

Millennium Cohort Study

GRANDPARENTS



Taken from Chapter 4 of *Millennium Cohort Study Second Survey: A User's Guide to Initial Findings*

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The Survey

The Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) offers groundbreaking large-scale information about children born into the new century and the families who are bringing them up in all four countries of the United Kingdom. It lays the foundation for a major new research resource.

For the first survey, conducted in 2001-2002, we interviewed the families of nearly 19,000 children aged nine months. A disproportionate number of these children came from families living in areas of high child poverty, and, in England, from areas with relatively high minority-ethnic populations¹. This survey looked at the circumstances of pregnancy and birth, as well as the social and economic background of the families into which these children were born.

The second survey (MCS2) marks the beginning of a series of follow-up surveys. Conducted in 2003-2005, it records how nearly 16,000 cohort children are developing at the age of three. For the first time, researchers have been able to chart the changing circumstances of families and relate children's outcomes at age three to earlier circumstances and experiences.

Introduction

Grandparents often provide vital financial, emotional and childcare support for their families. They also shape a child's identity and upbringing, even though, as in the case of the MCS children, they seldom live at the same address. Grandparents' characteristics are likely to have influenced not only the cohort members' parents, but the children studied.

Surviving grandparents

Both the main and partner respondents (almost always the cohort child's mother and father respectively) were asked at the age three survey about their own mother and father, hence, normally about the child's grandparents.

- Both parent-figures are more likely to have lost their own father than their mother. Ninety per cent of main respondents' mothers were alive, compared to 79 per cent of their fathers; 74 per cent of partners' mothers were alive, compared to 63 per cent of their fathers.
- More than half of White, two-parent families had a complete set of four grandparents. All the minority ethnic groups reported significantly fewer living grandparents.
- Almost all lone parents had at least one living parent, though a larger proportion of Indian (16 per cent) and Black (10 per cent) lone parents reported no living parent.

Childcare and financial support

An overwhelming proportion of families

with a living grandparent reported receiving some financial help from them – nine out of ten couple families and eight out of ten lone parents. Examples of such help include buying gifts, extras or essentials for the child, and paying for childcare or other household costs.

- Around one-quarter of families received some form of childcare from at least one grandparent. The first survey showed that this was most often the maternal grandmother.
- This proportion had fallen somewhat since the first survey. About half the families with grandparents providing childcare at nine months still had help with childcare from a grandparent at sweep 2, although as the children grew older more formal arrangements were being made.

Influence of grandparent carers

Children who had been looked after by grandparents at the age of nine months while their mother worked had, on average, a similar vocabulary score at age three to those who had attended formal care (nurseries, crèches, nursery schools and playgroups). They were clearly ahead of those who had been involved in other informal care arrangements, such as those looked after by their father or mother's partner. Assessments of their school readiness (based on children's understanding of concepts such as colours, letters, numbers/counting, sizes, comparisons and shapes) showed that the group of children with grandparent care were a little further behind those who had been

¹ Percentages reported here have been re-weighted to represent the population as a whole.

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in formal care but still ahead of those with other informal care. This pattern needs further investigation.

Grandparent contact

Main and partner respondents have more frequent contact with their mother than their father, as the charts below show.

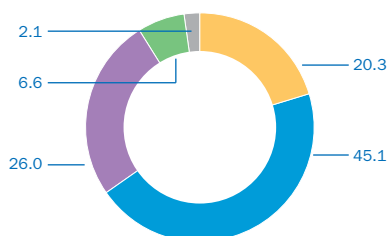
Grandparents' characteristics

Employment in the previous generation

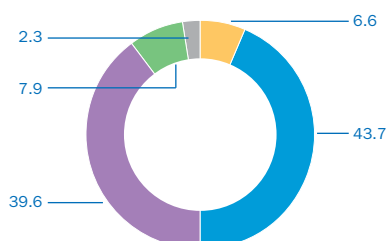
At MCS2, respondents were asked

■ Daily contact ■ Weekly contact ■ Monthly contact
■ Yearly or less ■ Never contact

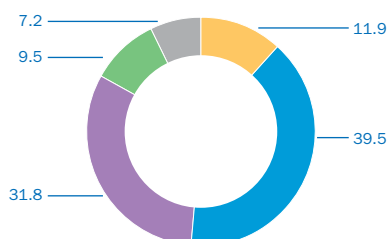
Main respondent's contact with own mother



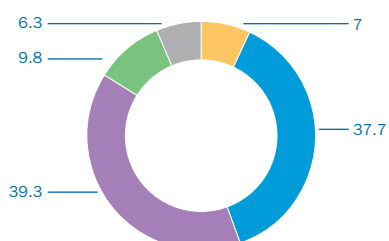
Partner respondent's contact with own mother



Main respondent's contact with own father



Partner respondent's contact with own father



whether their parents, the present-day grandparents, were employed when they (the respondent) was 14, and if so, what their job was.

- Nine out of ten grandfathers and two-thirds of grandmothers were working at this point.
- Variations in grandparents' employment by country can be seen in the graph (right).

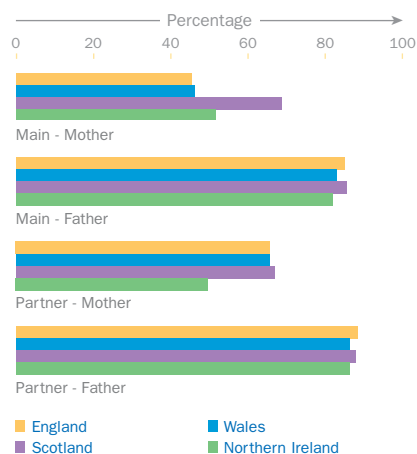
Social class

The distribution of grandparents' occupational class when the cohort child's parent was 14, is the same for main and partner respondents, but there are some large differences between the grandmothers' and the grandfathers' occupational class:

- 27 per cent of grandfathers had managerial or professional jobs, compared to 17 per cent for employed grandmothers.
- At the other end of the scale, 31 per cent of grandfathers and 54 per cent of grandmothers had routine or semi-routine jobs.

Looking across the generations, less than a third of mothers had remained in

Percentage of respondents whose parents were employed when they were 14 by country at MCS 2



the same social class as their own mothers. The same was true of fathers.

Born in the UK

- Nine out of ten respondents were born in the UK, whereas 84 per cent of grandparents had been.
- Of the respondents born outside the UK around half had arrived before 1990.
- Grandparents born outside the UK had come mostly from Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and Ireland.

Conclusion

Grandparents play a significant role in the lives of many of the MCS cohort children. Ninety per cent of the MCS grandparents had provided financial support and 25 per cent of the children had been cared for at some time by a grandparent. The results of our vocabulary and school readiness assessments at age three suggest that there should be further investigation into the influence of grandparent-carers. It is too early to draw firm conclusions, but the assessment results do not immediately suggest that grandparent care of infants leads to any large developmental deficit. In fact, they indicate that it may be particularly beneficial for the acquisition of language.

The grandparents themselves were very likely to be employed when the respondent was 14, approximately 90 per cent of fathers and 65 per cent of mothers. These data will enable analysts to study intergenerational social mobility with the MCS. Finally, over 80 per cent of the grandparents were born in the UK, with those who were not most likely to come from Pakistan, India, Ireland and Bangladesh. This information will be useful in allowing for immigration history in the study of different ethnic groups.

Millennium Cohort Study Second Survey: A User's Guide to Initial Findings is available at www.cls.ioe.ac.uk

If you require this briefing in a larger font, please contact Lorna Hardy (l.hardy@ioe.ac.uk)