

Key findings from the National Child Development Study

Summary report



Now we are
50

The National Child Development Study (NCDS) is one of the crown jewels of social research. Nothing comes close in value to the mighty British longitudinal surveys that track cohorts of babies, observing almost everything that happens to individuals throughout their lives.

This report marks the fiftieth birthday of the 17,000 NCDS babies born in one week in the spring of 1958. Researchers have been able to keep in contact with approximately 12,000 of them, doing follow-up surveys every few years. The most pressing political and social questions are revealed in the stories of their lives so far.

For governments, this gold mine of evidence has delivered policy riches. These studies are unique in the world, the envy of social and medical researchers who flock to use the high quality data collected here, but nowhere else.

Social science is something Britain is extraordinarily good at – and it can reveal the secrets of human life and society that people most want and need to know.

Polly Toynbee, [The Guardian](#)

Now we are 50

Key findings from the National Child Development Study

A summary report edited by Jane Elliott and Romesh Vaitilingam
2008

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Introduction

The aim of this report is to provide a brief summary of the key findings from the National Child Development Study (NCDS) over the past fifty years. It also highlights the importance of the study in influencing policy. Clearly it is impossible to do justice to the hundreds of pieces of research that are based on this unique study in such a short report. These are just some of the highlights.

The information that we have collected from you over the last five decades has provided a unique opportunity for social and medical researchers to study the long-term consequences of early childhood experiences. It has enabled us to understand more about how an individual's health, employment and family life can all have an impact on each other.

Through comparisons of the 1958 cohort with earlier and later birth cohorts (for example, those born in 1946 and 1970), it has also been possible to gain a deeper understanding of the impact of a half-century of change in British society. Over the years, key findings from the NCDS have had a major impact on policy-making and service provision across a wide range of areas – from education and employment to housing and health.

Health

The first survey of the 1958 cohort provided some of the earliest information about the impact of maternal smoking during pregnancy. It also informed debate about the best place to deliver babies. As a result, births in hospital were made more widely available to try to ensure that all mothers had care from highly experienced midwives and doctors.

The surveys that were carried out when you were aged 7, 11 and 16 shed light on the development of physical and emotional health throughout childhood, and how this links with adult health. They also highlighted the impact of several key



health-related behaviours, including smoking, physical activity, dietary habits and alcohol consumption.

More recently, DNA collected from a large group of cohort members has been used to examine possible links between people's genes and common diseases such as diabetes and rheumatoid arthritis. This research has also produced important breakthroughs.

Education and skills

Research using the NCDS has informed a range of important issues in educational policy. It has shown, for example, the wage returns to different qualifications, and in particular the higher earnings of those who went to university and gained degrees. And in revealing the negative consequences of poor basic skills, it has influenced both policy and practice. It has also shown how many individuals go on to study for qualifications in adult life even if they did not do well at school.

Family life

Among the most striking social trends since the late 1950s have been the decline in marriage, the rise in cohabitation and the increase in divorce and separation. These changes in family life have raised concerns about how they might affect the lives of children and parents, and society more

generally. Research using the NCDS has been vital in contributing to knowledge of these matters.

For example, it is now clearly established that far from being a single event in children's lives, divorce is a process that can begin years before their parents separate. For some children, it can have a long-term impact. Children from disrupted families tend to do less well in school than those whose parents stayed together. They are also more likely to experience the break-up of their own partnerships.

Gender and work

In the mid-1970s, when many of you were leaving school, the labour market was undergoing massive change. Traditional industries like coal and steel were in steep decline. The service sector was expanding. And alongside a series of major legislative changes to tackle gender inequalities, there was a steady rise in the number of women going out to work, particularly in part-time jobs.

The NCDS has provided valuable information about the different work histories of men and women and how they relate to differences in pay, as well as revealing some of the factors that help to explain continued gender inequalities. It has also helped to inform policy-making, providing evidence to official commissions concerned with pensions and equal pay, and contributing to recent debates about extending maternity and paternity leave.

Inequality and life chances

Over the past fifty years, there has been an enormous increase in the standard of living that the British population enjoys. At the same time, there has been a substantial rise in inequality. Comparisons between the 1958 cohort and those born in 1970 also suggest that inequality is becoming more embedded in society, as

individuals' life chances are becoming more, not less, shaped by their class origins.

The NCDS provided some of the earliest evidence of how family background influences which schools children go to and how well they do at school. Later research has confirmed that these early differences between children often have a substantial effect on individuals' later life chances. These findings have become accepted in policy circles and have helped to shape thinking on social exclusion and social mobility.

