Unresolved Public Policy Challenges

ONS, Understanding Society and NatCen
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At NatCen Social Research we believe that social research has the power to make life better. By really understanding the complexity of people’s lives and what they think about the issues that affect them, we give the public a powerful and influential role in shaping decisions and services that can make a difference to everyone. And as an independent, not for profit organisation we’re able to put all our time and energy into delivering social research that works for society.
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“...policy makers can undoubtedly make meaningful interventions to ensure the UK enjoys the opportunities and benefits while planning for, and managing, the downsides.”
Introduction

As we move into the 2020s, what are the key unresolved public policy challenges facing society?

While we might have huge advantages today over previous generations in terms of our longevity, health & wellbeing and education, a new set of challenges are emerging associated with modern living.

We are witnessing a period of major social change. Our population is growing and ageing, traditional families and religious structures are weakening. There are transformative changes for women’s lives, concerns around social inequalities and poor wellbeing for particular groups, while new technologies bring global outlooks and affect the way we communicate and live our lives.

Much of this change is not being driven by “Government”, but policy makers can undoubtedly make meaningful interventions to ensure the UK enjoys the opportunities and benefits while planning for, and managing, the downsides. It may be essential for them to do so if politicians are to regain public confidence.

This visual report has been produced by NatCen with support from ONS and Understanding Society to celebrate its 50th anniversary. It is designed to provide the evidence policy makers need to improve people’s lives over the next decade.
Office for National Statistics (ONS)

The ONS is the UK’s National Statistical Institute and largest producer of official statistics. Operating impartially and free of political control, it produces the numbers that matter most—on the economy and business, people, population and communities.

The UK has important decisions to make on exiting the EU and our place in the world, the macroeconomy and industrial strategy, population change and migration, health, security and many more. The job of ONS is to provide clear and timely insight, targeted on the issues at hand.

Changes in society, technology and legislation mean that more data, in richer and more complex forms, is available than ever before. This offers a huge opportunity for innovation and ultimately a better understanding of our society, our economy and our own lives. The ONS is uniquely placed to harness the potential of these data sources and provide answers to the most important questions in Britain today.

This chapter provides an overview of our population, and how it has changed over recent decades. The changing structure of the population will bring both opportunities and challenges for the economy, services and society at national and local levels. This chapter sets out some of the data and analyses relevant to these policy domains. It aims to give a resource for policy makers, commentators, think-tanks, academics, charities and the public to use when considering how the UK should adapt to the opportunities and challenges that our changing population brings.

Beyond a changing population, the chapter also explores some of the inequalities that are present in the UK. Across a range of different areas of society, we provide evidence of how lived experience of people can vary based on age, sex, or where they live.

We have used a range of different sources, including some of our flagship data sources such as the Living Costs and Food Survey, and our National Population Projections, as well as some external sources, such as the Office for Budget Regulations’ Fiscal Sustainability Report.

By using a range of different sources, we can provide a more holistic overview of our population to enable policy makers to have a snapshot of life in the UK.
Changing population and inequalities

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Our population is growing

UK population estimates, mid 1993 to mid 2018, and projections to mid 2043

The UK population, which was 66.4 million in mid 2018, is projected to rise to 69.4 million over the decade to mid 2028. It is then projected to pass 70 million by mid 2031 and reach 72.4 million by 25 years into the projection (mid 2043).

The total projected increase in the UK population over the next 25 years is less than over the past 25 years. Between mid 1993 and mid 2018, the population grew by 9.0 million (15.1%); between mid 2018 and mid 2043, it is projected to grow by another 6.0 million (9.0%).

Source: Office for National Statistics, National population projections 2018-based
There is a growing number of older people in the UK

Population by age group, UK, selected years

The UK population has also been steadily getting older and this trend is projected to continue.

In mid 2043, there are expected to be many more people at older ages. This partly reflects the 1960s baby boomers who will be aged around 80 years, but also reflects general increases in life expectancy.

In mid 2018, there were 1.6 million people aged 85 years and over; by mid 2043, this is projected to nearly double to 3.0 million.

Due to data availability for the year 1968, the under 16 category only includes those under 15 years of age. The 16–64 category for this year includes those aged 15–64.

Source: Office for National Statistics, National population projections 2018-based
Fertility rates fell for the sixth year in a row

Total fertility rate, England and Wales, 1938 to 2018

In 2018, fertility rates fell for the sixth consecutive year to 1.70 children per woman, from a peak in 1964 of 2.93 children per woman. Possible reasons for declining birth rates could be: improved access to contraception; the reduction in mortality rates of children under five years, meaning women having fewer babies; and difficulties conceiving due to postponing childbearing.

