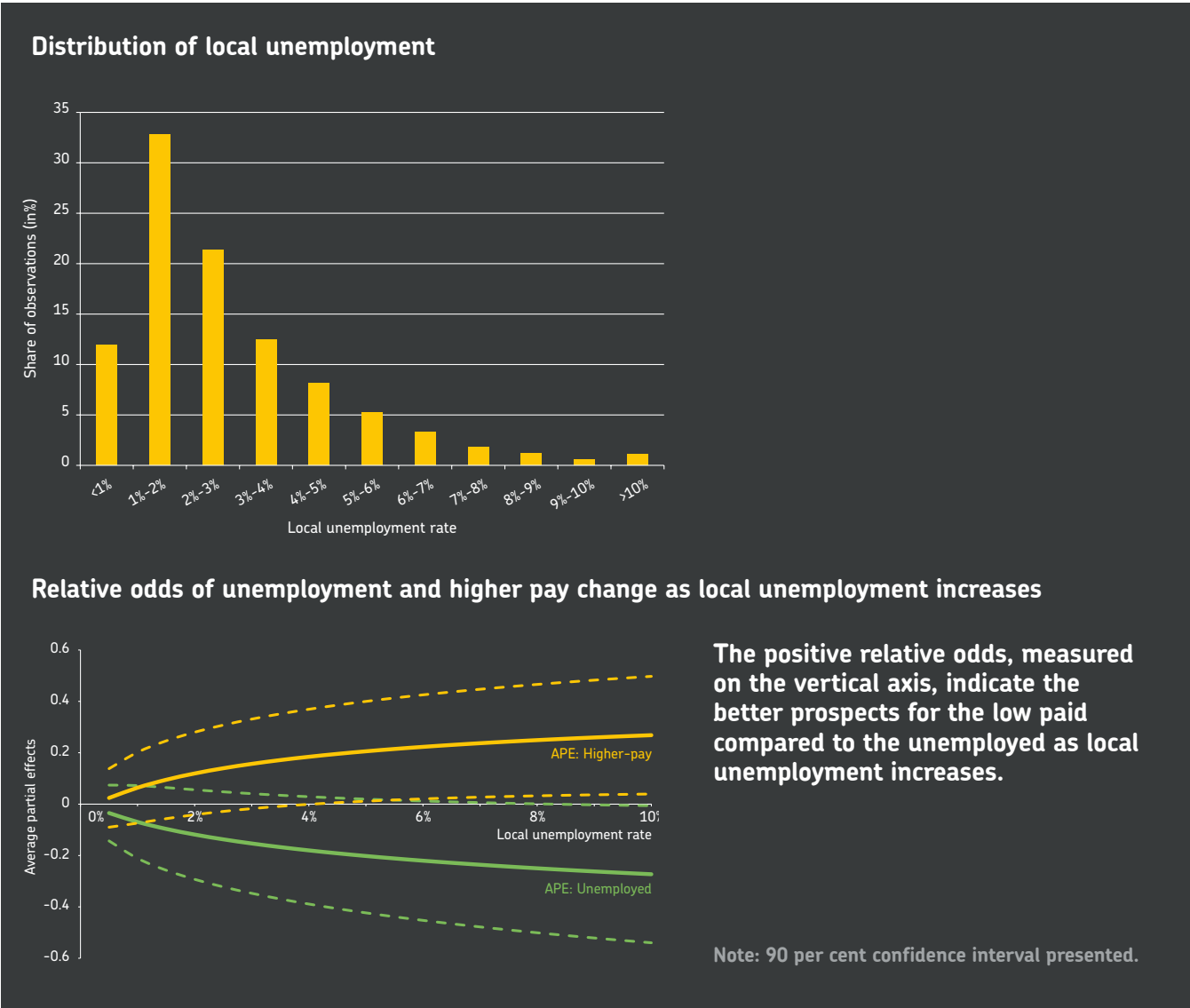
Using *Understanding Society* the research investigated this question by comparing the employment and earnings prospects of those who worked on low pay with those who were unemployed, focussing specifically on whether the economic conditions in the immediate neighbourhood altered the odds of low-pay employment paying off. The principal rationale for considering the local context was that opportunities to access jobs and higher salaries are not spread evenly across all parts of the country and the immediate neighbourhood may be most relevant for those in the low wage sector. There is compelling empirical evidence that shows the number of job applications and job acceptance rates decline sharply with distance between the home and job. Moreover, lack of (affordable) access to private and public modes of transportation may mean that jobs as close as ‘on the other side of town’ are not within reach. This could explain why the average commuting distances of those in low pay are much shorter than of those on higher pay.

The research exploited five waves of *Understanding Society* and followed 1500 men aged 25–64 living in England, who, in at least four consecutive survey waves, were either employed (full-time or part-time, and reporting some positive number of hours worked in a current job and a positive amount of gross pay), or who self-defined as unemployed.

In addition to exploiting the rich economic and socio-demographic information such as workers’ personal characteristics and family living contexts collected in *Understanding Society*, we used information about the proportion of jobseekers of working age in the immediate neighbourhood from the Department for Transport’s Accessibility Statistics series 2008–13. Following the standard definition by the OECD, pay is considered low if the gross hourly wage is below two-thirds of the respective annual median gross hourly wage, and high otherwise.

Whether low pay work pays off depends on where you live.

Consistent with other studies the research found that a much smaller share of those who worked on low pay one year experienced unemployment in the following year (2.5 per cent) than of those who were unemployed (48.6 per cent). One of the key findings was that although the low paid and the unemployed had, on average, similar rates of transitioning into higher pay from one year to the next (22.9 and 24.9 per cent, respectively), there was a lot of variation by level of neighbourhood unemployment. Specifically, in areas with low unemployment the probability of working for higher pay in the following year was nine percentage points higher for those who were in low pay the previous year, rather than for those who were unemployed; this difference was not statistically significant. However, in neighbourhoods with high unemployment the difference was four times that (36 percentage points) and, in this case, was statistically significant. This springboard effect to high pay of low pay was mainly driven by the unemployed in high-unemployment areas not getting jobs.



The research found that the results at the neighbourhood level also held at larger geographical scales; however the springboard effect of low pay was most marked when one considered the immediate local context. This was true even after controlling for differences across regions and segments of the working age population, and after factoring in that people may move to specific neighbourhoods to improve their employment prospects. Whether low pay work pays off,

depends on where you live! This has important implications for policy interventions. A national increase in the minimum wage would have different effects in different local labour markets. In all likelihood, it would reduce the level of low pay employment in areas with high unemployment and undermine the springboard effect of low pay, whilst it would make no difference to the higher-pay and employment prospects in areas with low levels of unemployment.

**Data used**  
*Understanding Society*  
Waves 1–5 (corresponding to calendar years 2009–13)  
linked to the Department for Transport’s Accessibility Statistics series 2008–13.



ARE CHANGES IN THE SPREAD OF HOURS WORKED CAUSING INCREASED INEQUALITY IN EARNINGS?

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Differences in the amounts people earn have been and continue to be a matter of considerable political debate. Such earnings inequality has been on the rise over the past 30 years in most industrial economies, for example the UK experienced a large increase in the spread of earnings during the 1980s and the early 1990s that eventually stabilised around today's values. Understanding the causes behind earnings inequality is crucial for policy. This research investigated the relevance of hours worked for earnings inequality. It examined how differences in the number of hours worked affects the pattern of earnings inequality between 1989 and 2012 in the UK, US, Germany and France.

The amount an individual earns is equal to the number of hours they work multiplied by their hourly wage rate. Given the large differences in average hours worked across countries, it is likely that the distribution of hours worked in each country also differs. How many hours individuals work in a particular country can affect the spread in earnings. Imagine there exists a country in which everyone works the same number of hours, then the spread in earnings is simply equal to the dispersion of hourly wages. Imagine now that individuals with the lowest hourly wages work more hours, this implies the spread of hours will partly offset wage inequality and thus reduce earnings dispersion.

