



# Growing Up in Europe

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## *EuroCohort*: an accelerated cohort survey of growing up in Europe

### Summary

There is, at present, no single data source to support comparative analysis of the well-being of children and young people across Europe as they grow up. Some European countries have regularly invested in cohort survey and benefited from analyses drawn from longitudinal studies, such as the British Cohort Studies (1946, 1958, 1970, 2000), the French Longitudinal Study of Children, the Danish Longitudinal Survey of Children, Growing up in Ireland, or the National Education Panel on Early Education and Schooling in Germany. These surveys remain an important source of evidence which supports policy development. The merits of collecting national longitudinal data are widely recognised, and yet the current studies are not easily comparable as they contain different questions and are conducted at different times and on different age groups.

Europe's first comparative birth cohort survey, a Research Infrastructure (RI) called ***EuroCohort***, will be an important source of evidence in developing social policies for children, young people and families across Europe for many years to come. ***EuroCohort*** will be an ***accelerated*** cohort survey including a sample of new born babies as well as a sample of school age children. With two cohorts taking place in parallel it will be possible to make cohort comparisons early in the life of the survey.

The ***EuroCohort*** consortium currently comprises 16 partners from 13 countries and is led by UK experts in longitudinal surveys from Manchester Metropolitan University, University College London, City, University of London and the University of Essex.

### The value to policy-makers of longitudinal data

Insights from longitudinal surveys have much to offer to policy. Different designs are associated with answering different research and policy questions. Birth cohort studies allow researchers to chart the development of the human life course. Longitudinal data is important as it can be used to show how the experiences of different cohorts of

#### Growing Up In Europe: EuroCohort

***EuroCohort*** will directly benefit children and young people by collecting both objective and subjective well-being measures which will be used to ensure that social policies are evidence based. Major themes covered in the survey include: ***Inequality, Learning, Digital Life and Lifestyle.***

people vary over their life course, for example, showing how 16 year olds born in the year 2000 experienced their primary and secondary schooling in order to see what factors are associated with different levels of success. Moreover, where there are a series of cohorts born in different years it then becomes possible to examine how far the experiences of one cohort are comparable or are different. This can be used to examine the effects of policy interventions. The data can then be used *prospectively* to make predictions about the outcomes of particular circumstances and experiences in life occurring at particular points in time or *retrospectively* to

identify the circumstances and experiences in earlier life that underpin a given outcome later<sup>i</sup>.

Longitudinal surveys routinely inform policy development<sup>ii</sup>. In the UK in the 1990s inequality and poverty rates flattened off and it appeared that there was little or no change in the income distribution from one year to the next. However, the British Household Panel Survey revealed that what looked like stable year-on-year average levels of poverty hid the fact that a significant amount of people and families were, over time, going into or coming out of poverty – households' incomes fluctuate between one year and the next, and there was substantial turnover in the membership of the low-income population<sup>iii</sup>. These findings influenced policy including the UK government's welfare reforms from the late 1990s that introduced a more dynamic approach to welfare with a focus on moving people into work and making work pay.

### Europe wide data needs

The UK [ESRC Longitudinal Studies Strategic Review](#)<sup>iv</sup> asserts the ongoing need for high quality longitudinal data. However, although there has been a proliferation of cohort studies around the world the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) is concerned at the lack of comparative analyses. It stresses the importance of internationally comparable longitudinal data to be able to undertake cross-national analysis of phenomena in an increasingly globalised world.

The EU already recognises the importance of high quality survey data to inform policy development through its investment in [The Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe \(SHARE\)](#), the [European Social Survey \(ESS\)](#) and the [Generations and Gender Programme](#) (GGP). This range of survey sources are already available and are regularly used to highlight similarities and difference among (and beyond) Member States. In addition to the requirement that EU Member States undertake a Survey of Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) the existence of complementary socio-economic surveys

strengthens the evidence base for future policy making. These surveys provide the benchmark, worldwide, for comparative survey methodology and will continue to provide a growing body of data which detail the lived, contextual experience of the survey respondents. There is, however, a gap as there are no prospective data collected from children or young people across Europe. Existing surveys may contain retrospective life history data collection that allows some analysis of the effects of early life experiences on subsequent outcomes, but there are significant questions as to the reliability of distant memories and events. Only a birth cohort survey can prospectively collect detailed and accurate life history data from children and young people and establish causal explanatory chains that have their origins in the very early years.