The age at which women have their first child has been increasing for more than 40 years. The average age of mothers in 2018 increased to 30.6 years, from 26.4 years in 1975.

The changing nature of our population is also influenced by historical and recent patterns of fertility.

The total fertility rate is the average number of live children that a group of women would bear if they experienced the age-specific fertility rates of the calendar year throughout their childbearing lifespan. Source: Office for National Statistics, Births in England and Wales
Healthy life expectancy fails to keep pace with life expectancy for males and females

Healthy life expectancy at birth, years lived in “good” health and years in poorer health, by sex (UK, 2009 to 2011 and 2016 to 2018)

The projected growth of the older population is due to declining mortality rates.

People are living longer, with improved working conditions, reduced smoking rates and improved healthcare contributing to increasing life expectancy from generation to generation. Whilst life expectancy is increasing, healthy life expectancy is not increasing at the same rate and people are spending more years in ‘not good’ health.

In 2016 to 2018, men could expect to spend 16.2 years of their lives in poorer heath, compared to 15.8 years in 2009 to 2011. Women could expect to spend 19.4 years of their lives in poorer health (2016 to 2018), compared to 18.6 years in 2009 to 2011.

Source: Office for National Statistics, Health state life expectancies, UK
An ageing population has an impact on public spending

Representative profile for tax, public services and welfare spending, UK, 2022 to 2023

Improvements in healthcare and lifestyle leading to people living longer is a good news story. However, there are many implications of a growing and ageing population, particularly on public spending. There are large increases in public spending on older age groups, particularly for welfare spending, reflecting spending on pensions, and more health and social care spending.

With multiple economic, public service and societal impacts, there will be a need to address the implications of a growing older population who depend more on public benefits than other age groups.

Source: Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR)
Gains in life expectancy at birth have slowed in the UK in recent years

Gains in life expectancy at birth in UK by sex over rolling temporally distinct periods, between 2001 to 2003 and 2016 to 2018

During the period 2001 to 2011, life expectancy increases were large by historical standards; for example, between 2001 to 2003 and 2004 to 2006 life expectancy increased by 12.3 months for males in the UK, and by 9.3 months for females.

Since 2011, these improvements have begun to slow down; for example, between 2013 to 2015 and 2016 to 2018 life expectancy at birth improved by only 1.7 months for males and 1.1 months for females.

To report the gain in life expectancy at birth, temporally distinct adjacent periods are subtracted in a rolling pattern. The year 2001 to 2006 on the x-axis reflects the gains between 2001 to 2003 and 2004 to 2006, and similarly the year 2013 to 2018 reflects gains between 2013 to 2015 and 2016 to 2018.

Office for National Statistics, Health state life expectancies, UK
Life expectancy falling for women in deprived areas

Change in life expectancy in days between 2012 to 2014 and 2015 to 2017: by sex and decile, England

There was a statistically significant fall of almost 100 days in life expectancy at birth among females living in the most deprived areas. This is in sharp contrast to the statistically significant gain of 84 days amongst females living in the least deprived areas. Taken together, this represents an increase of half a year in the absolute difference in life expectancy between females living in the least and most deprived areas in England.

Life expectancy at birth of males living in the most deprived areas in England was 74.0 years, compared with 83.3 years in the least deprived areas, nearly a decade difference. Males in the least deprived 50% of areas could expect to live beyond the age of 80 years, while those in the 50% most deprived fell short of 80 years.

In general, males living in more deprived areas had either non-significant slight falls or gains in life expectancy, with gains becoming more substantial by decile 5 and then becoming statistically significant in areas located in deciles 9 and 10.

Source: Office for National Statistics, Health state life expectancies by national deprivation deciles
Younger adults are experiencing loneliness more often

Reported frequency of loneliness by age group, England, August 2018 to March 2019

In 2018 to 2019, 6% of adults (aged 16 and over) in England reported feeling lonely “often/always”—that’s 1 in 20 adults.

Compared with all other age groups those aged 16 to 24 years were more likely to report feeling lonely “often/always”. Those aged 16 to 24 years were also more likely to report feeling lonely “some of the time” compared with all other groups. They were also least likely of all age groups to report “never” experiencing loneliness.

Source: Community Life Survey, August 2018 to March 2019
Wellbeing is lowest for those in the middle age groups

Percentage with very high rating of satisfaction with their lives overall, by age group, UK, April 2018 to March 2019

Those in the middle age group experience a dip in reported life satisfaction compared to other age groups. This trend is also apparent in the other three measures of personal well-being (feeling things done in life are worthwhile, happiness and anxiety).