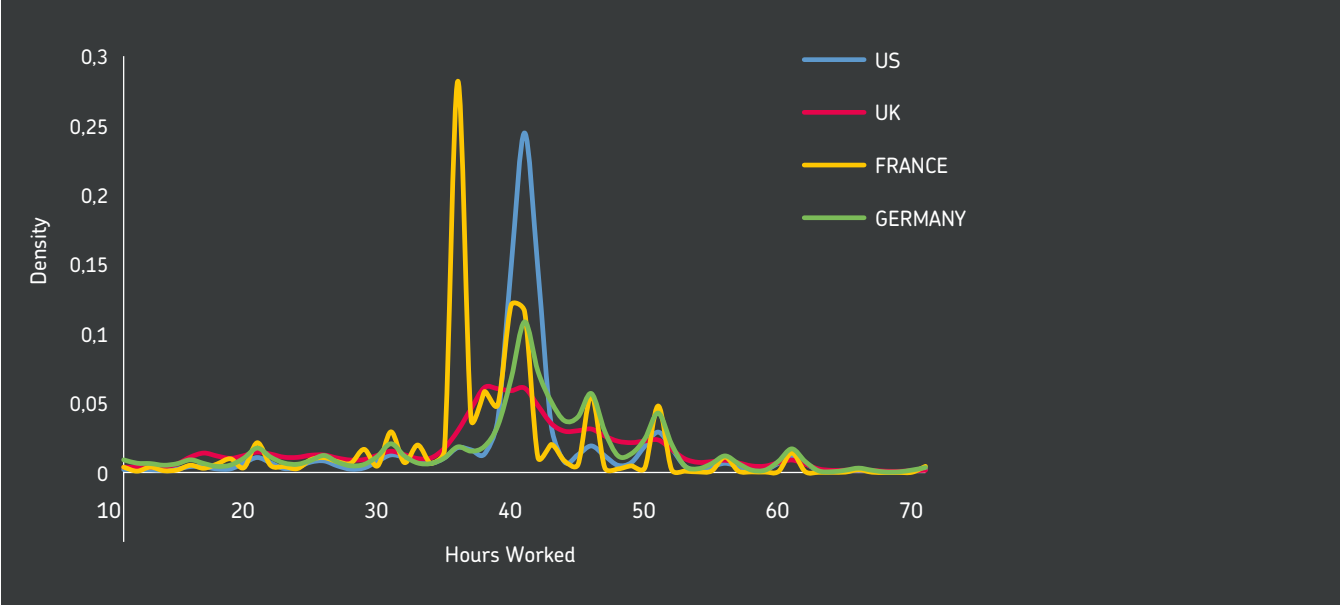
The authors used four household datasets that asked comparable questions in the UK, the US, Germany and France. Among them, the study exploited the detailed information collected in *Understanding Society* on individual's earnings and work hours; it then used a method called decomposition to understand how the spread of hourly wages and hours worked, plus the correlation between them, contributed to earnings inequality. An index was constructed that modelled these elements and provided a score for earnings inequality.

The research found that earnings inequality was consistently high in the US and UK, low in France, while Germany experienced a substantial increase over the period. The figure shows that in the US and France hours worked appears to be fairly concentrated, while in the UK and Germany they are more unequal.

The analysis indicated that a greater spread in hours worked magnified the distribution of wages, but its impact varied substantially across countries and over time. This analysis also showed that this source of inequality was least important in the US. In the UK, it accounted for about 40 per cent of overall inequality in earnings and it was characterised by a strong positive association between hours and wages. France and Germany exhibited a negative association in the 1990s which has become null or positive in later years. Put another way, in the early 1990s individuals with low hourly pay compensated by working longer hours, but this was not the case in recent years.

In order to examine whether the results were driven by a particular type of worker, this study split the employed population by gender and education. Observed changes over time were largely due to the behaviour of unskilled men and skilled women. Both groups showed an increase in hour inequality and in the association with wages.

Average number of hours worked per week, for the period 2007-12



The results clearly highlighted changes in the association between hours and wages, and identified the importance of the contribution of hours worked to inequality in the UK and other advanced economies. The causes behind the change in the hour-wage correlation are still unclear. One reason behind these findings could be related to trade unions; as unions weaken, workers have more freedom to adjust hours, therefore the spread in hours worked or the association between hours worked and hourly wages may increase as a result. Another cause could be employers imposing constraints on the number of hours worked.

This finding has implications for policies aimed at reducing inequality, as it indicates that individuals with the lowest wages are also becoming increasingly constrained in their hours of work.

The research demonstrates how *Understanding Society* data can be used to understand important policy relevant research questions related to income inequality and can be utilised to conduct comparative research in order to understand the UK in context.

Data used  
BHPS Waves 1-18 and  
*Understanding Society* Waves 1-4.

Also used data for other three countries: Current Population Survey (US), German Socio-Economic Panel (Germany), Enquete Emploi+Enquete Emploi en continu (France).





## LOW PAY AND WORK KEY FINDINGS

*Understanding Society* asks questions about all types of work and participants' work histories and experiences. The Study builds a picture of the progression and change in people's working lives.

>> Three-quarters of self-employed people were business owners

>> **People were more likely to choose self-employment if there was a strong local economy**

>> Men who had very recently become inactive or unemployed were more likely than others to choose self-employment if opportunities in the local labour market were not as good

>> **One in four low paid workers escaped low pay over a decade**

>> Having, or completing, a degree was associated with escaping low pay

>> **Older workers, people with disabilities and single parents were less likely to progress from low pay**

>> Those who worked on low pay were less likely to become unemployed than the unemployed were likely to remain unemployed

>> **Where workers lived had an impact on their progress from low to higher paid work – living in neighbourhoods with high unemployment made people more likely to progress to better paid work than similar workers in neighbourhoods with low unemployment**

>> The springboard effect to high pay of low pay was mainly driven by the unemployed in high-unemployment areas not getting jobs

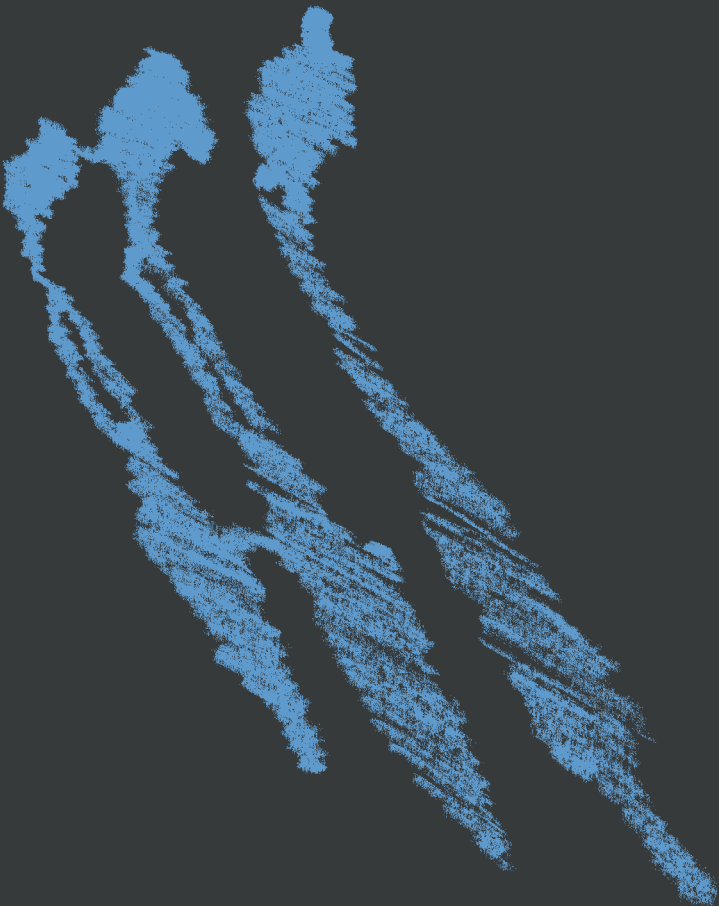
>> **Earnings inequality was consistently high in the US and UK, low in France and increased in Germany**

>> Increased earnings inequality was partly explained by a larger spread in the number of hours worked by the highest and lowest paid workers

>> **Changes in working hours inequality was driven by the changing working patterns of unskilled men and skilled women**

# ADULT MENTAL HEALTH

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## COMMENTARY



PAUL FARMER  
Chief Executive, Mind

**This is an exciting moment for mental health. Awareness is rising, discrimination is falling, and there is an increased commitment from policy makers. But, as the research presented in Insights 2017 highlights, there remain fundamental challenges.**

Mental health services have been underfunded for decades and people with mental health problems have had to put up with second-rate, second-class support. One in four adults lives with a mental health problem and yet fewer than two million are in contact with specialist mental health services. Whilst some progress has been made in recent years, there are very worrying trends. For example, self-harm among young people has doubled in boys to 7.9 per cent and trebled in girls to 19.7 per cent in recent years.

Some communities face even greater challenges because mental health issues do not occur in a vacuum, they interact with other forms of inequality. For example, we have known for many years that people from ethnic minority communities experience worse mental health than the White British population. 13 per cent of the UK population is from an ethnic minority community but they made up 31.3 per cent of people detained under the Mental Health Act on 2015-16.

The 2014 Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey found significant demographic inequalities in who receives mental health treatment. After controlling for level of need, people from White, female, and middle aged groups were more likely to receive treatment. People from ethnic minority communities had particularly low treatment rates.

Bécares, Nazroo, and Wallace's research highlights the combined impact of cumulative racism and deprivation, rather than any particular propensity for poor mental health within ethnic minority communities. Once reduced socio-economic status and experiences of racism are taken into account, the inequalities in mental health between White British and ethnic minority groups are reduced.

Socio-economic deprivation also explains the higher prevalence of poor mental health amongst people with intellectual disabilities. Hatton, Emerson, Robertson, and Baines demonstrate the significant impact of unemployment and poor housing conditions on this group.

Discrimination is often a cause of socio-economic deprivation but it can also have a direct effect on mental health. Semlyen, King, Varney, and Hagger-Johnson studied the prevalence of poor mental health among people who are lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB). They found that adults who identify as LGB are twice as likely as heterosexual adults to experience a common mental health problem. The stress of stigma and discrimination contributes to this disparity.