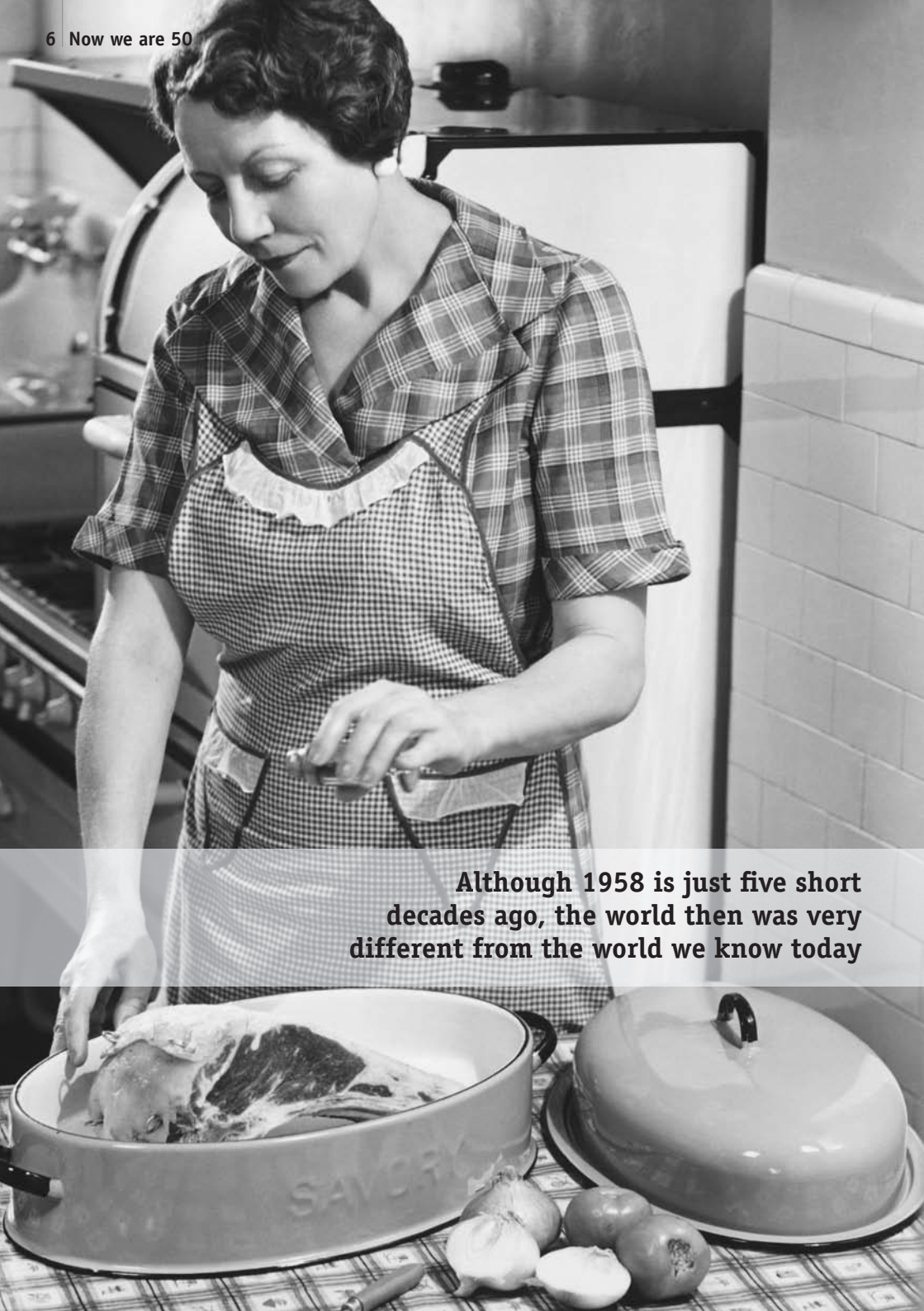
The future

As you will read in this report, the NCDS has already made a major contribution to our understanding of many different aspects of individual lives. Although it began as a study of infant health and became a national study of child development, the NCDS is now much more than that.

It is the only study in the world that has collected such a wide range of information from a national sample of people. The NCDS and the other cohort studies are crucial because they provide information about large numbers of people and about all the different stages of their lives. The scientific value of the study is huge and will continue to grow as you move through your fifties towards and into retirement.

The sections that follow are brief summaries of chapters written about the study by researchers who have used the information from the NCDS to understand more about health, family life, education, employment and inequality. A longer report containing the original chapters is available on the NCDS website at <http://www.ncds.info/>.