The lower rating for people reaching middle age may be a reflection of the added caring responsibilities often seen in this age group, having to care for elderly parents and children at the same time. Those in their younger years and those who are retired may also have more free time to spend on activities which promote their wellbeing.

Source: Office for National Statistics, Annual Population Survey
Income inequality remains unchanged in the financial year ending 2019

Gini coefficients* for equivalised disposable income of all individuals, UK, 1977 to financial year ending 2019

*The Gini coefficient ranges between 0% and 100%, where 0% indicates that income is shared equally among all households and 100% indicates the extreme situation where one household accounts for all income. Therefore, the lower the value of the Gini coefficient, the more equally household income is distributed.

Income inequality in the UK, as measured by the Gini coefficient, remained stable at 32.5% in the financial year ending (FYE) 2019. Despite a small increase in income inequality over the last couple of years, levels remain slightly lower than those reached 12 years ago.

Looking separately at people living in retired households, and those in non-retired households, levels of inequality for both groups were unchanged in FYE 2019.
Each generation saw an increase in income in real terms, compared to the previous generation, until recently

People born in the 1930s, 1940s or 1950s had higher average incomes than the generation preceding them at similar stages in their lives.

But the same pattern of consistently higher average incomes than previous generations has not been seen for those born in later decades. Households with heads born in the 1980s have broadly comparable median incomes to those born the previous decade. They have also seen slower growth in income between age 25 and 34 years, compared with those born in the 1960s and 1970s at the same age. Average annual growth between age 25 and 34 years for those born in the 1980s was 1.5% per year, compared with 2.3% and 2.4% per year for those born in the 1960s and 1970s respectively.

Stagnating income for more recent generations, compared with their older counterparts, is likely to be influenced by several factors. For instance, over recent years, wages have fared worse than their historical trends. In the 10 years since 2004, when those born in the 1980s and those born in the 1970s were likely to have been in the earlier stages of their working life, according to the UK National Accounts, wages per head fell by on average 0.1% per year. This compares with an increase of 3.9% per year over the 10 years preceding 2004.

Median equivalised disposable income for each decade of birth by age of household reference person, UK

Source: Office for National Statistics, Living Costs and Food Survey
Conclusion

The structure of the UK’s population is changing: people are living longer and having fewer children which is resulting in the age structure shifting towards later ages. However, life expectancy is slowing down, with recent increases in life expectancy being much lower than experienced in previous decades. Nevertheless, life expectancy is still increasing, so the ageing population is projected to continue. Understanding the size and characteristics of the UK population is vital when it comes to planning and delivering services such as education, transport and healthcare.

These high-level figures provide interesting insights; however, you must scratch below population level estimates to explore people’s lived experience in the UK. Whilst life expectancy is increasing, the years lived in good health is not keeping pace, meaning people are spending more of their lives in poor health. Also, the picture varies significantly by area, with large spatial gaps in life expectancy at birth across all the constituent countries of the UK. These differences have implications to future planning and delivery of health provisions and social care.

It is not just health outcomes that are varied. Across personal wellbeing and loneliness, and income and wealth, there are a lot of factors that affect our lived experiences. Highlighting just a few areas in this report, it is important we explore the inequalities between groups for a number of outcomes, to help policy makers improve lives.
Understanding Society, the UK Household Longitudinal Study, enables researchers to examine short and long-term changes in the lives of individuals, families and groups. With funding from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) at UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), and support from University of Essex and co-funding government departments, the study is a unique resource for evidence informed policymaking. These findings reflect the work of experts and researchers from across different disciplines and institutions. In particular thanks go to Mike Brewer, Alina Pelikh and Brienna Perelli-Harris for their input.

In 2019 there were 19.2 million families in the UK, a 16% increase from 16.6 million in 1996—although the number of those living alone has also increased by a fifth over the last 20 years, now numbering 8.2 million one-person households. Less people are having children, but there are many more co-habiting couples with children, whilst the number of young people aged 20 to 34 years (non-dependent children) living with their parents has increased by 46% in the last 20 years.

The lives of families have significantly improved in the past hundred years. Changing social norms, the creation of the NHS, post-war house building at scale and the mass availability of domestic appliances have all had a major impact. From feminisation of the workforce, to separation of work from home and childcare provision, many factors have transformed family life.