These inequalities are not acceptable. Everyone experiencing a mental health problem deserves both support and respect. Whilst many of the challenges faced by minority groups require structural changes to make our society fairer, the issues are exacerbated by a lack of understanding, awareness, and diversity among mental health professionals. The Five Year Forward View for Mental Health, to be implemented system wide by 2020-21 provides an important opportunity to address these entrenched issues.

There are already great resources available to help services improve their work with minority communities. For example, Time to Change (the anti-stigma campaign jointly run by Mind and Rethink Mental Illness) have produced the '300 Voices Toolkit'. This provides a comprehensive guide for services to engage with young African Caribbean men on equal terms, helping them to shape mental health services that are fit for their needs.

I chaired the Mental Health Taskforce in 2015-16, which set out a plan to improve mental health care. One of the themes that emerged time and again during the public engagement was inequality and multiple disadvantage – relating to ethnicity, sexuality, intellectual disability, and other characteristics.

The Government accepted all of the Taskforce recommendations – including a commitment by the NHS to spend £1billion more on mental health services by 2020-21. The priority for this additional resource must be addressing the acute inequalities in our health system. Local commissioners are now required to report on spend on mental health so transparency around funding should improve. Charities like Mind will be keeping an eye on this and making sure the money gets where it needs to be.

DO CUMULATIVE EXPERIENCES OF RACIAL DISCRIMINATION IMPACT ON MENTAL HEALTH?

LAIA BÉCARES, University of Manchester  
JAMES NAZROO, University of Manchester  
STEPHANIE WALLACE, Manchester Metropolitan University

Racism harms health. This association has been proven across many countries, age groups, ethnicities, and health outcomes. Most studies to date explore the association between experiences of racism and poor health at one point in time, or show how experiencing racism leads to poor health over time. However, studies to date have not examined whether experiences of racism *accumulate* over time to create an *increasing* toll on health.

Exploiting longitudinal data from Waves 1-4 of *Understanding Society* this study explored whether ethnic minority people who experience racial discrimination repeatedly over time had worse mental health when compared to ethnic minority people who don't report experiencing racial discrimination or who reported experiences at one time point only. The study also examined whether the association between racial discrimination and mental health was stronger if people experienced one form of racial discrimination only (for example, being physically harassed), or several (for example, being physically harassed and avoiding places for fear of being racially discriminated against).

Experiences of racial discrimination were measured using a set of questions that were asked in Waves 1 and 3. These questions asked respondents whether in the last 12 months they (1) had felt unsafe; (2) had avoided going to or being in several locations; (3) had been insulted, called names, threatened, or shouted at; or (4) had been physically attacked. In order to measure the accumulation of discrimination, a summary variable was created to capture a gradual exposure to discrimination across time and of different forms.

Mental health was measured using the 12-Item Short Form Health Survey (SF-12) Mental Component Summary (MCS), a measure of nonspecific psychological distress that consists of 12 questions relating to the respondent's self-reported general health, health limitations, emotional problems, pain, and feelings of depression and how they interfere with social activities.

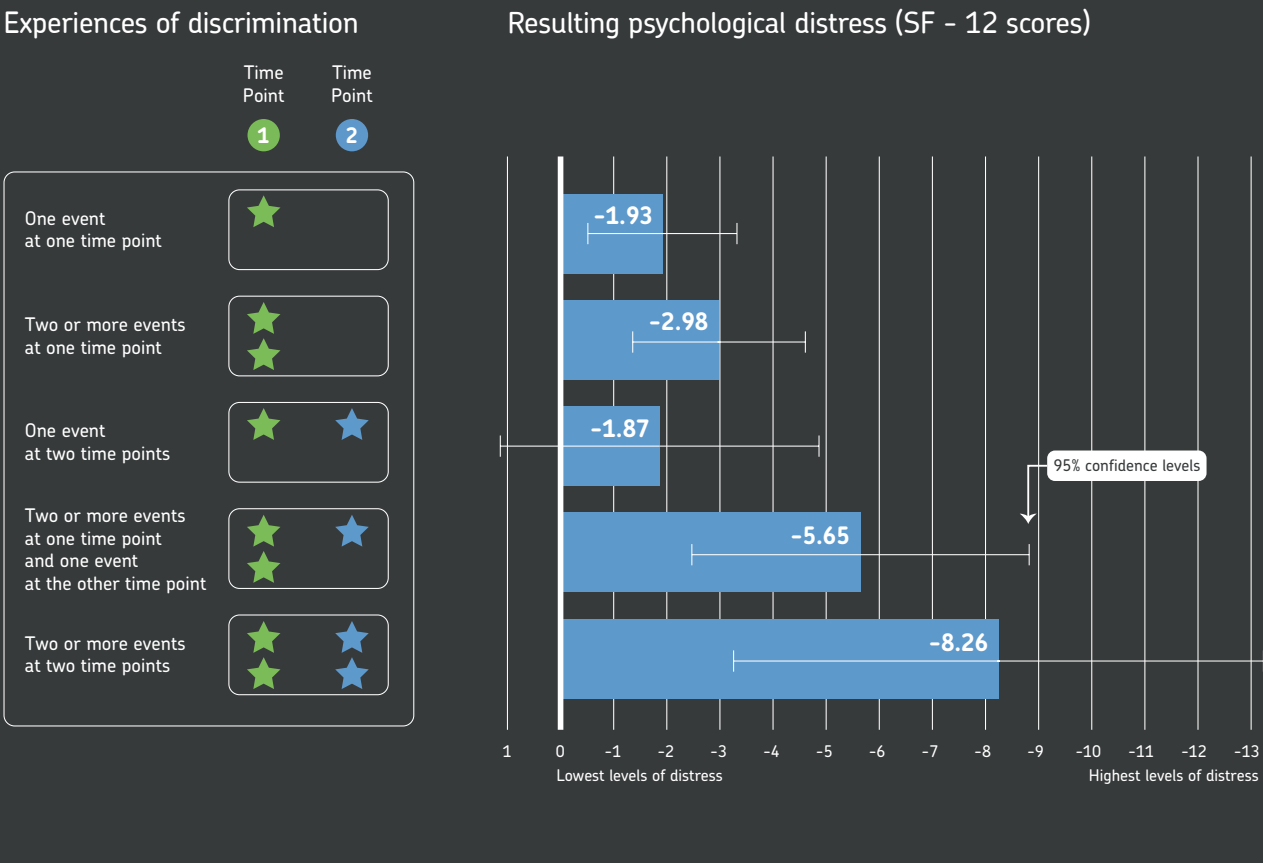
Analyses took into account other factors that are also linked to poor mental health, including age, gender, and household income, because the aim of the analyses was to isolate the effect of experiencing racial discrimination on mental health.

The study documents how harmful cumulative racial discrimination is for the health of ethnic minority people.

The study found that ethnic minority people who reported repeated occurrences of racial discrimination, over time and across domains had poorer mental health than ethnic minority people who did not report any experiences of racial discrimination.

Findings also showed that fear of racial discrimination, expressed through reporting feeling unsafe or avoiding spaces or places, had the biggest cumulative effect on the mental health of ethnic minority people, compared to other experiences of racial discrimination (such as being insulted or attacked). This suggests that previous exposure to racial discrimination over the life course, or awareness of racial discrimination experienced by others, can continue to affect the mental health of ethnic minority people, even after the initial exposure to racial discrimination.

Longitudinal association between accumulation of reported racial discrimination experienced at Waves 1 and 3



One potential consequence of racial discrimination is poorer socio-economic position. So, the study also looked at whether experiences of racial discrimination and socio-economic disadvantage jointly explained ethnic inequalities in mental health. It found that when the lower socio-economic status of ethnic minority groups and their experiences of racial discrimination are taken into account, the inequalities in mental health between White British and some ethnic minority groups reduced.

This study documents how harmful cumulative racial discrimination is for the health of ethnic minority people. Other research shows that racial discrimination also impacts on the chances of getting a good job, a good salary, living in a warm and safe house, and other factors that are important

to health. The main policy recommendation that emerges from this work is to address and tackle racism across several domains (for example in employment, housing, while in public places), and through people's lives. This is important in light of the documented increase of racist attacks that have occurred since the Brexit vote and various terror attacks.

THE MENTAL HEALTH OF THE ‘HIDDEN MAJORITY’ OF ADULTS WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES

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ERIC EMERSON, Lancaster University and University of Sydney  
JANET ROBERTSON, Lancaster University  
SUSANNAH BAINES, Lancaster University

There are an estimated 930000 adults with intellectual disabilities living in England, of whom around 700000 adults are likely to be part of the ‘hidden majority’ of adults with intellectual disabilities. These are adults who were identified in childhood as having an intellectual disability but have not carried this label with them into adult health or social care services. Although not much is known about the health of this group, sparse evidence suggests that this hidden majority are more likely to experience relatively poor health across a wide range of conditions. They are also more likely to be living in circumstances generally linked to poorer health due to a range of factors, including poverty, hardship and unemployment.

This study focused on mental health, using two mental health screening questionnaires included in *Understanding Society*, the GHQ12 and a subscale of the SF-12. These screening questionnaires are designed to identify people who may have mental health problems, with the GHQ12 focusing on recent changes from the usual (approximating to recent onset or incidence) and the SF-12 focusing on present state (so including recent onset and more chronic mental health issues). Based on education information and cognitive testing undertaken in Wave 3, a group of 269 adults with likely intellectual disabilities aged 18–49 years was identified, to be compared to a larger group of adults with borderline intellectual disabilities (1785 people) and all the other adults in the survey (21466 people).

