**50 Years of Life in Britain – Transcript**

**Episode 6 – 2020, COVID-19 and the future**

**Lee Elliot Major** 00:06

In one week in April 1970, 17,000 mothers and their newborn babies were asked to take part in a survey to find out more about the first week of life. This became known as the 1970 British Cohort Study, BCS70. The study followed these babies as they grew, and continues to do so today. This year, the study turns 50. And so welcome to 50 Years of Life in Britain, a podcast celebrating half a century of the 1970 British Cohort Study. I'm Lee Elliot Major, Professor of Social Mobility at the University of Exeter, and I'll be your host as we trace the story of BCS70 across five decades and consider the future of this amazing study. In last week's episode, we discovered how the study successfully navigated a decade of economic and political uncertainty, meeting with participants on two occasions, including a groundbreaking survey of mid-life health. In the lead up to the big 5-0, we discovered more about how Generation X were coping with the stresses and strains of modern life during their 40s. We found out how their mental and physical health compared with that of the Baby Boomers before them. So it's now 2020, and we're in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, arguably the most challenging global event since the Second World War.

**Boris Johnson** 01:31

The coronavirus is the biggest threat this country has faced for decades, and this country is not alone. From this evening, I must give the British people a very simple instruction: you must stay at home.

**Lee Elliot Major** 01:46

In this our final episode in the series, we'll examine how BCS70 and our study members have fared during lockdown and we look to the future.

**Study member** 01:56

There's a phrase being coined, the 'coronacoaster' – I think it has been like riding a roller coaster. There's been some highs, some absolute lows, fear. Yeah, everything you can possibly think of, I think we've probably all felt it.

**Study member** 02:14

It was like living through some hideous B movie at first and just sort of waiting. I was turning into a bit of a news junkie, sort of waking up and watching the news in the middle of the night, or going downstairs and watching the rolling news. And I've got over that now because they're not really telling you anything new.

**Study member** 02:32

The plus side of it is that we've been able to spend more time together and you know, we've been on our one exercise a day – we've sort of in a way have been doing more exercise, with some great bike rides and walks you know, as a family. And so that's been quite a nice thing, you know, out of a situation which is pretty horrible, because normally we'd all be rushing round, the girls would be at after school clubs and I'd be coming back from work and you know, you wouldn't have that sort of quality time. But actually, every day, sort of making ourselves go for a walk or go for a bike ride, as you know, has been quite beneficial.

**Study member** 03:15

Now our children are having the source of experience, the sort of childhood that I had in the 1970s. Those simple, fun things – climbing trees, going to the park, collecting leaves, country walks... Very, very simple things, baking, playing board games, all of those, you know, fantastic things that are keeping us all occupied at this time.

**Study member** 03:39

It's been pretty surreal and it's had its moments. I'm lucky to have both my parents still alive, and I'm not able to have physical contact with them. That's been absolutely horrendous. But, you know, we've got into a way of working and we've got them going with technology to try and improve that. So we have, you know, Zoom meetings and various things to try and keep that connection going. And but yeah, you know, sort of working at home, getting into a new routine, maybe looking after myself a little bit better in some ways – so yeah there are you know highs and lows of it and yeah, you know, emotional times, angry times, but also times that you actually are sitting you know, going out for big long walks, just round in your local area and just actually appreciating what you have, really.

**Study member** 04:30

I'm furloughed, so I'm not working. So there's the fear of losing my job. There's been homeschooling for both of my children. I've got a 14-year-old and a 6-year-old, and they've dealt with it in different ways. And obviously emotionally supporting people and feeling like you need supporting. The loneliness of not being able to see my parents. They're both 73, live 35 miles away. Not being able to see them since lockdown.

**Study member** 05:03

Definitely miss friends and family and seeing people so yeah, Zoom and stuff is great. It's not the same. It's not the same as actually being with people. So like yeah, the Thursday night clap for the NHS is really quite nice because you can at least bond at a distance with people. You don't realise just how much you need that social contact. So I'm looking forward to being able to meet other people again.

**Lee Elliot Major** 05:33

In these uncertain times, we'll be chatting to the director of the Centre for Longitudinal Studies, Professor Alissa Goodman, about the COVID-19 survey. This has been sent to around 50,000 study participants across the UK, including members of the 1970 study. But first, current BCS70 director Professor Alice Sullivan, shares her highlights and challenges running the study, plus her hopes and dreams for the future. So Alice, you have been director for 10 years. I hadn't realised it had been that long, I have to say it's gone very quickly.

**Alice Sullivan** 06:07

Yeah, it has!

**Lee Elliot Major** 06:09

Can you sort of highlight some of the successes, but also the challenges in those 10 years?

**Alice Sullivan** 06:16

It covers a lot, obviously, in 10 years – well, I started in 2010. And so the first wave I was director of was the Age 42 Survey. And then we applied for funding to do a bio-medical at age 46, and got that funding from the Medical Research Council and Economic and Social Research Council. So that was a massive success for the study, to become then part of, part of that group of studies that has adult medical information as well as the social science and be useful to a wider range of researchers. And then at the moment, of course, we're planning for the Age 50 Survey. And we were also planning lots of lovely birthday events and things like that. So that's where challenges obviously come in quite neatly there because the world has changed dramatically and we're having to think about piloting going out to the survey members using video conferencing, rather than actually visiting them physically.

**Lee Elliot Major** 07:28

You do research as well, right? So you're basically balancing championing and making the survey cohort study happen as well as doing your own research. That seems like two jobs in one to me?