These research findings point to areas where policy attention can continue to make a real difference to families. There may be a temptation to place these findings into neat and distinctive areas of policy for individuals—welfare, employment, equality, social mobility, housing or health—but thinking about families in the round has never been more important. Grouped under three themes, the research findings demonstrates just how ‘linked’ our lives are.
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Family institutions are being transformed: co-habitation is on the rise, marriage continues to decline

Percentage of mothers who are married, co-habiting or alone

Family structures have changed between 1991 and 2015/16, with marriage becoming less common and co-habiting becoming more common. In 1991, 79% of mothers were married, falling to 62% in 2015/16. Meanwhile the number of cohabiting mothers has almost trebled in that time, from 5% to 15%. The proportion of lone mothers has also increased marginally, from 18% in 1991 to 23% in 2015/16.

Source: Understanding Society Policy Unit Data Note (2018)
NEW AND DIVERGING FAMILY STRUCTURES

There is growing divergence in family structures

Level of education and relationship status for mothers

Whilst family structures in general have changed, with fewer mothers in 2015/16 married than in 1991, this effect diverges by educational level. For medium or highly educated mothers just around 80% were married or living with the biological father of their children in 1991. This has remained unchanged for highly educated mothers. However, for mothers with lower levels of education, 66% were married to or living with the biological father of their children in 1991, dropping to 56% in 2016.

Source: Understanding Society Policy Unit Data Note (2018)
NEW AND DIVERGING FAMILY STRUCTURES

Increase in separation has created a sizeable group of separated families, raising implications for children

How involved are non-resident fathers with their children?

Alongside these shifts in family structures there has also been an increase in separation, accounting for 13% of families in the UK in 2019. This increase in separated families means there are currently 3.9 million children living with one biological parent (usually their mother), with the majority having regular contact with their fathers. Around 3 in 10 children in separated families have disengaged fathers or fathers who live over an hour away from them.

Source: Poole, Speight, O’Brien and Connolly (2016)
As UK society ages, many families now have sandwich carers

Number of sandwich carers in the UK

As mentioned before, the UK population is ageing, with a higher proportion of residents aged 85 and over in 2018 than 25 years ago. This ageing population, in combination with increased childbearing age, means that many families in the UK now have sandwich carers who look after dependent children and parents. In 2016-17 in the UK there were 1.3 million sandwich carers, marginally down from 2009-10. Whilst the majority (75%) of these sandwich carers provide elderly care outside their home, a quarter provide care in-house, suggesting multi-generational families living in the same home.

Source: Sandwich carers, Office for National Statistics (2019)
NEW AND DIVERGING FAMILY STRUCTURES

Sandwich carers disproportionately struggle financially and… those who provide more care have poorer mental health

How sandwich carers feel about their financial situation

![Financial Situation Bar Chart]

Mental health of sandwich carers (based on General Health Questionnaire—GHQ)

![Mental Health Bar Chart]

Source: Sandwich carers, Office for National Statistics (2019)

Those who are sandwich carers are more likely to struggle financially than the general population, with 1 in 10 reporting that financially they are ‘finding it difficult’ and a third reporting that they are ‘just about getting by’. Alongside this, those who are sandwich carers are more likely to report symptoms of mental ill-health, and feel less satisfied with life, particularly when they care for others for over 20 hours a week.
Another change in family structures relates to who people are marrying. Native British women are 10 times more likely to marry within their ethnic/cultural group (i.e. another Native British person) than outside. There are also significant differences among immigrants and their descendants. Those from Europe are more likely to form a relationship outside their group than one within their group, showing a preference for interethnic marriages. Women from India, the Caribbean or Other ethnic/cultural groups are respectively 5, 3 and 1.5 times more likely to marry within their own group than outside it. In contrast, those from Pakistan or Bangladesh are 15 times more likely to marry within their own group than outside it (all unweighted analysis).

Source: Kulu and Hanneman (2018)
Each chart simply represents a ratio for that group. It does not represent the size of the group population or quantity of mixed relationships.
Income volatility, a major risk for working age people*, is falling

Income volatility between 2010–17 for working age and older age people

Income volatility, that is swings in income, can create risks and insecurity for individuals and households, and is associated with depression, food insecurity, poor health, mortgage delinquency, and poorer child outcomes. Overall income volatility fell between 2009 and 2017, although there are worrying signs that this trend may have started to reverse for 25 to 59 years olds. For low income and retired households, benefits and tax credits have played an important role in reducing income volatility, including for a household with more than one person working.

* Includes self-employed

Income covers earnings, benefits, pensions and other income. Income volatility is the change in monthly income measured at two similar time periods.
...but Universal Credit will create many winners and losers at the lower end of the income scale

Impact of Universal Credit on adults in households entitled to means-tested benefits, by family type (share of all entitled adults in brackets)

Benefits and tax credits have played a role in reducing income volatility, but Universal Credit will create losses and gains for different groups. Around 1 in 4 single parents and couples without children will see losses of over £1,000 per annum, while a similar proportion of couples with children will see gains of over £1,000 per annum.