The graph opposite shows that according to the GHQ12, nearly a third of adults with likely intellectual disabilities (31 per cent) were at risk of mental health problems, compared to just over a quarter of adults with borderline intellectual disabilities (27 per cent) and a fifth (20 per cent) of people without likely/borderline intellectual disabilities. Overall figures were even higher using the SF-12, with adults with likely and borderline intellectual disabilities again more likely to be at risk of mental health problems than adults without likely/borderline intellectual disabilities (43 per cent and 44 per cent versus 32 per cent). These between-group differences were statistically significant. The higher rates of potential mental health problems using the SF-12 compared to the GHQ12 may reflect the difference between incidence of recent onset mental health problems (as measured by the GHQ12) and the prevalence of both recent onset and more chronic mental health problems (as measured by the SF-12).

When differences in economic disadvantage between groups were taken into account, people with likely and borderline intellectual disabilities were generally at no greater risk of mental health problems than other people.

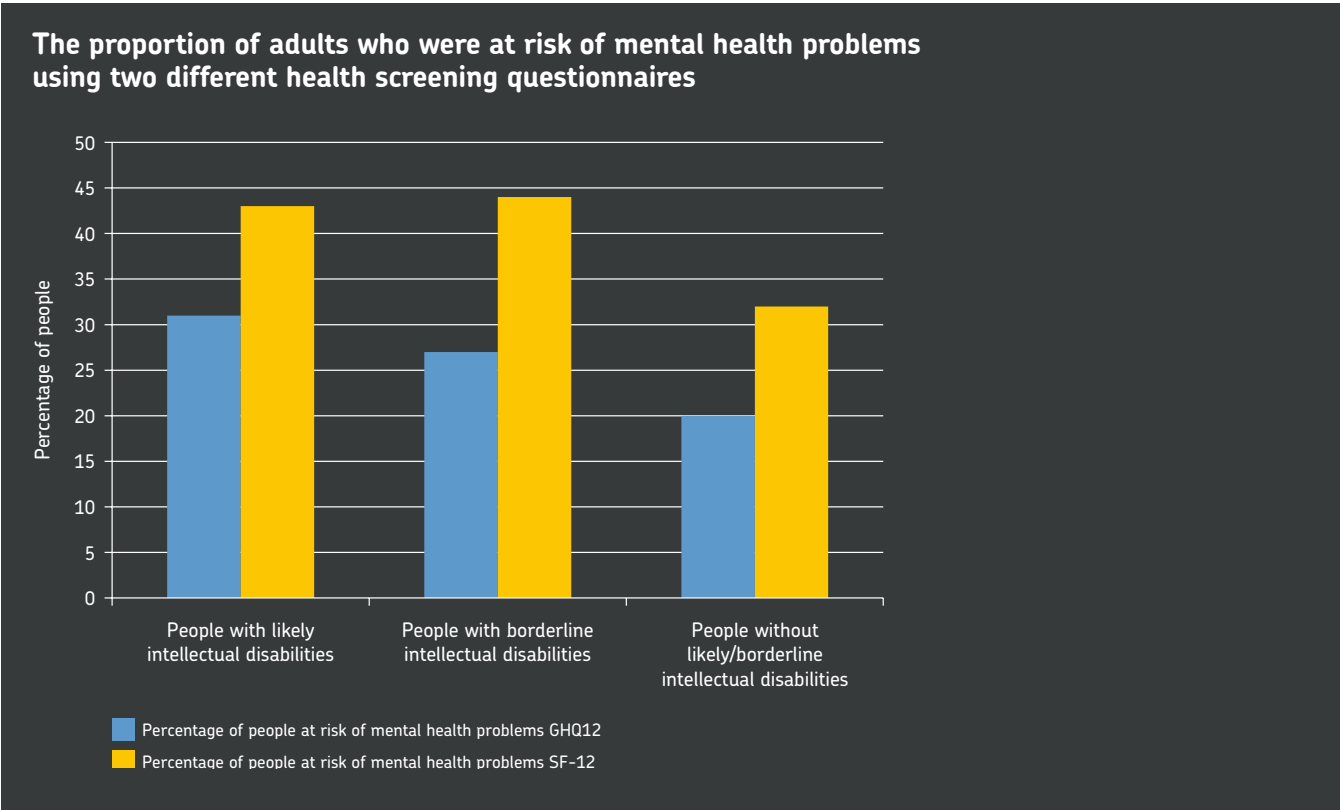
Poorer mental health amongst people with intellectual disabilities has been consistently reported in childhood and adulthood. Often the poorer mental health of people with intellectual disabilities has been assumed to be an inevitable part of a person’s intellectual disability, even though an intellectual disability is a cognitive or educational issue and not in itself a health condition.

Given that people with intellectual disabilities are also more likely than other people to live in disadvantaged circumstances linked to poorer health generally, it is possible that at least some of the difference in mental health between adults with and without intellectual disabilities is because people with intellectual disabilities live in more disadvantaged circumstances. For example, in this study adults with likely and borderline intellectual disabilities were more likely than other adults to be living in household income poverty (50 per cent and 44 per cent versus 18 per cent) and to be unemployed (70 per cent and 54 per cent versus 26 per cent).

To explore this issue, the study looked at the risk of mental health problems being reported by people with likely and borderline intellectual disabilities compared to people without likely/borderline intellectual disabilities, taking into account other factors. The risks of having a mental health problem were substantially higher for people with likely and borderline intellectual disabilities compared to other people, even when taking into account some differences in age and gender

between the groups. However, when differences in economic disadvantage between the groups were taken into account, people with likely and borderline intellectual disabilities were generally at no greater risk of mental health problems than other people.

These results suggest that the hidden majority of adults with intellectual disabilities are more likely than other people to experience mental health problems, and that this is a health inequality associated with socio-economic disadvantage. Mental health interventions need to be routinely accessible to and effective for people with limited literacy, without a label of intellectual disability being required. More general policy interventions designed to reduce socio-economic inequalities, for example in employment or housing, should also have a positive impact on the mental health of the hidden majority.



Data used  
*Understanding Society*  
Wave 3.



# SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND MENTAL HEALTH: WHAT CAN POPULATION STUDIES OFFER?

JOANNA SEMLYEN, University of East Anglia  
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JUSTIN VARNEY, Public Health England  
GARETH HAGGER-JOHNSON, University College London

**There is considerable available evidence that having a lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB) identity is closely linked to poorer mental and physical health. However, research in the UK, looking at the relationship between sexual minority identity and health, has commonly had to use convenience samples drawn from self-selecting groups often at LGB venues or events. This is because sexual orientation identity (SOI) was not collected in population surveys until recently.**

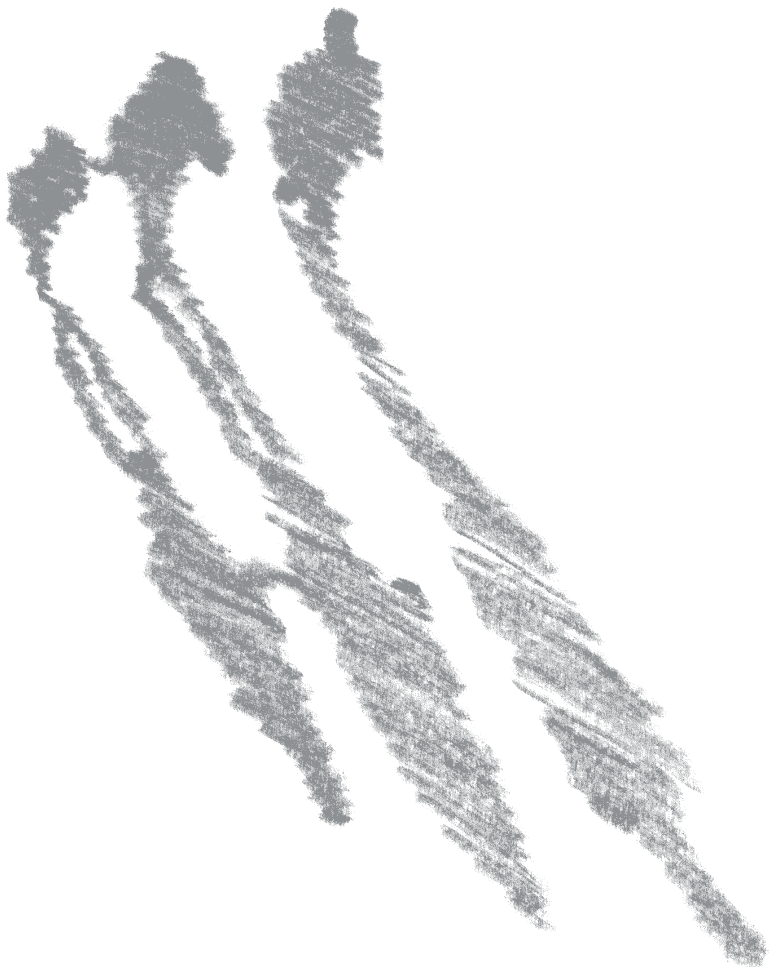
Since 2008 some UK population surveys, including *Understanding Society*, began to include a SOI question. The SOI question was developed, after wide consultation, by the ONS. It asks ‘Which of the following options best describes how you think of yourself?’ Responses possible are: ‘Heterosexual or Straight’, ‘Gay or Lesbian’, ‘Bisexual’, ‘Other’, or participants can refuse to answer. This question does not measure sexual attraction or sexual behaviour. By adopting the same standardised SOI question in a range of surveys, it is possible to combine data across studies. This is important because the proportion of people that respond as lesbian, gay, bisexual or other (LGB0) in the surveys that collect SOI is relatively small. By grouping the data from a series of surveys it is possible to create a larger group of LGB participants for analysis. This study combined responses from *Understanding Society* with the Scottish Health Survey, the Health Survey for England, the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England and the British Cohort Study. Of 94818 participants that were included in the final pooled sample, 97 per cent identified as heterosexual and one per cent each identified as lesbian/gay, bisexual, and ‘other’.