Jane Elliott and Romesh Vaitilingam
July 2008



Although 1958 is just five short decades ago, the world then was very different from the world we know today

Fifty years of change in British society

Although 1958 is just five short decades ago, the world then was very different from the world we know today. Food rationing had finally ended in 1954, but in 1956 fewer than one in ten households had refrigerators and only a minority had a telephone.

1958 was the year that Bertrand Russell launched the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, Nikita Khrushchev became Soviet premier and the first successful American satellite, Explorer 1, was launched.

Over the next fifty years, those born in 1958 were to witness dramatic events on the world stage as well as major changes in family life, education and employment. Technological change was to transform communications as well as people's experiences of work.

The making of an affluent society

When Harold Macmillan famously said that 'Most of our people have never had it so good' in 1957, he could not possibly have foreseen the enormous increase in the standard of living that the population would be enjoying over the next fifty years.

As Figure 1 shows, between 1974 (when the cohort members turned 16) and 2004, household disposable income more than doubled in real terms. This has led to a marked change in lifestyles with more people owning cars, TVs and other consumer durables and an increase in foreign holidays and travel. For example, during the 1970s, the proportion of households with a telephone doubled – from 35% in 1970 to 72% in 1980 – and by 2002/3, 94% of households had a telephone and 70% a mobile phone.

Accompanying the improvements in standards of living, the past fifty years have seen a substantial rise in inequality. After a period of relative stability during the 1960s and 1970s, income inequality went up sharply during the 1980s.

Inequality has continued to rise since the early 1990s but at a slower rate. The increases in inequality meant that the numbers living in relative poverty (measured as the proportion of people in households receiving less than 60% of average income) approximately doubled between the late 1970s and the early 1990s (see Figure 1).

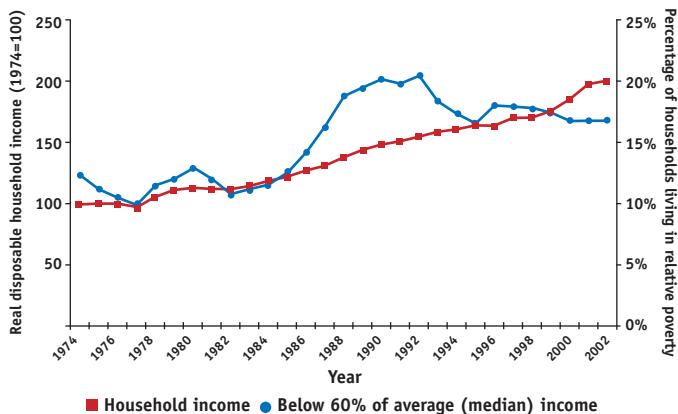


Figure 1: Real disposable household income and percentage of households below 60% of average income over time

School and education

People born in 1958 were educated during a period when there was considerable debate about the nature of primary schooling. There were also significant changes in secondary schooling: selection – the ‘eleven-plus’ – was in the process of being abolished, and the comprehensive sector was expanding.

The school leaving age was raised from 15 to 16 years in 1973, making cohort members part of the first year group required to stay on at school for an extra year. A substantial proportion of the cohort left school at age 16: 66% of men and 60% of women.

But some in the 1958 cohort benefited from the large expansion of the university system that took place in the late 1960s. By age 33, 14% of men and 11% of women in the cohort reported having a degree.

Housing

The early years of the 1958 cohort were very different from earlier generations in terms of their housing experience. Improvements in both the quality and supply of housing after the Second World War meant that unsatisfactory accommodation was much less common than it had been among those born in the 1940s.

The post-war boom in house building led to a major shift in home ownership. Over the lifetime of the 1958 cohort, owner occupation has increased substantially, creating what is very nearly ‘a nation of home-owners’.

In 1969, just 46% of children from the NCDS lived in owner-occupied accommodation with 42% living in homes rented from the council and 8% in private rented accommodation. By 2004, approximately 86% of cohort members were living in owner-occupied accommodation.



Marriage and cohabitation – the decline of the family?

Over the last five decades, there have been concerns about the demise of the traditional ‘nuclear’ family, resulting from the decline in marriage, the rise in cohabitation and the increase in divorce and separation.

Figure 2 shows changes in the age at which men and women first get married. From the 1950s until around 1970, there was a trend towards earlier marriage for both men and women. But from 1972 onwards, this trend reversed. One of the reasons for the decline or postponement of marriage is the increase in cohabitation. From the early 1970s onwards, a growing number of couples have chosen to live together without getting married.