Source: Brewer, Joyce, Waters and Wood (2019)
Upward or downward income mobility is ‘sticky’ at the top and bottom of the distribution rather than in the middle

UK, 2010–2017—Male income before housing costs (BHC)

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Becoming a homeowner* depends on parental property wealth...and its importance has increased over time

Proportion of homeowners by binary parental wealth indicator

Children with parents who have property wealth are more likely to be homeowners themselves by the time they are 30, although overall homeownership has fallen. Between 1991-2003, about 40% of people whose parents were homeowners had themselves become homeowners by the age of 30, compared to 19% of those whose parents were not homeowners. By 2004-2017, these figures had dropped to 25% of those whose parents were homeowners and 9% of those whose parents were not.


* Becoming a homeowner is defined by housing tenure alone and not the way in which the property was acquired, e.g. through a mortgage or outright ownership.
In spite of higher education levels, ethnic minority men face higher risks of unemployment and lower access to professional & managerial jobs

Integration trajectories of first and second generation ethnic groups

Although some ethnic minority groups are more likely to have higher education qualifications (first generation Chinese men’s degree-level education is 34% higher than that of white men), their access to professional and managerial occupations is lower. This is the case for both first and second generation ethnic minorities, who encounter much higher risks of unemployment, and have much lower access to professional and managerial positions than do white nationals, even when considering higher educational achievements.

Source: Li (2018)
Significant gender differences can be observed in the average pay gap before and after becoming a parent. There is an average wage gap between men and women of over 10% even before the arrival of the first child (though a small part of this is due to age differences: men tend to be slightly older than women when they have their first child). This gap is fairly stable and relatively small until the child arrives, when there is a gradual but continual rise in the wage gap over the following 20 years (since childbirth), where it reaches one third.
Women’s employment patterns after childbirth are very different to men’s

Mothers and fathers’ employment patterns (%) in the three years after birth

One factor which might impact the gender pay gap following childbirth is changes in working patterns and a reduction in working hours. Women increasingly withdraw from employment in the years following childbirth by moving into part-time work or exiting the labour market, while men’s employment shows far less variation: the majority remain employed full-time or self-employed. Women who return to employment typically see their chance of moving up the occupational ladder decrease: 26% of men are promoted or moved to a better job in the five years following childbirth, compared to 13% for women.

Source: Harkness, Borkowska and Pelikh (2019)
Data on new mothers and new fathers. Fathers paternity not visible as employment figures are 6 monthly and most paternity leave was relatively short.
PARENTHOOD, GENDER EQUALITY AND FAMILY HEALTH

Long-term wealth outcomes for men and women diverge after divorce and separation given different housing trajectories

Relative risk of moving to different types of housing for separated women and separated men in England and Wales, 1991–2014

Divorce and separation can be economically costly both for women and men, but disproportionately more costly for women. This is because they can have an impact on long-term housing trajectories. Past research shows that family formation (e.g., marriage) leads to upward housing mobility for example homeownership, while those who are divorced or separated have an increased risk of residential changes. Separated women are most likely to move to private rented housing, followed by social renting. Separated men are also most likely to move to private renting, but the second most common move is to owner-occupied housing.

Source: Mikolai and Kulu (2017)
Family wellbeing matters to individual wellbeing … but it is the mother and daughter connections that count

Previously stated evidence shows that children of parents who had difficulties with their own mental health were more likely to have a mental disorder, and other evidence suggests that the wellbeing of parents and their adolescent children is interrelated. Whilst a mother’s and a father’s mental health will influence each other’s over time, only the mother’s mental health appears important for their children’s wellbeing. Similarly, both adolescent boys and girls have similar levels of unhappiness about different aspects of their lives, but for boys parental distress doesn’t seem to increase their own mental distress.

Improving family health: intergenerational health is more highly correlated than intergenerational income


Poor health in early life leads to a number of detrimental outcomes later on. Between 1990 and 2017 parent’s and children’s health and wage correlations have remained fairly constant. Intergenerational health is more highly correlated than intergenerational wages, suggesting it’s harder to break intergenerational links in health than links in the labour market. Furthermore, policies to influence income mobility may not necessarily impact on health mobility and vice versa. While health and income are highly correlated in any given generation, it is not necessarily the case that both health and economic status are equally transmitted to the next generation.