### Longitudinal Studies Strategic Review

The [ESRC Longitudinal Studies Strategic Review](#) mentions various topics of international interest:

- “Comparing **life-course trajectories** to better understand how policy and circumstances affect well-being, health, development and other outcomes
- Comparing **migrants' experiences** in different countries to identify factors that foster successful integration
- **Comparative historical analysis** on areas such as income mobility
- **Socio-economic issues** such as savings practices or attitudes toward redistribution
- **Political research topics** such as attitudes regarding the law
- Specific **health behaviour issues** such as child obesity to assess the impact of policies
- **Generic issues** would profit from larger sample sizes by pooling samples”

There is, at present, no data source available to scientists and policy-makers to analyse comparatively the well-being of children as they grow up and therefore to develop evidence-based policies to improve their well-being. As the respondents to **EuroCohort** grow up an increasing body of data will develop, becoming ever richer and more informative, able to show the ways in which national policies have made impacts and showing where policy interventions can make significant improvements. Researchers the world over will be able to learn from the lived experiences of children and young people as they grow up in a diverse range of European countries. The common methodology of a Europe wide accelerated cohort survey represents a powerful

tool in being able to separate the effects of demography from national policy. The results will be valuable for many years to come and will have a direct impact on better targeting of social policies. **EuroCohort** will inform future policy innovations where there are needs to both improve health outcomes and make savings to public expenditure.

### Benefits of a longitudinal children and young people centric well-being survey across Europe

A comparative longitudinal survey of child well-being in Europe offers policy-makers at a European and Member State level a number of new possibilities for policy formulation.

**International comparative cohort surveys are powerful data resources.** The medical sciences have shown that even with birth cohort surveys that do not have common research design methodologies there are important analytic advantages in undertaking post-hoc harmonisation in order to study child development in relation to early experiences<sup>v</sup>. While there have been a number of initiatives to draw together birth cohort studies over the years, none of these benefit from having a common methodological core. This, therefore, presents a significant challenge in terms of full comparability.

**The German National Educational Panel Study (NEPS)** is one of the largest studies of its kind in Europe. Due to its longitudinal nature it acts as a fundamental source of data for studying the cause-effect relationships between a person's educational paths and multiple dimensions of well-being. By the end of 2018 more than 600 academic publications had used NEPS data. The NEPS data is used for educational reporting and monitoring<sup>vi</sup> and is used to inform the decisions of policy makers in Germany. In addition, as a result of the cooperation with the German Ministry of Education and Research, the NEPS team has conducted evaluations of federal educational reforms in Thuringia<sup>vii</sup> and Baden-Wuerttemberg<sup>viii</sup>.

#### The Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe (SHARE)

By the end of 2017, The SHARE survey had over 7,400 data users from all over the world and more than 2000 publications had used SHARE data.

Findings from SHARE based research allow for evidence-based policy making, demonstrated through examples of policy impact in EU Member States, the European Commission and international organisations. Examples include:

- In Germany, SHARE data was used to compare people's future pension expectations with the actual projected amount and directly evaluate policy measures incentivising citizens to prepare for retirement through increased private retirement savings;
- The Estonian Government Office has used SHARE data to inform the parliament in the ongoing discussion about working opportunities beyond retirement age;
- The European Commission and the OECD had used SHARE research to analyse the recipients and providers of informal care in Europe and to develop ways of providing support to help the caregivers remain in employment and in good health.

**Longitudinal well-being surveys can help us understand transitions in young peoples' lives** (for instance the step from education to the labour market), interruptions and trauma (break up the family unit) as well as turning points that might contribute to the understanding of well-being. In this regard, transitional experiences have been shown to vary significantly over time and so longitudinal data are necessary to analyse and understand the transitions of individuals as they grow older and answer questions about the impact of policy interventions on young people's outcomes<sup>ix</sup>.