Not only has the incidence of cohabitation increased, but couples are also cohabiting for longer. This may be because of a change in the nature of cohabitation, with it becoming an alternative rather than a prelude to marriage.

This idea is supported by the rise in childbearing among cohabiting couples. By 2006, over 40% of all births were to unmarried women but almost two thirds (63%) of these extra-marital births in England and Wales were registered by parents living at the same address.

Divorce

Another factor leading to the supposed decline of the family has been the increase in the divorce rate. As Figure 2 shows, the incidence of divorce in England and Wales increased substantially between 1960 and 1980.

Since the early 1980s, the divorce rate has stabilised. This new stability is largely due to the decline in marriage and the increasing proportion of couples cohabiting, particularly since 1990.

Gender and employment

During the 1950s, equal pay for men and women in the civil service was established, but women in other occupations were expected to accept lower wages simply because of their sex. It was not until the mid-1970s that the Equal Pay Act was passed and statutory maternity leave and pay were introduced.

Despite this legislation, there are still marked differences between men and women's experiences of employment and family life. The NCDS has provided information about men and women's

different work histories and how these relate to differences in pay, as well as some of the factors that explain these continued gender inequalities.

Examined lives: the growth in social surveys and statistics

A final significant change over the past fifty years is one of which few are likely to be directly aware: the huge increase in information about individuals and society available from large-scale social surveys.

Since 1958, three major new birth cohort studies have been set up: the 1970 British Cohort Study; the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (based on babies born in what was then the county of Avon in 1992/3); and the Millennium Cohort Study.

In addition, panel studies – such as the British Household Panel Survey, set up in 1991, and Understanding Society, the UK's new longitudinal household study – aim to further our understanding of social and economic change at the individual and household level.

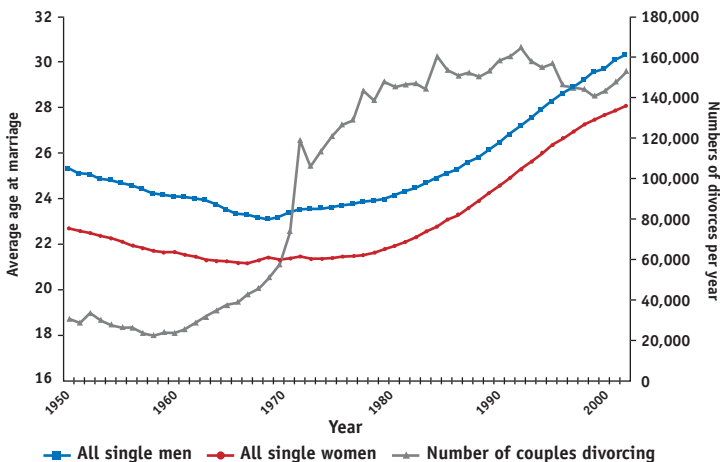


Figure 2: Trends in age at marriage and numbers of divorces

Health

The NCDS has its origins in the Perinatal Mortality Survey, a study of around 17,000 children born in one week in 1958, which was designed to examine the key factors associated with stillbirth and death in early infancy.

Infant health

During the week in which the 1958 cohort was born, 33 out of every 1,000 infants delivered died – either as stillborn or during their first week of life. This ‘perinatal mortality rate’ was lowest in second-born children at 23.5; it rose to 50.5 in fifth or later pregnancies.

Some of the highest rates were among births ‘booked’ for home delivery. This led to an urgent review of maternity services and a better understanding of which mothers could be considered likely to have a safe delivery at home.

Subsequently, home delivery almost disappeared and perinatal mortality declined markedly: the 1970 birth cohort had a rate of 23 per 1,000 infants, reflecting improvements in the 12 years since 1958; and by 2005, the rate had fallen to around 8 per 1,000.

Analysis of the NCDS also showed that the risk of a perinatal death was 50% higher than average if the mother was having her fifth or subsequent baby. It was 30% higher in mothers who smoked heavily during pregnancy compared with non-smokers.



Child health

The follow-up surveys of the 1958 cohort at ages 7, 11 and 16 meant that their condition at birth could be linked to their later development in terms of health, education and social status.

For example, looking at whether children can read at age 7, the strongest influence comes from their social background. But other strong influences include whether a child is a boy or girl, their position in the birth order and how many younger brothers and sisters they have.

First-born children tend to achieve more highly at school though second-born children tend to be larger and have fewer problems around birth. And while girls tend to be lighter when they are born, by age 7, they are typically ahead of boys on school results.