The study found that those adults who identify as LGB were twice as likely as heterosexual adults to experience symptoms of common mental disorder (e.g. symptoms of anxiety or depression). The link between LGB sexual orientation and mental health was somewhat stronger for men than for women. The study also showed that these mental health inequalities were worse for younger (those aged under 35) and older (older than 55) people. At midlife (age 35–54.9), LGBs were still at greater risk of poor mental health, but less so than for the younger and older adults.

Recording sexual orientation to allow understanding of LGB health is extremely important. We know that mental and physical health inequalities continue to be experienced by this population. It is likely these health disparities are a result of stress due to experiencing stigma, prejudice and discrimination in daily lives; further research is needed to understand these pathways.

The current study highlights the need for policies to be developed that address the mental health inequalities experienced by LGB people. These could include social policies to tackle discrimination against LGB people, which may contribute to worse mental health.

Recording sexual orientation to allow understanding of LGB health is extremely important. We know that mental and physical health inequalities continue to be experienced by this population.



**Data used**  
*Understanding Society* Wave 3,  
British Cohort Study (2012),  
Health Survey for England  
(2011, 2012 and 2013),  
Scottish Health Survey (2008–  
13), Longitudinal Study of Young  
People in England (2009–10)

# ADULT MENTAL HEALTH KEY FINDINGS

*Understanding Society* includes standard measures to capture the mental wellbeing of adult participants.

- >> Ethnic minority people who reported repeated occurrences of racial discrimination had poorer mental health
- >> Fear of racial discrimination had the biggest cumulative effect on the mental health of ethnic minority people
- >> The combination of mental health inequalities and lower socio-economic status particularly impacted some ethnic minority groups
- >> Adults with likely intellectual disabilities had a higher risk of mental health problems than adults with borderline, or no, intellectual disabilities
- >> People with intellectual disabilities were more likely to be living in disadvantaged circumstances

- >> Socio-economic disadvantage explained the higher risk of mental health problems for people with intellectual disabilities
- >> Adults who identified as LGB were twice as likely as heterosexual adults to experience mental health problems, such as anxiety or depression
- >> The health inequalities experienced by the LGB population need to be further studied to fully understand how prejudice and discrimination impact on mental health
- >> The link between LGB sexual orientation and mental health was somewhat stronger for men than for women
- >> These mental health inequalities were worse for younger (those aged under 35) and older (older than 55) people

# WORK LIFE BALANCE

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## COMMENTARY



**PETER CHEESE**  
Chief Executive Officer, Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development

**Work-life balance has been part of the dialogue of business for decades and reflects the challenge most of us face in balancing the demands of work and career with lifestyle choices and commitments. Today many would contend that the lines between work and leisure are getting increasingly blurred and the idea of work-life integration has become popular. Flexible working also provides access and opportunities to people who are not able to work full time and may have been excluded from work in the past.**

Flexible working today takes various forms including part-time, compressed or non-standard hours, job-share, and homeworking. And since the expansion of provision and changes in law that allow almost any employee to have the right to request, every employer is obligated to provide flexible working options. Technology has enabled remote or home working for many, but also for contractors and the self-employed many more options to access short term work opportunities (now generally labelled the “gig economy”).

Understanding the benefits and challenges of flexible working from the individual and the employer perspective is important. The Timewise Flexible Job Index which annually assesses how many jobs are advertised flexibly upfront showed only marginal progress from 8.7 per cent of jobs in 2015 to 9.7 per cent of jobs in 2016, yet many surveys show that more people want to work flexibility, particularly women. The three studies presented here on different aspects of work life balance provide interesting insights into these issues.

Wheatley’s research did highlight that there was clear evidence for the positive impacts of working from home on work and non-work satisfaction for both men and women. It’s clear that a real factor in work or job satisfaction for people working flexibly is the quality of the work itself, and lower satisfaction likely indicates that too many jobs are being reduced in impact or quality to ‘accommodate’ the flexible worker. Particularly, if women are not to feel trapped when making work-life choices, it is vital that we are designing the roles and jobs effectively, providing ongoing progression and support and all those elements that help to create engaging and meaningful work.

The research by Khoudja and Platt looked at ethnic differences in workforce participation amongst women, and found that different gender role attitudes amongst

different ethnic groups was a major contributor to women’s participation in the labour market. The research highlighted a wider challenge for some groups with a range of factors driving behaviour, but more affordable and well targeted childcare provision, and support for women with caring responsibilities could go some way in encouraging higher workforce participation across these particular ethnic groups.

The research by Carr and colleagues provides important insights on a particular challenge. Our ageing population will increase the numbers of people in the workforce with caring responsibilities, and yet this research shows how taking on caring responsibilities clearly links to people leaving work. As already noted from other research, caregivers not surprisingly have the need for flexible working options but too often feel their options are limited, or their choices for meaningful work are constrained.

From all the research papers, there are shared views on some of the thinking and policy changes that could help. Childcare provision and better recognition and support for caregivers including perhaps statutory leave provision are all important ideas.

But it’s also important to recognise that flexible work for many is also through contracting or self-employment, and very flexible forms of contract working such as zero hours contracts have grown significantly. These workers may have more flexibility but they do not have the same protections and rights as employees. The recently published *Taylor Review* of modern working practices called for greater clarity in law on the rights, taxation and benefits frameworks for the spectrum of traditional employee status through dependent and independent contractors and it is important this is progressed.

Real improvement and consistency in good practice around flexible working, balancing the needs of individuals and employers, requires changes in mindsets and long held paradigms of work. We have to encourage supportive workplace cultures, good job and role design and properly train managers to see flexible working as part of a spectrum and a vital part of engaging and retaining a more diverse workforce. We still have some way to go as the research has indicated. Greater transparency and reporting by organisations of how much of their workforce is working flexibly would help raise attention.

# HOW DOES FLEXIBLE WORKING IMPACT ON EMPLOYEE WELLBEING?

DANIEL WHEATLEY, University of Birmingham

Despite expansion of the provision of flexible working arrangements since the year 2000, driven in part by the work-life balance agenda and implementation from 2003 of the *Flexible Working Regulations*, evidence continues to indicate significant gaps between availability and use of flexible working arrangements. This raises questions regarding the drivers of patterns of use, and of the relative benefit of these arrangements for employees. This research utilised data from the BHPS and *Understanding Society* for the period 2001 to 2010-11 to explore patterns of use of flexible working arrangements, the impacts of flexible working with regard to employee wellbeing, and whether patterns of use and wellbeing impacts differ between men and women.

Flexible working arrangements include part-time, flexi-time, job share and homeworking. Just under three-quarters of workers reported the availability of at least one flexible working arrangement at their workplace. The figure shows that while use of some arrangements is relatively common,

e.g. over 40 per cent of women reported part-time work in 2010-11, use of other flexible working arrangements remains relatively uncommon.

The research considered impacts of the use of flexible working on measures of subjective wellbeing, specifically satisfaction with job, amount of leisure time and life overall, and revealed that women working flexibly are less satisfied in their working life compared to men. The research suggests that, while various forms of flexible working generate a number of benefits, working reduced hours had significant negative impacts on satisfaction levels. Working part-time for extended periods (two years) had statistically significant negative impacts on job satisfaction, while job share had negative impacts on leisure and life satisfaction. These findings reflect both the drivers of movements into reduced hours work including household caring responsibilities, but also the low quality associated with reduced hours employment. Part-time was the most common flexible working arrangement used by women. Job share and term-time working were also used predominantly by women,

reflecting gender norms regarding the provision of care including for school-aged children. Both working part-time for a longer period and working flexible hours were associated with lower job satisfaction among women, but greater satisfaction among men.