**Longitudinal well-being surveys also allow for the measure of stability or instability and the identification of causal relationships.** Individual-level change can only be understood in the context of changes taking place over a considerable amount of time. This type of analysis enables researchers to identify patterns of change (e.g. steady growth, fluctuation around a low level, sudden decline followed by stability<sup>x</sup>). For example, if the proportion of children and young people satisfied with their life is relatively stable over time there might be many of them starting to feel satisfied with their lives while others are not satisfied anymore. A small proportion of children and young people might be satisfied with their lives on a continuous basis, while the majority show strong variations in time. This insight provides greater information about the dynamics and the factors associated with children and young people being satisfied with their lives.

**Longitudinal studies can be used to evaluate policy.** They allow the construction of a 'time series', which, in some contexts provides a 'quasi-experimental' evaluation design<sup>xi</sup>. As compared to the use of administrative data, a key advantage of longitudinal survey data is the potential to overcome the threat of 'instrumentation'. If a time series is constructed using administrative data there is a risk that changes to the way the data is defined or collected will undermine the internal validity of the design<sup>xii</sup>. However, in a survey, where consistent survey instruments are used, this threat is avoided. This application of longitudinal data for establishing causal relationships is evident in policy evaluation where the success of policies on returns to qualifications

and education are more generally understood using birth cohort survey data. In this regard, outcomes in adulthood such as occupation and earnings are set against qualifications, taking account of ability as tested in childhood and numerous other circumstances and experiences earlier in life that might be confounded with them.

### About EuroCohort

Across Europe there are Research Infrastructures in most academic disciplines. Within the EU these are organised within the [European Strategy Forum on Research Infrastructures \(ESFRI\)](#). In September 2018 the [2018 ESFRI](#) roadmap was published. This roadmap is periodically updated with the next refresh due in 2021. Our aim is that **EuroCohort** will be included on the 2021 ESFRI roadmap and receive EU funding to support the coordination of the survey.

### The European Social Survey

ESS data has been widely used for both academic and policy research, resulting in over 3000 publications by the end of 2018. As of November 2018 ESS had 130287 registered data users.

Examples of ESS policy impacts and cases of use by national governments include:

- Evidence on alcohol consumption in Belgium influenced prevention policy;
- Various uses of the ESS data on well-being by the UK Parliament contributed to agenda-setting and monitoring;
- Evidence on attitudes on child-rearing has been used by the Estonian Ministry of Social Affairs to develop "Strategy for Children and Families 2012-2020";
- In Lithuania, the ESS provided indicators on active citizenship that allowed for international benchmarking, leading to the formulation of an action plan aiming to stimulate young people to become more active in civil society;
- The findings from the "Trust in the Police and the Criminal Courts" module fed into the reorganisation of the Swedish police service and has been used in several capacity building projects in Albania.

The EU recognised the need for a robust evidence base for child well-being policy making in calling for FP7 project proposals “Towards a European longitudinal childhood and youth survey” SSH.2013.6.3-1 for which MYWeB (Grant agreement 613368, <https://fp7-myweb.eu>) was the successful application.

**EuroCohort** builds on the MYWeB project, which provided the proof of concept for the development of a Europe wide longitudinal survey of child and youth well-being in regard to:

- desirability among stakeholder groups
- technical do-ability in relation to questionnaire surveys of children as young as seven years old
- policy relevance in regard to the evidence needs for policy development in the area of children, families and education
- policy benefits weighed against the infrastructural costs.

The MYWeB project has demonstrated the desire for and the technical feasibility of a Europe wide Cohort survey. The current work plan of **EuroCohort** is to translate these findings into reality through firstly convincing key policy makers and funders of the need for such a survey, secondly by developing a plan for the operational aspects of the infrastructural requirements and finally by developing the scientific tools required to mount they survey.

The research design of **EuroCohort** will be finalised by the end of 2019. The ESS, SHARE and GGP have set high standards in data quality that will be replicated in **EuroCohort**. There are, however, key decisions which have been taken which both show how the survey will operate as well as the likely costs to each participating country.