Development of physical health

The NCDS has provided insights into the development of physical health throughout childhood and subsequent links with adult health. For example, there is evidence that the fattest children at age 7 have increased risks of being obese adults, particularly if they have overweight parents.

Similarly, how well people see and hear in childhood tends to continue into adult life. For example, hearing levels at ages 7, 11 and 16 predict adult levels. But even among children with severe defects, some will experience recovery of normal hearing.

The NCDS has also yielded information about asthma and wheezing, showing that of those who had symptoms before age 7, 50% had attacks when they were 33, 5% had persistent symptoms, 10% had occasional symptoms and 35% were completely clear.

A concern that people who 'outgrow' asthma after early childhood may be vulnerable to lung disease in middle age has not been borne out: lung function in early adulthood was normal for this group when aged 34-35 and remained so ten years later.

Health behaviour

Several key health-related behaviours – including smoking, physical activity, dietary habits and

alcohol consumption – have been investigated using the NCDS, and links established between these behaviours and adult health.

For example, adolescents who drink most and most frequently are more likely to drink heavily in adulthood. Similarly, adolescent smoking is associated with increased likelihood of smoking through to mid-adulthood.

Adult health in mid-life

The most recent surveys of the 1958 cohort are seeking to establish how developmental, lifestyle and environmental factors act throughout people's lives to influence current ill health and physiological and psychological functioning in early middle age.

For example, with cardiovascular disease, research shows that risk factors, such as body mass index, are more common among those with a less advantaged social position in childhood, as well as in adulthood, suggesting that factors in early life affect the risk.

More recently, DNA collected from a large group of cohort members has been used to examine possible links between people's genes and common diseases such as diabetes and rheumatoid arthritis.

Partnership and parenthood



Children born in 1958 were overwhelmingly born to married parents (95%) compared with 56% of children born in 2006. And fewer than one in ten children born in 1958 saw their parents separate by the time they were 16 compared with more than a third of children today who have recently turned 16.

Declines in marriage, increased cohabitation and divorce alongside increased childbearing outside of marriage and changing age patterns of becoming a parent have translated into more diverse, complicated and often inequitable family settings for children.

These changes in family life have raised policy concerns about their implications for the lives of children and parents, and society more generally. Information collected in the NCDS has been invaluable in contributing to knowledge of these matters.

Parental divorce

Research using the NCDS has clearly established that far from being a single event in children's lives, parental divorce is a process that can begin years before their parents separate and has repercussions that reverberate through childhood and into adulthood.

Children from separated families may do less well on reading and maths tests in school and may have more behaviour problems compared with children from families who stay together. But these differences may already be in evidence for some children even before their parents separate.

Relative to those whose parents stayed together, children who experienced the break-up of their parents' marriage tend to have lower educational attainment and lower incomes. They are also more likely to be unemployed, to be in less prestigious occupations and to be living in social housing in adult life.

Young women who experienced parental divorce are more likely than their peers to cohabit or marry at young ages, to have children in their teens and to conceive and bear children outside of marriage. And men and women from disrupted families are in turn more likely to experience the break-up of their own partnerships and marriages.

Older parenthood

Since the late 1950s, there has been a trend towards more people becoming parents at a later age. Two thirds of the women in the 1958 cohort had had a child by the age of thirty compared with just over half of those born in 1970. And 54% of the men in the 1958 cohort had had a child compared with only 39% of those born in 1970.

Unmarried motherhood and childlessness

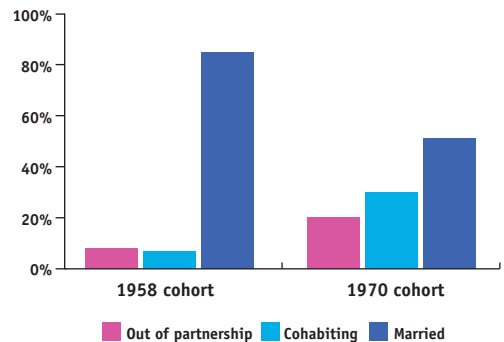
Although the vast majority of the 1958 cohort was born within marriage, fewer of them have gone on to have children within marriage. As Figure 3 shows, of those who had had a child by the age of thirty, 83% had their first child within marriage.

But this proportion is much higher than that for the 1970 cohort, where only 51% of those who

had become mothers did so within marriage. This latter figure is likely to be higher when more have become mothers, probably of the order of 60%.