Looking below the averages, correlation across mental health, physical health, and wages over generations is stronger in the North than the rest of England—and it’s increasing over time. What this suggests is that mobility is declining faster in the North of England. More young people are following their parents into an adult life of poor health and low wages.
Conclusion

Strong families are critical to the advancement of society and economy, for care and nurturing, and for people’s wellbeing. The findings, emerging from researchers using Understanding Society, reveal three things:

- the UK has undergone substantial family change, leading to new and diverse family types and a greater churn through relationships. Inequality in family types, by education, is becoming embedded in society;

- the differential effects of economic change on individual and family prospects are becoming entrenched. This raises implications not just for tax and benefit policy and how wealth and assets are taxed, but how housing and labour market policy can play a bigger role in mobility and supporting families;

- producing a healthy society crucially depends on the role of families, whether in terms of social care, adult and children’s mental health or reducing the risk of children following their parents into poor health.

Rhetoric about families is not uncommon in political and media discourse, but outside of pockets of excellence, family considerations are not always incorporated fully in the normal pursuit of policy formulation and public service reforms. A key reason for this is a lack of policy coherence on how to think about modern families and, in particular, what role can the state, employers and civil society play in strengthening them. In reality, families are dynamic, fluid and open-ended—and whilst not always harmonious—they reflect changing social practices as well as institutions vital to societal wellbeing. A “lifecourse approach” to policy, rather than a “pick and mix” of policies, could help to join-up government and generate longer-term dividends.

Bibliography

Understanding Society is an initiative funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and various Government Departments, with scientific leadership by the Institute for Social and Economic Research, University of Essex, and survey delivery by NatCen Social Research and Kantar Public. The research data are distributed by the UK Data Service.

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Who are Non-Resident Fathers?: A British Socio-Demographic Profile, Eloise Poole, Svetlana Speight, Margaret O’Brien, Sara Connolly, Journal of Social Policy, 45(2), 223-250 https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279415000653

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ONS dataset, January 2019: https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/healthandwellbeing/datasets/sandwichcarers

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Yaojun Li, Integration Journey: The Social Mobility Trajectory of Ethnic Minority Groups in Britain, Social Inclusion 6(3): http://dx.doi.org/10.17645/si.v6i3.1542

PARENTHOOD, GENDER EQUALITY AND FAMILY HEALTH

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PAGE 33: Improving family health: intergenerational health is more highly correlated than intergenerational income
Heather Brown, Clare Bambra, Do your parents mess you up?: Exploring the Intergenerational Correlation in Physical Health, Mental Health, and Wages Over Time. Executive summary for London policy event, June 2019, using findings from The Intergenerational Persistence of Inequalities in Health and Income: Where can we target policy to best reduce inequalities?. Understanding Society Policy Fellowship: https://www.ncl.ac.uk/ihb/staff/profile/heatherbrown.html#research
The National Centre for Social Research (NatCen)

The National Centre for Social Research exists because social research has the power to make life better. As Britain's leading centre for independent social research, it has over 50 years' experience of listening to the public and making sure their voice is heard. The research it does helps government and charities make the right decisions about the big issues, and we’re passionate about ensuring the widest possible positive impact on the world around us. As a non-profit organisation, we are never compromised by commercial or political agendas.

The political landscape and policy makers' priorities in the 2010s were inevitably influenced, firstly, by the aftermath of the global financial crisis and its consequences for the UK's economy, and then by the outcome of the EU referendum.

But what about people’s actual lives? The UK is witnessing a period of significant social transition, much of it happening irrespective of politicians and policy makers. The changes inevitably raise the question as to whether or not there is a need for a more compelling narrative for society going forward—the “group” interest as opposed to our “individual” ones.

The evidence brought together in this report by the ONS, Understanding Society and NatCen—the three organisations that collect much of the UK’s evidence base on our society—suggests there are challenges ahead for our policy makers. For example, although we’re living longer, we’re also spending more of our lives in poor health. With our population ageing, the stretch on our health and social care services can only be expected to increase substantially in the future—and the financial cost for the average citizen to rise with demand—unless there are successful interventions.

Public confidence in our politicians and the so-called “establishment” remains a cause for concern. How the public are feeling and what they would like to happen next are important for the main political parties—if there is too big a gap between the public policy agenda and what people want, then more populist leaders might emerge to fill it. The British Social Attitudes Survey, conducted by NatCen with its gold standard methodology and time series, is recognised as the primary vehicle for informing policy makers where the public’s priorities lie.
Making People's Lives Better: The Public Perspective

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A significant period of social change...

We’re witnessing a period of significant social change. It can be argued that much of it is for the better. Much of the change is not being driven by Government but policy makers can still make telling interventions to improve people’s lives.

