



Longitudinal Data on Children

Longitudinal studies on families are seen as a valuable way to understand the processes of family support for children, and have been used in various countries to provide a better understanding of the phases and durations of family experience. Most recently, Canada has commenced a longitudinal study of children to form the basis of a better understanding of family change and associated policy responses.

In Australia, the Australian Bureau of Statistics has been considering the issue of longitudinal data. They have recently embarked on a longitudinal Survey of Employment and Unemployment Patterns (SEUP), but their family analysis currently focuses on cross-sectional data. At this time, there are no plans to develop a longitudinal survey for children.

Two recurring themes at the recent Australian Rotary Health Research Fund Symposium on Health and Family were the need to analyse children's characteristics in a wider framework and the need to explore the experiences of children over time. The ABS presented a paper there in which they raised issues about user requirements for data on children.

Longitudinal studies, though, require considerable resourcing and particular care in analysis, and any agency considering undertaking such a commitment needs to look at the benefits and disadvantages. A longitudinal study does have the ability to address issues such as: How many children spend time in a one-parent family, how long do those experiences last and how much of that period is linked with poverty? How well do such experiences link with educational outcomes? How closely is poverty linked with family break-up as compared with long term unemployment of parents? How do families with a child with a disability or a health problem fare over the long haul? But as the issues shift over time, some of the questions asked lose their relevance and the dilemma about the advantages of longitudinal versus more immediate cross-sectional data is highlighted.

For this reason, the Australian Bureau of Statistics is interested to hear from people who have a need for longitudinal data on children.

Contact Andrea Knott on (06) 252 7070, or write to The Australian Bureau of Statistics, PO Box 10, Belconnen ACT 2616.