Childlessness is also on the increase: nearly 18% of the 1958 cohort had not had a child by the age of forty compared with 8% of women born 12 years earlier in 1946.

Figure 3: Percentages of the first children of members of the 1958 and 1970 cohorts born within marriage, within cohabiting couples and out of partnership



Education and skills



The 1958 cohort grew up at a time of considerable change in education. The ‘eleven-plus’ was being abolished, and the comprehensive sector was becoming established. The members of the cohort were the first group of teenagers to have to stay on at school to 16. Some benefited from the expansion of higher education in the late 1960s.

The wage returns to education

As Figure 4 shows, most members of the 1958 cohort had some form of educational qualification by the age of 33, although nearly 15% do not. Has this educational investment been worth it to individuals in terms of the wages they earn?

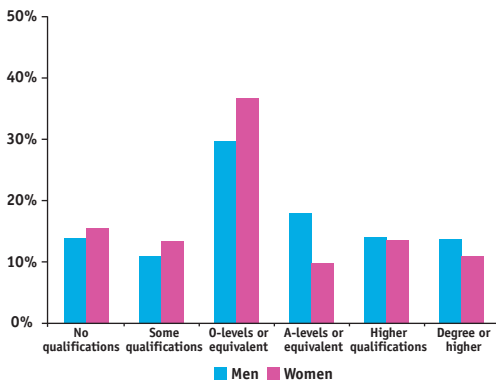
Research using the NCDS finds that compared with leaving school at 16 without qualifications, there is an average wage return of 18% for O-levels, 24% for A-levels and 48% for higher education.

After 16

Today, when the target is 50% for young people entering higher education, it is striking that the teachers of the 1958 cohort thought that only one in ten of them was suitable for university. What’s more, only 11% of them wanted to go, though 15% actually ended up going.

Traditional routes for the 90% who were expected to be earning a living by their late teens were differentiated by the 15% who had access to high quality training as part of an apprenticeship – combining work-based training with day release for college courses – compared with the others who mostly moved directly into full-time adult jobs.

Figure 4: Percentage of men and women in the 1958 cohort by level of highest qualification, measured at age 33 in 1981



Apprenticeships took between five and seven years to complete, and almost all of them were taken up by boys, one third of whom failed to complete. The main apprenticeship for girls was hairdressing (82%), and they made up 10% of the total apprentices.

Upgrading skills

Many members of the cohort have made up for not doing well at school by doing employment-related courses through their adult years. For example, when the cohort members were surveyed at age 23, 28% of them had no qualifications. But by age 33, that percentage had reduced to 13%. By 42, it was 12%.

Analysis of NCDS information from the 2000 survey shows that participation in different forms of adult learning leads to benefits at age 42 in terms of personal wellbeing, civic awareness and political engagement.

At the same time, analysis of the NCDS has revealed a lack of literacy and numeracy skills among part of the population. This eventually led to the establishment of the Moser committee in 1998, the task of which was to recommend what should be done to improve skills.

The committee's report was highly influential in convincing the government of the need to place a high priority on raising skills levels, not least because without them, the establishment of vocational courses leading to qualifications and skills development generally was going to be impeded.

The Moser report set targets of 10% improvements in literacy and numeracy. Research using the NCDS and other survey data estimated that achievement of the targets would save the taxpayer £0.44 billion for literacy and £2.54 billion for numeracy.

Changes in women's paid work



The generation of women who reached their fifties in 2008 are very different from earlier generations, including their own parents. But they also differ from each other in some respects, especially by whether they managed to gain a degree or other qualifications.

Motherhood and employment for the previous generation

When the members of the 1958 cohort were under 5, it was normally expected that mothers stayed at home to look after their children – and most of them did. By the time the cohort had finished primary school, it had become a common experience to have a mother in paid work.

This meant that in the generation of the mothers of the 1958 cohort, most women had fairly long breaks from paid work around childbirth. The few who started out as potential high flyers were likely to have returned to lowlier jobs with low wages in the part-time jobs they took up.

Motherhood and employment for the 1958 cohort

The opportunities for women born in 1958 were different from those for their mothers, but they were not entirely transformed. They faced a higher risk of marriage breakdown, but they had more education, maternity leave, smaller gaps out of work while having children and better job opportunities.

Experiences varied considerably according to the education level reached. Staying on longer in education meant that starting a family was delayed. But in addition, the new earning opportunities for women added further delays to having children.