**EuroCohort** will be an **accelerated** birth cohort with data collection for each cohort taking place (mostly) alternately, ideally starting with the child cohort in 2022. Figure 1 shows one design of how this would work with a birth cohort (C2) and an age 8 cohort (C1). We anticipate that five year

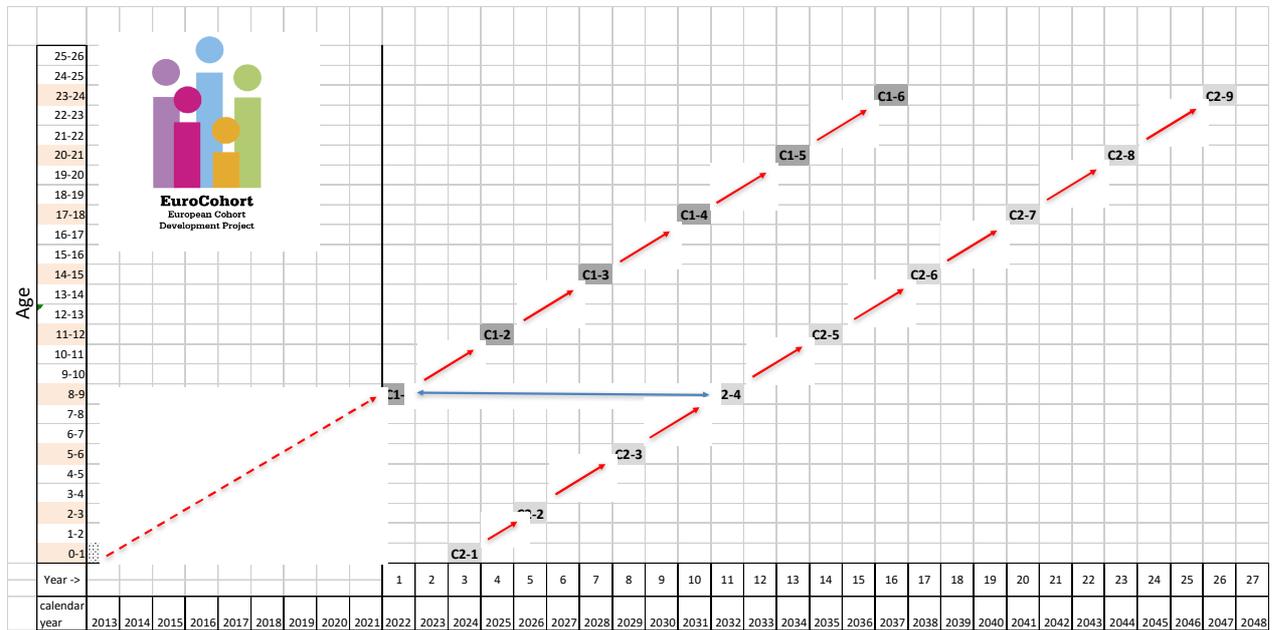
funding cycles are required at the early phases for a stable ongoing investment in the survey.

Survey costs have been estimated on the basis of data collection taking place at regular intervals throughout the life of the survey. Costs relate to the central coordinating team (including developmental and infrastructural requirements), each national scientific team and each national data collection agency. An important cost factor is the sample size in each country. EuroCohort will set minimum target sample sizes for each participating country. These will be nationally representative samples and will be large enough to facilitate multivariate analysis using demographic variables. The MYWeB survey estimated that the minimum sample size for countries with large populations should be 10,000 and for countries with small populations, it could be as low as 5,000. ECDP will update projected national costs but we estimate that national funding, for both the scientific team and the data collection, is likely to be of the order of €1Million for a sample size of 10,000 per year in northern European countries. The central coordinating team requires funding on top of this and this should be provided partly by subscription from each participating team, and partly through funding from the country which hosts the central coordinating team.

We are working closely with established European social science Research Infrastructures: [The European Social Survey](#), based in the UK and the [Generations and Gender Programme](#) are included in the **EuroCohort** consortium. We have a strategic connection with the [Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe](#) (SHARE) survey and the [Consortium of European Social Science Data Archives](#) (CESSDA).

As knowledge of **EuroCohort** spreads, we have been approached by government departments and research teams not currently represented in the consortium. We are interested to hear from any person or organisation who would like to become associated with or be an ambassador for EuroCohort. Please contact us on the email address below.

Figure 1: EuroCohort's accelerated design and an example of a potential timeline





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@EuroCohort



EuroCohort@mmu.ac.uk

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