- The population is changing in size, distribution (ageing and diversity) and family formations
- More of us are becoming relatively better educated
- New technologies enable global outlooks and change the way people communicate and live their lives
- Greater equality across groups, including transformative change for women’s lives
But the public typically changes slowly in real-time...

Sexual relations between two adults of the same sex are ‘not wrong at all’

Individuals and our behaviours and attitudes change gradually over time.

A good example of this is with our attitudes towards sex between same-sex adults. When the question was first asked on the British Social Attitudes Survey in 1983, less than 1 in 5 people said it was not wrong at all. Today, the figure is nearer two thirds.

This is a major shift but it hasn’t happened overnight—rather, over more than three decades.

Source: NatCen, British Social Attitudes Survey, 1983–2018
The public are moving in the same direction on most issues but at different paces...for example, by age

Same-sex relationships are “not at all wrong”, by age

Source: NatCen, British Social Attitudes Survey, 1983–2018

You would expect people’s behaviours, values and attitudes to change at different paces during a period of social change. But we are typically all moving in the same direction—for example, here by age.
...or by education

Sexual relations between two adults of the same sex are ‘not wrong at all’ by education: those with degrees vs those with no qualifications.

Similarly, the same direction of travel is observed by education level. This can be seen as reassuring—perhaps there is more that unites us than we sometimes convey, at least in terms of changes in attitude.

However, it is worth noting on the graph that the 2018 figure for “no formal qualifications” is 43%. It is a reminder that LGBT rights are historically still relatively new and are not yet universally accepted in Britain.

Source: NatCen, British Social Attitudes Survey, 1983–2018
...or by education

What is the best way for a family with a child under school age to organise their family and work life?

![Graph showing the decline in support for arrangements where the man works full-time and the woman plays the main caring role in a family with a child under school age. The decline is seen across the different education levels.]

The decline in support for arrangements where the man works full-time and the woman plays the main caring role in a family with a child under school age can be seen across the different education levels.

We are again moving in the same direction at different paces from different bases. This pattern is seen across many series with just a small number of exceptions, such as recently with trust in Government.

Source: NatCen, British Social Attitudes Survey, 2012 and 2018
The unresolved public policy issues… views on taxation and spending

So what are the unresolved public policy issues in the public’s eyes?

There is a growing sense that we should increase taxes to enable us to spend more on public services such as health, education and social benefits.

This is a shift of direction following the years of austerity. Between 2007 and 2015 more people thought taxes ought to be kept the same than thought they ought to be increased, but since 2016 more people have thought taxes should be increased.

The recent overall increase in those supporting an increase in tax and spending appears to mainly be driven by a rising level of support among Conservative voters: in 2015 only 35% of Conservative supporters said that tax and spending should increase, compared to 53% in 2018. The last time over half of Conservative voters thought the Government should increase tax and spending was in 2002.

Source: NatCen, British Social Attitudes Survey, 1983–2018
In your opinion, is the NHS facing a funding problem?
Percentage saying there is a major or severe funding problem in the NHS

There may be several reasons for the people’s greater willingness to see taxes increase.
One is the public belief that there is a major or severe funding problem in the NHS.

Source: NatCen, British Social Attitudes Survey, 2014–2017
...Inequalities: spending on welfare

Proportion saying the Government should spend more on different benefit claimants, 1999–2017

Source: NatCen, British Social Attitudes Survey, 1999–2017

Since 2011 there appears to have been greater willingness to support increased government spending on welfare... for those who are disabled and cannot work, parents on very low incomes and single parents... but not for those who are retired.
Our relationship with, and the influence of the European Union

Attitudes towards Britain’s relationship with EU, 1996–2018

Our relationship with the European Union remains an unresolved challenge. In 2018, the country was divided between the two most prevalent attitudes at that time: wanting to leave the EU or stay and reduce the EU’s powers. Only 7% wanted to stay and see an increase in the EU’s powers or work towards a single European government.

Source: NatCen, British Social Attitudes Survey, 1996–2018
...Controlling International Migration

Percentage of the public thinking the number of immigrants should increase a little or a lot (1995 4%, 2003 6%, 2008 4%, 2011 4%) — Source: NatCen, British Social Attitudes Survey

Long-term immigration, emigration and net migration United Kingdom, 1991–2017

Net migration has increased substantially between 1991 and 2018, reaching a peak of 336,000 in 2015, adding to the size of the UK population. Whilst emigration has remained fairly constant, immigration has been increasing.

And yet the public's view of immigration has remained largely unchanged over the years, with very few of us wanting the number of immigrants to increase at all.

However, recent evidence suggests there has been some shift in the public's attitudes to immigration since the vote to leave the EU, for example in believing immigrants have a positive economic impact.