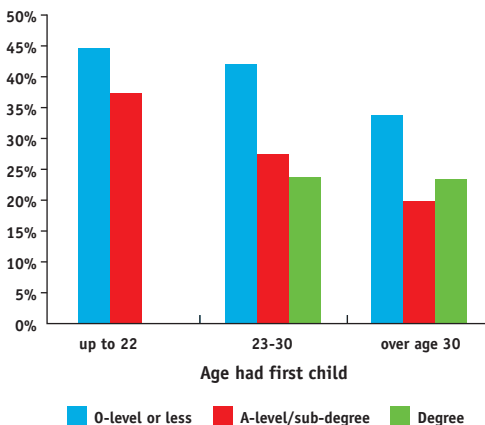
For those women in the NCDS who had O-levels as their highest qualification, the average age of having their first child (where they had one) was 24. For those with A-levels, the average age of having their first child was nearly 28. But it was nearly 32 for women with a degree.

The 1958 cohort contains some highly educated women who set a new trend as they postponed childbirth into their thirties. In addition, when they did have children, the higher qualified women returned to work much faster than earlier starters with fewer qualifications. They also typically had more success in maintaining the status of their position at work after childbirth.

A woman in the 1958 cohort who left school with O-levels or below and had a first child by age 22 would have spent on average nearly five years at home before returning to work. This was not unlike what her mother did. As Figure 5 shows, 45% of the 1958 cohort who became mothers by age 22 returned to work in a lower status job.

The women who got A-levels but still had a child by age 22 spent nearly four years before going back to work at a slightly lower risk (37%) of downgrading of their job. Women who got an A-level but waited to have their first child until later in their twenties spent two years out of work before returning and 28% of them returned to a lower status job.

Figure 5: Percentage of mothers in the 1958 cohort who returned to a lower status job after childbirth



But most women who got a degree and waited until their thirties before becoming mothers had returned to work within the child's first year. Nevertheless, 24% of them returned to a lower status job, largely because of working part-time.

Wage equality

Inequalities in earnings between men and women have decreased over time as women have gained more qualifications and work experience. Yet despite equal pay legislation from 1975 onwards, the experience of the 1958 cohort shows that there is still a 'gender pay gap'.

The wages of the 1958 cohort also show that the gender pay gap increases as people get older: men's wages increase relative to women's between the ages of 23 and 42. This is partly the result of differences in the ages at which different groups of women leave and re-enter paid work.

It is also partly the result of lower wage growth among women compared with men. This is associated with interrupting a paid career to raise children, returning to part-time employment after having children and getting fewer pay rises and promotions.

The minority of women with degrees in the 1958 cohort have had more continuous paid careers and have earnings approaching those of men. One study of women graduates finds that degrees that lead to a specific occupation are associated with quicker returns to paid work after having children.

Policy impact

The NCDS has helped to inform policy-making to improve gender equality. For example, the study contributed to the debate about extending maternity and paternity leave in 2003. It has also had an influence on the House of Lords report published in 2003, which recommended switching the basis of the state pension from national insurance contributions to citizenship.

Born to fail?

The impact of childhood disadvantage

Reducing child poverty has become a serious policy issue in recent years, in part as a result of research revealing the serious consequences of growing up in disadvantage. Findings from the NCDS have made an important contribution to this understanding.

Family background and educational outcomes

The NCDS provided some of the earliest large-scale evidence of the impact of family background on children's development. The influential Plowden report on primary education, published in 1967, included evidence from the 1958 cohort at age 7.

The analysis found a strong link between the occupation of fathers (a crude measure of parental advantage) and their children's performance in reading and maths. As Figure 6 shows, 23% of children whose fathers were in unskilled jobs were 'good readers' compared with 56% of children whose fathers had professional careers.

Outcomes in later life

Studies of the cohort at ages 23 and 33 show that childhood disadvantage is linked with a variety of poorer outcomes, such as a greater risk of being a teenage mother or having contact with the police, longer absence from school, lower wages and more unemployment.

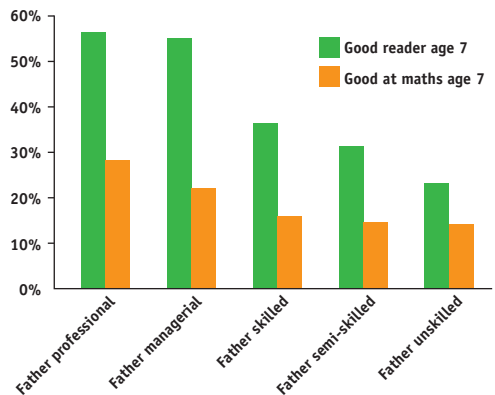
Educational achievement seems to play a central role in later life outcomes. Much of the relationship


between disadvantage, delinquency, lower earnings and unemployment is generated because of the lower educational attainment of disadvantaged young people.