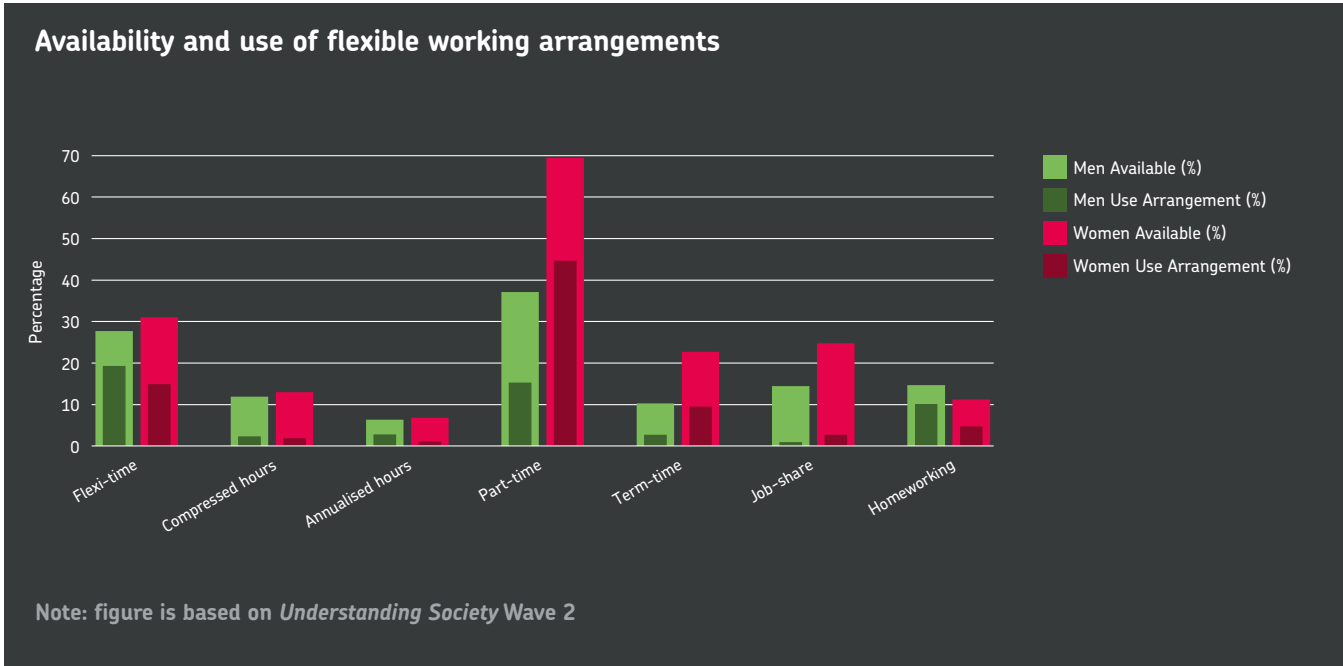
For men the use of flexible working arrangements may represent more of a choice. Flexi-time, the most common arrangement used by around one-fifth of men, for example, enables greater control over the timing of paid work, while maintaining full-time employment. Meanwhile, where men work reduced hours this more often reflects use by younger men combined with study, or by older men as part-retirement.

Employers remain unwilling, especially given recent economic circumstances, to offer truly employee friendly policies.

While women's job satisfaction was negatively affected, the analysis did suggest that women working part-time experienced more leisure satisfaction, evidencing the trade-offs faced when flexible working. The findings also provided clear evidence of the positive impacts of working from home on job and leisure satisfaction for both men and women. These findings demonstrate the general benefits of increased control over the timing and location of work which enables better management of work alongside household responsibilities. The findings correspond with arguments for greater use of homeworking than is currently reported, as this could offer particular benefits with respect to employee wellbeing.

Overall, the results reflect the long-standing links between women and work-life balance and flexible working. This continues to be viewed as a 'women's issue', as women more often reduce hours or work part-time as a result of constraints imposed by their greater household contribution. While some women are able to use reduced hours to their advantage, such as those working part-time following maternity leave, those using reduced hours for lengthier periods because of commitments such as childcare may feel trapped in low quality flexible employment. In some cases this could result in women 'trading down' into lower skilled employment, while many experience a slowdown in career progression.

The findings from the analysis of the BHPS and *Understanding Society* suggest current policy and workplace practice needs to be revisited. Employers remain unwilling, especially given recent economic uncertainty, to offer truly employee-friendly policies. Instead, employers focus on employer-friendly flexibility, extending to recent trends including the emergence of zero hours contracts and gig work. A focus on employee-friendly flexibility a greater degree of choice has significant potential benefits for employee wellbeing. Specific efforts also need to be made to improve the quality of part-time, and other forms of reduced hours, work. In summary, employers need to move away from the ideas of gender which are attached to flexible working, facilitate choice in the use of flexible working arrangements, and improve the quality of reduced hours options.



Data used  
BHPS Waves 1-18 and  
*Understanding Society* Wave 2.



WHAT CAN EXPLAIN ETHNIC DIFFERENCES IN WOMEN’S LABOUR MARKET ENTRY AND EXIT RATES?

YASSINE KHOUDJA, Utrecht University  
LUCINDA PLATT, London School of Economics and Political Science

**Women’s labour force participation differs substantially between ethnic groups in many Western countries. Census data from 2011 for England and Wales shows that roughly three quarters of British White majority, Indian, Black African and Mixed African women of working age participate in the labour market. Black Caribbean and Mixed Caribbean women have an even higher rate of women’s labour force participation at 80 per cent. In contrast, only 42 per cent of Pakistani and Bangladeshi women participate in the labour market. Not participating in the labour market may threaten women’s economic independence and, in the case of immigrant women, can also impact integration. Understanding the reasons for differences in women’s labour force participation is therefore crucial for designing policies aimed at increasing women’s activity in the labour market.**

This study focused on how women’s labour market entries and exits differ by ethnic group. The research investigated how changes in household circumstances (partnership status, partner’s income, and the number of pre-school aged children), as well as attitudes about gender and religion contributed to ethnic differences in women’s labour market entries and exits. The findings took into account relevant socio-demographic factors such as age, years since migration, health and education.

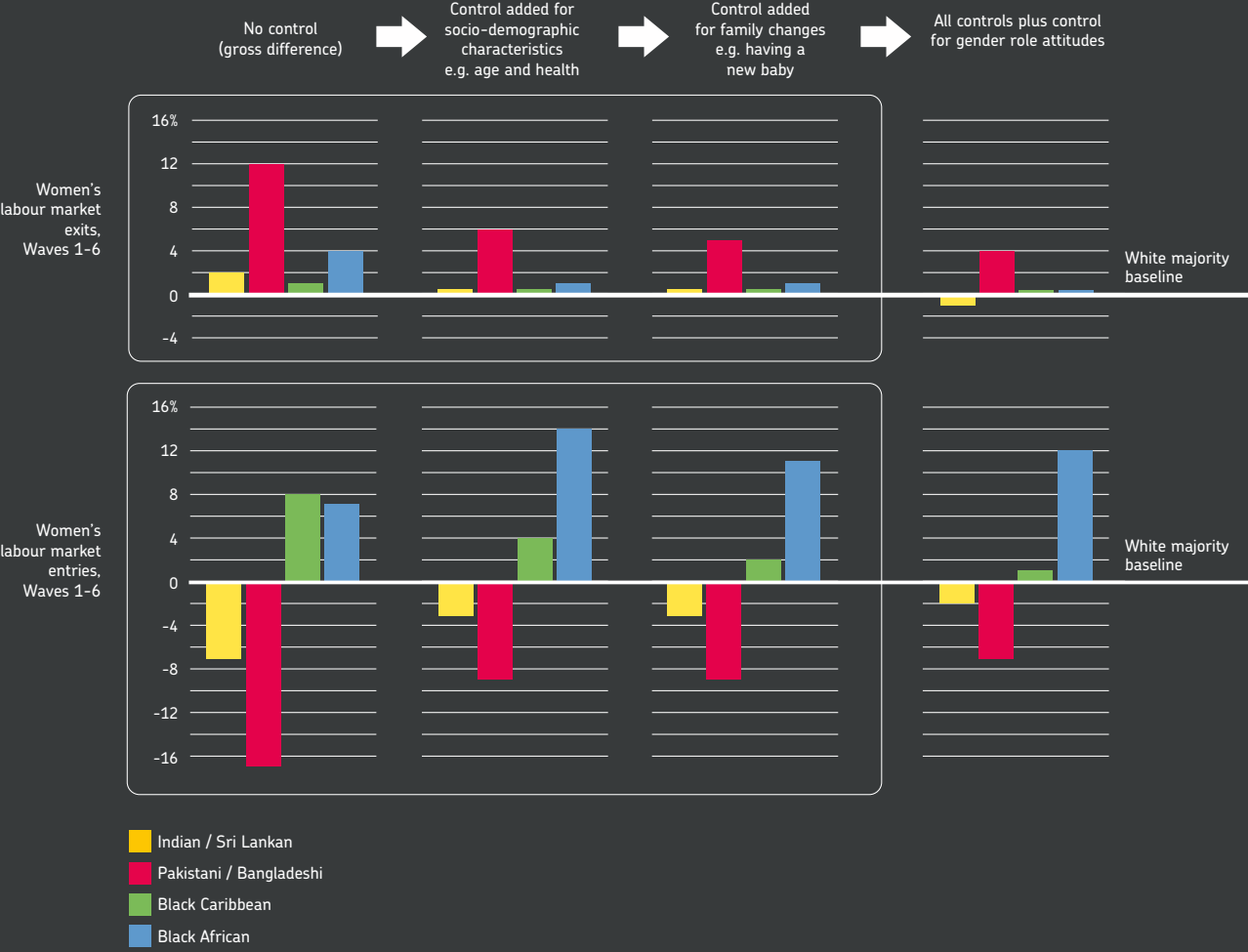
The findings revealed distinct ethnic patterns in women’s labour market transitions. The labour market entry rates of White majority women were higher than those of Indian, Sri Lankan, Pakistani and Bangladeshi women. By contrast, Black and Mixed Caribbean and Black and Mixed African women’s entry rates were higher than those of the White majority. There are higher rates of labour market exit for all ethnic minority groups compared to White majority women.