Source: Migration Observatory. For 1991–2008: ONS, Table 2.00: Long-Term International Migration time series. For 2009–2018: Provisional Long-Term International Migration estimates, Table 1. Note: Revisions to overall net migration from 2001 to 2011 but not immigration and emigration means that net migration does not equal immigration minus emigration for those years.
Prior to the Scottish independence referendum in September 2014, there was little sign of any long-term increase in support for independence in Scotland. However, the 2014 campaign and ballot resulted in a marked and sustained rise in support for Scottish independence.

Following the result of the 2019 general election, the departure of Britain from the EU, and the rejection by the UK government of the SNP’s calls for a second independence referendum to be held this year, the future of the debate about Scotland’s constitutional status remains uncertain with levels of the public in Scotland supporting independence close to 50%.

Source: ScotCen, Scottish Social Attitudes Survey, 1999–2017

The categories used (devolution, independence, no parliament) are derived from five answer options to the question ‘Which of these statements comes closest to your view?’
Are we really worried about climate change?

93% believe the world’s climate is definitely or probably changing.

36% believe that humans are entirely or mainly the cause of climate change.

In 2017, the vast majority of people acknowledged the existence of climate change. However, just over a third believed that humans are the main cause of this change, and only one in four were extremely or very worried about climate change.

Source: NatCen, British Social Attitudes Survey, 2017
Attitudes towards climate change may be changing...

How concerned, if at all, are you about current climate change, sometimes referred to as ‘global warming’?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>2017</th>
<th>2018</th>
<th>2019</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very concerned</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairly concerned</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Concern with climate change and global warming appears to be changing. Since 2017, the number of people that are very concerned with current climate change has increased from 23% in 2017 to 35% in 2019.

Source: BEIS Public Attitudes Tracker wave 29–31
Do we recognise being obese or overweight?

Child’s BMI Index

While we may be concerned about our health, we don’t necessarily recognise obesity. Similar to the mismatch between expert and public opinions about climate change, we see that parents don’t necessarily recognise overweight and obesity in their children. The majority of both mothers (69%) and fathers (62%) with a child who was overweight or obese perceived them to be ‘about the right weight’. Fathers were slightly better than mothers at judging that their child was ‘too heavy’ (36% compared to 30%).

So if policy makers are to reduce obesity, they need us to better recognise it.

Source: Health Survey for England 2016 and 2017, NHS Digital
Do the public have confidence in politicians?

Proportion who say they trust British governments of any party to place the needs of the nation above the interests of their own political party just about always or most of the time

Low levels of trust in government are not new. However, low public confidence in politicians and the political system can become a problem if the public feel that they’re not getting what they want or need.

Public confidence in politicians has fluctuated since the 80s. In 2017 20% felt that the UK Government placed the needs of the country before their political party ‘always’ or ‘most of the time’. Whilst current trust in government is lower than its peak of 38% in 1986 (when the first data were collected), it is not the lowest it has been. In 2000 and 2009 16% of people felt that the government put the needs of the country before their political party.

Confidence in politicians is not an issue confined to the 21st Century; in 1985 92% disagreed that the average person has a great influence on government decisions.

Public apathy: Does it matter who you vote for?

It doesn’t matter which party is in power, in the end things go on much the same

Looking at declines in trust during the last decade can be misleading.

For example, by 2008, the majority of the public (55%) had very little or no confidence in the UK Parliament, compared with just over a third in 1995. So public confidence in the political system could already be seen to be deteriorating well before the EU referendum vote.

This chart for 2011 shows the vast majority of the British people in that year felt it didn’t matter which party is in power, in the end things go on much the same.

Source: NatCen, British Social Attitudes Survey, 2011
Trust in the UK Government (by education qualification)

Proportion who say they trust British governments of any party to place the needs of the nation above the interests of their own political party just about always or most of the time by education level

Data from the British Social Attitudes Survey show that, over the last decade, public trust has not changed that much overall. The gap between those who have degrees and those who have no qualification has narrowed, however. In the most recent year, public attitudes by education level were converging, with trust falling among those who have degrees and rising among those with no qualifications. On trust in government, we do not all seem to be moving in the same direction.

Conclusion

There is a significant amount of social change happening today. Much of it is not driven by government, but public policy interventions may still be necessary and helpful to reap the benefits.

In particular, we are in a period of sustained population growth and ageing, where the emergence of inequalities and poor wellbeing in many guises is becoming more evident for some groups in our society.

After a period of focus on the economy, and our economic wellbeing as a nation, the evidence points policy makers towards reflecting on whether the country has a compelling enough narrative for society, and for improving people's lives and their wellbeing in the 2020s.