Comparisons with later generations

Comparing the 1958 cohort with the 1970 cohort reveals that the relationship between parental income when a child is 16 and what they earn in their early thirties had become stronger. There is also an increased effect of family background on the likelihood of being in poverty in later life in the younger cohort.

Figure 6: Early evidence from the NCDS included in the Plowden report



A black and white photograph showing a woman in the foreground holding a young child. The woman has dark hair and is wearing a patterned top. The child has light, curly hair and is looking towards the camera. In the background, the lower part of a man's face and his dark suit and tie are visible. The overall tone is serious and historical.

The 1958 cohort provided some of the earliest evidence of the impact of family background on children's development

What lies ahead?



As members of the 1958 cohort turn fifty, many may be looking back over their lives but also wondering what lies ahead. The English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA), a survey of around 12,000 individuals aged fifty and over, is the perfect place to look for information on what the next few years may hold for today's fifty year olds.

Employment and retirement

Around three quarters of people in their early fifties are in paid work with the numbers only slightly higher for men (80%) than for women (73%). By the late fifties, these figures fall to two thirds of men and half of women in paid work. By the early sixties, the figures are one third and one fifth respectively.

Those no longer working at these ages are two very different groups of people. First, there are those who are well off and can afford to retire early. Second, there are those with very low incomes who often can no longer work because of poor health.

Family and health

People typically find their fifties to be a time of changing family circumstances. In the next ten years, many individuals will experience their children leaving home, the arrival of grandchildren and the loss of one or both parents.

Evidence from ELSA shows that of those aged 50-54 who had children, two thirds had children still living at home, but of those aged 60-64 only a fifth had children still living at home. While at age

50-54 just over a third had grandchildren, this had increased to three quarters by age 60-64.

Individual health will change too. While rates of disease and ill health are surprisingly low among those in their fifties and early sixties, the cohort has now reached the point where the number in bad health will begin to rise somewhat. Once again using information from ELSA, in their early fifties over a half of individuals had no major health problems, but this falls to just below a third of individuals by sixty.

Future research

For researchers trying to understand more about the processes of ageing, information from the 1958 cohort will become increasingly valuable. What is unique about the study is having information about all the different aspects of individuals' lives collected from birth through childhood and into adult life.

We know that the profile of the British population is changing, and there are increasing numbers of people in the older age groups. As some of the comments on the next page show, for many, life after fifty can be a rewarding and enjoyable stage of life. Many report having fewer responsibilities and more life experience.

As the NCDS continues into its sixth decade, the aim of the study will be to collect more information that can help us to understand what helps promote healthy ageing as well as wellbeing and life satisfaction for this age group.

Life at fifty

Later this year, the next survey of the 1958 cohort will collect a great deal of detailed information about the health, lives and circumstances of people aged fifty. This will also allow for analysis of how childhood circumstances affect outcomes in mid-life.

Evidence from other nationally representative studies such as the British Household Panel Survey can also give an insight into the lives of fifty year olds. In the 2006 round of this survey, people of all ages were asked about the main advantages and disadvantages of being their age. Analysis of the responses from those who were fifty gives a valuable picture of what it feels like to be aged fifty today.

Two of the main negative themes that emerged from the comments related to health and employment difficulties. Many fifty year olds commented that they were not as fit as they used to be, they were putting on weight, they had more ailments or simply that they felt their body was starting to wear out:

'I'm too old to play football now: physical deterioration – not as fit as I used to be.'

'Getting old – everything starts falling apart! The general lack of energy of a twenty year old when your nine year old wants you to run around on a football pitch.'

'I have more ailments, get more tired.'

Several individuals also commented on age as a barrier to getting a new job:

'It's harder to find jobs, even though I think I am more reliable.'

'Job-wise, it's a young people's world.'

But many of the fifty year olds also made very positive comments and talked about the advantages of being fifty. Some of the main themes were having greater financial security and independence, having greater self-confidence and the benefits of age for providing wisdom, skills and experience. As one person said:

'I have experience and life skills to draw on for future use but enough financial and health resources to still have an active, rewarding life.'

Someone else commented that the advantage of being fifty was:

'Knowing who I am, what I want out of life – have enough wisdom to know how to achieve it.'

One particularly positive individual summed it up as follows:

'Fifty is fantastic because you are old enough to know what you want and how to get it; and young enough to still enjoy it.'

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