Differences in socio-demographic factors such as age and health explained a large part of the ethnic differences in labour market entries and exits. Such factors fully explained the lower entry rates of Indian and Sri Lankan women and the higher entry rates of Black Caribbean. However, Pakistani and Bangladeshi women’s entry rates remained lower and Black African women’s higher, even after taking account of these factors. Pakistani and Bangladeshi women were also still more likely to exit the labour market than White majority women.

The study found strong evidence that, as might be expected, a new baby reduced the chance of labour market entry and increased the chance of labour market exit, and that the partner played an important role in women’s labour force transitions. A decrease in his income was connected to an increased chance of women entering the labour market, whereas an increase in his income made it more likely for women to exit the labour market. Over and above this income effect, the study found that single women and women ending a partnership were in general more likely to enter the labour market than women in stable relationships. Changes in these life-course events also explain some of the ethnic differences in women’s labour force transitions.

Gender role attitudes had a clear influence on women’s decision to enter or exit the labour market; and were able to account for a small share of the remaining differences in entry and exit rates of Pakistani and Bangladeshi women compared to White majority women. By contrast, religiosity seemed not to affect women’s labour market transitions.

How do women’s labour market entries and exits differ by ethnic group? (with White majority as a reference)



Understanding the reasons for differences in women’s labour force participation is crucial for designing policies aimed at increasing women’s activity in the labour market.

Overall, this research shows that varying female labour market participation rates across ethnic groups are driven by both differences in entering and leaving the labour market. Our findings suggest that policies designed to reconcile work and family commitments are needed to increase women’s labour force participation; for example, by providing easier and cheaper access to childcare and facilitating flexible work hours.

Furthermore, gender role attitudes explained a small share of the ethnic differences in women’s labour force transitions, and religiosity explained none of the difference. Cultural differences between the groups should therefore not be overemphasised as a reason for ethnic differences in women’s labour market participation.

Data used  
Understanding Society  
Waves 1-6.

NEW CAREGIVERS GIVE UP PAID EMPLOYMENT

EWAN CARR, University College London  
EMILY T MURRAY, University College London  
PAOLA ZANINOTTO, University College London  
DORINA CADAR, University College London  
JENNY HEAD, University College London  
STEPHEN STANSFELD, Queen Mary University of London  
MAI STAFFORD, University College London

Population ageing is increasing the demand for social care. In the UK, most social care is provided informally by family or friends. Demand is expected to exceed supply by 2017, and by 2032 there is projected to be a shortfall of 160000 caregivers. At the same time, spending on formal care has fallen and fewer people over the age of 65 are receiving such care. Population ageing will also decrease the proportion of people remaining in work, compared to those outside the labour market. This threatens the viability of old age pension systems and many governments have responded by raising retirement ages and seeking to extend working lives.

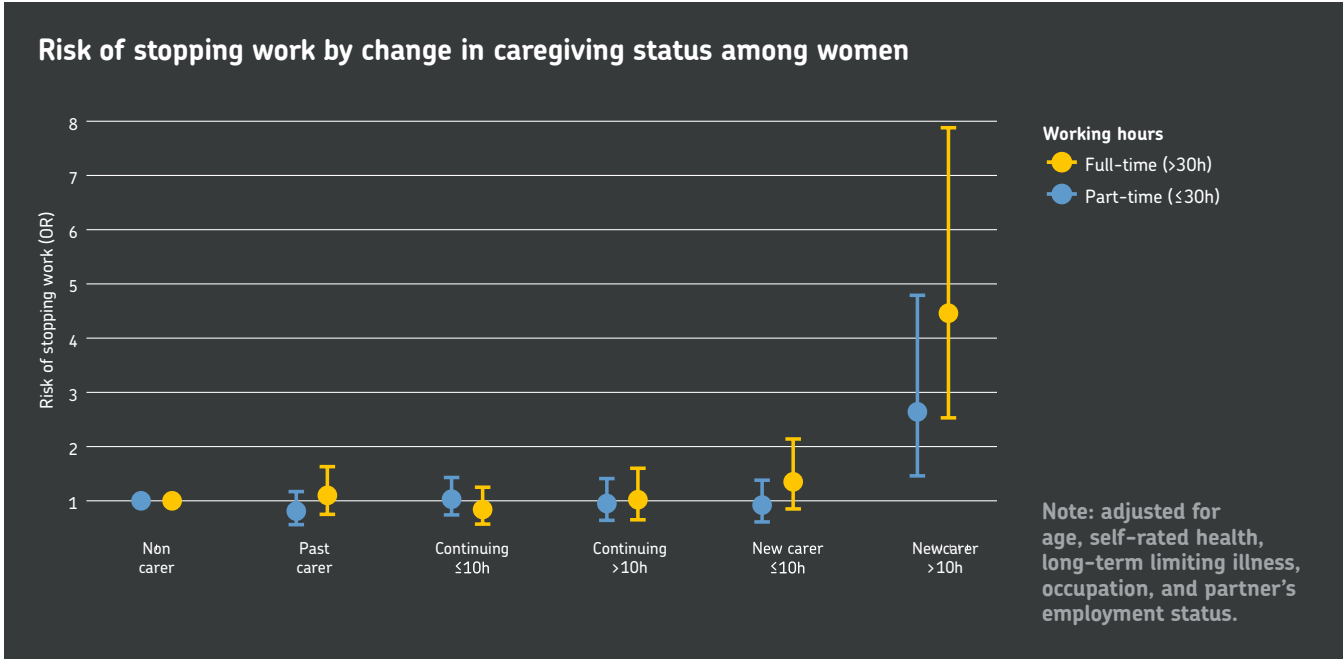
These challenges are strongly linked. Caregivers are less likely to continue paid work, compared to those not providing care, and full-time workers are less likely to enter a caregiving role. Caregiving is also associated with poor health, which can lead to work exit or early retirement. Policies to raise retirement ages may therefore reduce the supply of informal care.

This study looked at whether informal caregivers were more likely to leave their jobs using longitudinal *Understanding Society* data of 8688 older workers (ages 50-75) living in the UK. These data allowed the researchers to look at the impact of changes in caregiving over time. The analysis was carried out for women and men separately and took into account other reasons why people leave their jobs, such as age and poor health.

The study found that entering a caregiving role was linked to people leaving paid work. Women who started providing more than ten hours of care per week were more than twice as likely to stop working, compared to women providing no care. This was found for women working part and full-time, but not for men. The study also found that certain types of caregiving increased the risk of leaving work. Older workers who provided care within the household were more likely to stop work (compared to non-caregivers), as were women who provided care for a partner or spouse.

The hours of care provided did not influence the likelihood of stopping work, and 'continuing' caregivers were no more likely to leave work, compared to workers not providing care. Importantly, this does not mean that caregiving can be easily combined with paid work, but rather, respondents who were providing care had already overcome the challenge of combining care and work.

Older workers are expected to extend their working life while increasing their involvement in informal care. As this study showed, achieving these goals in parallel will be difficult, since older workers who enter a caregiving role are likely to leave work shortly after. More needs to be done to facilitate the combination of paid work and caregiving responsibilities. This could include: (1) improving recognition and support for older workers who take on new caregiving roles, particularly from supervisors or managers; (2) providing flexible work arrangements, such as offering more control over how, where, and when they carry out work responsibilities; (3) introducing statutory leave for caregivers, allowing extended time off work to provide care, and facilitating subsequent returns to work.



Data used  
*Understanding Society*  
Waves 1-5.



# WORK LIFE BALANCE KEY FINDINGS

*Understanding Society* asks about people’s lives holistically. The Study captures their work, their home life and how the two interact.

- >> Women working flexibly were less satisfied in their working life compared to men
- >> Working reduced hours had significant negative impacts on satisfaction levels
- >> Working from home had positive impacts on job and leisure satisfaction for both men and women
- >> Labour market entry and exit rates varied by ethnicity
- >> Differences in the family structure between ethnic groups explained some of the ethnic variation in women’s labour market entries and exits

- >> A smaller part of the ethnic variation in women’s labour market entries and exits was explained by differences in gender role attitudes
- >> Entering a caregiving role for more than ten hours per week was linked to people leaving paid work
- >> For continuing caregivers, the hours of care provided did not influence the likelihood of stopping work
- >> Older workers who provided care within the household were more likely to stop work compared to non-caregivers, as were women who provided care for a partner or spouse

# SCALING UP POLICY IMPACT



RAJ PATEL

Impact Fellow, *Understanding Society*

***Understanding Society* has enormous potential to build on its pioneering work in facilitating knowledge exchange and generating policy impact. As society becomes more diverse and the lives of people more 'complicated', both the collection of wide ranging reliable data and the research methods used for analysis need to adapt.**

The Study allows for more precise analysis of unmet needs within society – beyond the efficacy of existing policies and programmes. For example, understanding the dynamics of groups such as the 'older old' as society ages, the working poor, people with multiple health conditions, second and third generation ethnic minority groups or recent immigrants throw up new policy questions. Understanding the links between different factors is crucial for informing cross-cutting policy (or the limitations of a singular policy) and collaboration between organisations. For example, improving health outcomes critically depends on understanding how biological, social and environmental factors interact if the rising costs of health care are not to overwhelm public expenditure.

