

# ECONOMICS AND UNDERSTANDING SOCIETY

## WITH PROFESSOR BIRGITTA RABE

### Talking points

#### KNOWLEDGE

1. What is a longitudinal study?
2. What is mental health and well-being?

#### COMPREHENSION

3. What are some positive effects of schools on children's well-being?
4. What does the Understanding Society study have to do with economics?

#### APPLICATION

5. "It's important to learn whether the children who have fallen behind the most academically are also those who have suffered the greatest deteriorations in mental health," says Birgitta. What interview questions do you think Understanding Society might use to investigate this link?

#### ANALYSIS

6. Understanding Society interviews parents and carers about their children, as well as the children themselves. What is the benefit of having these different responses? What do you think these different sets of data reveal?
7. Why do you think children kept away from school for longer suffered greater declines in mental health?

#### EVALUATION

8. Birgitta mentions celebrity advocates helping influence policy for free school meals. Based on your knowledge of social science and human behaviour, why do you think celebrities rather than the researchers who have the relevant expertise may be considered more influential in these areas? Do you think this is right? If not, how might this approach be changed?
9. Based on your own experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic, do you think the policy trade-offs made – for instance, shutting schools to slow the spread of the disease – were worthwhile when looking at overall societal well-being? What data might you need to provide evidence to back up your opinion? To what extent would you change your opinion if the evidence does not support it?

### Activity

Imagine you are designing a subsection of the Understanding Society interview, developing a set of questions to ask respondents every year about the mental health and well-being of their children and possible influencing factors.

**1. First, read this article from the Pew Research Center about writing survey questions: [www.pewresearch.org/our-methods/u-s-surveys/writing-survey-questions/](http://www.pewresearch.org/our-methods/u-s-surveys/writing-survey-questions/)**

Focus on the sections about:

- Open-ended versus closed-ended questions
- Question wording

**2. Using the article as inspiration, write the following:**

- a. Five basic questions to understand the household's social and economic circumstances (e.g. How many people live in your household?)
- b. Five questions seeking information about children's mental health and well-being (e.g. How often does your child show instances of disruptive behaviour?)
- c. Five questions on factors you suspect might influence well-being (e.g. How much time does your child spend in green spaces per day?)

**3. Try out your questions with a classmate.** Ask them to imagine they are a parent answering these questions in 2019 (pre-pandemic) and record their answers. Then, repeat with the same classmate, but ask them to imagine they are answering these questions in 2020 (during lockdown). Do the same vice versa to answer your classmate's questions.

**4. Look at the data you have collected.** Imagine you had answers to the same questions from thousands of parents across the UK. Write some potential advice you could generate for policymakers using this data. While writing this advice, think about:

- a. Correlation and causation
- b. Variables you have not measured
- c. Information that might be lost when quantifying answers to interview questions
- d. Reliability and accuracy of answers
- e. To what degree the above caveats should be conveyed to policymakers – will they get better data from elsewhere? Think carefully about your answer!

### More resources

- Birgitta speaks on the Understanding Society podcast about the effects of school closures on children's wellbeing. Listen here:

[www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/podcasts/how-have-the-pandemic-related-school-closures-affected-our-children](http://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/podcasts/how-have-the-pandemic-related-school-closures-affected-our-children)

- The Understanding Society YouTube channel has a large number of videos exploring different insights that the study has uncovered. Find it here: [www.youtube.com/channel/UCZYQzqhFDBZof66luum6TKQ/](http://www.youtube.com/channel/UCZYQzqhFDBZof66luum6TKQ/)

- This article from mental health site VeryWellMind provides an overview of longitudinal studies and notable historic and modern examples: [www.verywellmind.com/what-is-longitudinal-research-2795335](http://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-longitudinal-research-2795335)

- Read another Futurum article based on an Understanding Society quantitative social science project: [www.futurumcareers.com/how-one-massive-study-is-uncovering-the-secrets-of-uk-society](http://www.futurumcareers.com/how-one-massive-study-is-uncovering-the-secrets-of-uk-society)