There remains a big challenge, though. Britain is in need of major social policy reforms but Brexit is now the big agenda on the table and arithmetic of public spending continues to be challenging. Brexit could syphon energy out of departments, devolved administrations and from across Whitehall. In relation to public spending, estimates by the Institute for Fiscal Studies suggest that real terms public service spending is forecast to increase slightly during the next few years, but with the population also forecast to rise, spending per person is still likely to fall. Both these factors risk curbing or derailing grand social projects. However, the agenda about social policy is not simply about grand projects. Shorter-term gains for improving outcomes also matter. This partly depends on how policy makers and social scientists collaborate to diagnose and solve problems.

As part of the ESRC's investment in data infrastructure, *Understanding Society* generates policy impact both directly through its own activities and indirectly as a result of the activities of its growing community of academic and non-academic data users. The Study, through its wider functions, such as consulting government (particularly Co-Funding Departments) and other stakeholders on survey content, providing support and training and improving access to the data, helps ensure high relevance to public policy issues whilst engaging the broadest audience possible. Its dedicated Policy Unit champions, catalyses and supports impact activities by engaging policy audiences – in ways that provide an understanding of longitudinal research, aid problem diagnosis, support policy evaluation and inspire new thinking.

Positively, the opportunities for interaction between policy audiences and researchers are growing. This is partly as a result of ESRC funding for 'intermediaries' that operate at the interface of research and policy and practice such as the 'What Works Centres' and the Parliamentary Office for Science and Technology (POST). Impact Accelerator Accounts, operated by 24 research organisations, are also building the capacity for interaction. The Evidence 'Eco-system' for Social Policy by the Alliance for Useful Evidence attempts to capture the wider infrastructure for social policy that is now in place.



Transforming social science research into policy action is of course a complex business. The idea of a fully functioning 'eco-system' implies mutually dependent players who collaborate to improve social policy through evidence – arguable a desirable goal with much more to be done to broker productive interactions – but with a number of opportunities for scaling up policy impacts:

**Evidence needs of policy users:** A recommendation by the 2015 Nurse Review was for government departments and non-governmental agencies, where they have a research and development budget, to publish statements on Areas of Research Interest (ARIs). These statements are now beginning to be published by selective departments and could help to align policy and scientific interests – helping researchers better target their expertise and findings, particularly if more policy makers follow suite.

**Linked data:** Research using *Understanding Society* survey data linked with administrative data shows promising results. For example, analysis for the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) of linked education data has revealed the relationship between worklessness and children's educational outcomes whilst other research is demonstrating how parental investment is affected by changes in the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills' (Ofsted) rating of schools. Yet, the process of linking survey data with administrative data is often frustrated in practice. The new Digital Economy Act (April 2017) sets out the scope for anonymised data sharing between government departments and third parties such as academics under highly regulated conditions. Progress on this issue could help accelerate policy applications of *Understanding Society*.

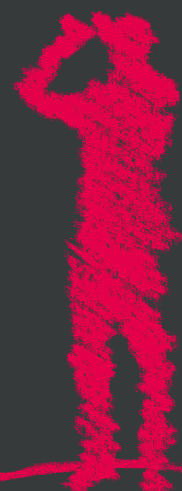
**Problem-solving approaches:** Translating research, media coverage and short knowledge exchange seminars are good ways for sharing research with time-constrained policy makers but generating value from researchers or pursuing fresh ideas depends on far more engaging interactions between decision-makers and producers of longitudinal research. More structured processes such as workshops, placements and 'learning expeditions', whilst more resource intensive to organise, are underexploited tools for policy makers.

Policy readers of Insights who wish to build links with researchers with expertise in using *Understanding Society* should in the first instance get in touch with the Policy Unit: [policyunit@understandingsociety.ac.uk](mailto:policyunit@understandingsociety.ac.uk).





# LOOKING FORWARD



## AFTERWORD



**SUSAN HARKNESS,**  
Director, *Understanding Society* Policy Unit

**As children grow-up, enter the labour market and form their own families, life course trajectories are set. For many, setbacks will occur along the way as families separate, face job loss or ill health. Longitudinal data can help us understanding how widespread these events are: how many will experience some time in low paid work, living in poverty, unemployed, as single parents, or in poor mental health? And while for some, these events may last only fleetingly, for others adverse events may persist for longer. Understanding these dynamics can help inform policy, improve the way in which problems are conceptualised, and help develop appropriate responses.**

Indeed, many policy problems are better understood with longitudinal data such as *Understanding Society*. It is used to help understand income and poverty dynamics; family stability; and work and pay progression. Specifically, the type of questions that were addressed in this edition of Insights help us understand more about the implications of changes in the labour market for future job prospects, inequalities in mental health and challenges and successes in balancing the demands of work and home lives.

As the articles in this edition of Insights showed, the consequences of new trends may not always be as expected. With labour market changes, which have worried policy makers and commentators alike, the longitudinal data revealed mixed evidence on the negative effects of casualisation and low pay on individual's long term career prospects.

Whilst change provided opportunities for some, it was problematic for others. For those with caring responsibilities, these opportunities often reflect positive choices at certain points of the life course. However, it may be a particular problem for mothers, as studies that have used data from the BHPS and *Understanding Society*, published elsewhere, showed – following childbirth women's wage growth stalls and mothers pay falls far behind that of childless women and men. As women are more likely than ever before to be the main family breadwinner this has serious implications for the incomes of families with children. For single mothers in particular, losses in earnings combined with the absence of a partner's income mean that many have very low incomes indeed, and face a high risk of poverty. This has long term implications, both for children's development and women's lifetime incomes.

As more data from *Understanding Society* becomes available, understanding how these relationships evolve over the longer term will become increasingly feasible. To support this, in Wave 7 (released November 2017) *Understanding Society* and the BHPS are harmonised to help researchers make the most of the data across these datasets.

In conclusion, understanding how the life course unfolds, matters if policy is to intervene to help those most at risk. Insights gives just a snapshot of how *Understanding Society* data can help to inform policy – other issues, from understanding health outcomes and wellbeing, to voting intentions and behaviours, or grappling with problems of social mobility – can all benefit enormously from longitudinal data and, with the release of Wave 7, *Understanding Society's* capacity to inform these debates will continue to grow.

# ABOUT THE STUDY

*Understanding Society* provides key evidence about life in the UK. It is the largest longitudinal study of its kind and provides crucial information for researchers and policy makers about the causes and consequences of change in people’s lives.

Our participants come from every area of the UK and the Study covers issues that affect all our lives, from family relationships, education and employment to health, social attitudes and behaviour.

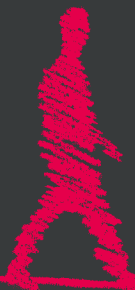
***Understanding Society* has the following key features:**

- >> It covers all ages, allowing us to understand the experiences of the whole population over time.
- >> The whole household contributes. We collect information on everyone in a household so that relations between generations, couples and siblings can be explored.
- >> There is continuous data collection. We interview participants every year so that short and long term changes in people’s lives can be investigated.
- >> We have national, regional and local data. All four countries of the UK are included in the Study allowing researchers to compare the experiences of people in different places and in different policy contexts.
- >> There is an Ethnic Minority Boost. The sample sizes of different ethnic minority groups allow the experiences of specific ethnic minority to be investigated.
- >> It is multi-topic. *Understanding Society* covers a range of social, economic and behavioural factors, making it relevant to a wide range of policy makers and researchers.
- >> It can be linked to administrative data. Study data can be linked, with consent, to administrative records from other sources, building a richer picture of households.
- >> It is underpinned by world-leading methodological research. Researchers have access to high-quality designed and harvested data supported by innovative experimentation, development and testing.
- >> It includes biomarkers and genetic data. Data collected by nurses to measure people’s health enable researchers to understand the relationship between social and economic circumstances and health.
- >> Explore how life in the UK is changing through *Understanding Society*.

*Understanding Society* is part of the Institute for Social and Economic Research, a leading centre for the production and analysis of longitudinal studies.

ISER is based at the University of Essex, which is part of an elite group of ‘dual intensive’ universities gold rated for teaching excellence (TEF2017) and top 20 for research excellence (REF2014). Essex is 22nd in *The Times* and *The Sunday Times Good University Guide 2018* and is ranked in the top 20 globally for international outlook (THE World University Rankings 2018).

*Understanding Society* is primarily funded by the Economic and Social Research Council with additional contributions from a consortium of government departments.



## FIND OUT MORE

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Find out more about the Study online at:  
[WWW.UNDERSTANDINGSOCIETY.AC.UK](http://WWW.UNDERSTANDINGSOCIETY.AC.UK)

Sign up to our newsletter at:  
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