**Alice Sullivan** 07:41

Yeah, it is. And I mean, it's a huge responsibility, obviously, to be responsible for such an important study. And I remember when I first took it on and I had been up to that point, I'd been a contract researcher and fairly junior – to suddenly have this responsibility for one of the jewels in the crown of British social science actually feels a bit scary. And I still feel a little bit like that when we're in meetings, having to cut the questionnaire back so it will fit the time slot and having to drop wonderful and important questions. And ultimately, it's my decision and it feels like such a huge responsibility. And yeah, of course bringing the funding in to keep it going, and making sure that it's being used, that the community, the various research communities out there know about the treasure trove that we've got and are actually going to use it.

**Lee Elliot Major** 08:31

So why do you think it's important that we continue funding BCS, from now on? I was under the naive assumption that all this was supported and funded. But I'm guessing now, that's not as straightforward as people might think?

**Alice Sullivan** 08:46

I think we always have to keep explaining and justifying the value of the studies and we can never rest on our laurels. But the value of these studies just grows as they get older. Because you have more information with every single wave, and the value of the information that you've already invested in, just increases, because then you're able to look at the outcomes over a much longer period of time. So, it does seem very obvious to me, I have to admit, that of course these studies should continue to be funded. And of course, we should continue to have new birth cohort studies. When you look at the huge amount of research and value that's come out of them, one of the things that's interesting about BCS70 is that we then had to wait 30 years after BCS70 for the Millennium Cohort Study, so there's a big gap there in terms of we didn't have a national birth cohort to capture the 1980s. And what an interesting era that was and what a shame and what a gap. It's now come to the point where we're 20 years after the Millennium Cohort and we still don't have a new birth cohort study. And I'm sure that people in the future will be looking back and saying, what a shame that they didn't have birth cohort study that had already started when the COVID-19 epidemic broke out.

**Lee Elliot Major** 10:22

Can you say a little bit about how the cohort studies are having to improvise to illuminate what's happening in society over the current period?

**Alice Sullivan** 10:31

There's a huge amount of work going on in the Centre, doing quick surveys. So people have been working very hard to get quick online surveys out to the cohort members, so that we can understand actually what's happening with them right now. And of course, the research community will be aware that there's loads and loads of surveys like that going on. So you might think, oh, well, what's special about us doing that? But of course, the answer is that then we will then be routinely following these people up for years and years and years afterwards. So we'll then be able to answer the questions about how this short term shock has affected people over the longer term. Has it? I mean, I think we're all aware that it's leading to greater short term inequalities. But what about the longer term inequalities? Will there be scarring effects? Will certain people ever recover from this? So that's where I think we have a really unique contribution to make.

**Lee Elliot Major** 11:35

And that is exactly what you said about COVID-19. You know, I find you know, we're all struggling with this a bit, aren't we? How much is this a short term shock? Or is it going to be something that we talk about for generations to come? The longer it goes on, the more sort of long term it appears to be?

**Alice Sullivan** 11:55

Yes, absolutely. And I think in terms of children missing schooling, that's likely to be really quite dramatic in terms of the level of inequalities that will be generated over that period with some kids in households where there's lots of educational resources, and parents have the time and the space and other households where none of that is the case. And so the question is, will those inequalities start to reduce once those kids are back in school? Or will you end up with a cohort of people who are much more unequal?

**Lee Elliot Major** 12:35

So going forward, then thinking about the future? What would you... Have you got any ideas about how you see the BCS70 cohort in particular developing over the next 20 years?

**Alice Sullivan** 12:49

It's really interesting, isn't it? Because I think all of our assumptions about the future being predictable have been completely dashed on the rocks by this sort of reality check of COVID-19. And it just makes you realise that the way you've envisaged things happening is likely to be completely different – we're probably going to be using different technologies that don't even exist yet, possibly to carry out the study, possibly to measure both medical and social factors in people's lives. And we might be engaging with the cohort members in different ways, which is really important because obviously, the studies do not exist without the cohort members giving up their time freely to take part – which is just amazing that they do that. So I really wouldn't want to make too many predictions about the substance of how we're going to do it. But I think that we will still be following these people up for many, many years to come and asking them about their lives and all the different interrelated dimensions of their lives in order to further our understanding of human life in all its facets, from health to the economic, to the social to the psychological.

**Lee Elliot Major** 14:21

So unfortunately, our study members had to celebrate their 50th birthdays in lockdown this year. However, thanks to the magic of technology, they were still able to party with family and friends. Here, Mike and James tell us how they celebrated their half century.

**Study member** 14:38

So in 2020, everybody in this group turned 50 and what was supposed to be very special landmark in all of our lives fell right in the middle of the global pandemic. You couldn't go and socialise with people and you were barely allowed to leave your house. And so people worked creatively to try and celebrate in their own way. For me, I hadn't realised but my wife had contacted all my friends on my social media channels and asked them to help her put together a project on my behalf. Knowing I was a Madness fan, she chose 'Night Boat to Cairo' and asked all my friends to video themselves singing one line each from that song and send it to her. And she put all these together in a video with the song playing in the background, secretly. I didn't know any of this was going on. And then my birthday, she said, oh, yeah, come along, I've got something to show you. And before my eyes, there was this incredible video that she'd made with my friends, local, overseas, in America, all around the world, singing this song for me. And it was absolutely amazing, really touching. And it was a really creative way to get around this separation that we're all undergoing. So it's a very touching moment for me and afterwards, everybody who had participated was eager to say hi, and you know hoped that their contribution hit the mark, which it most definitely had. So we sort of had a Zoom party and I did some DJing so people were in their own home. Listening to music I was playing, having a glass of wine, saying hi on video and online. It was like a virtual party and I felt like I'd had a real celebration. It was a really good night. I really enjoyed it.

**Study member** 16:13

For my birthday, for my 50th during lockdown, we chatted to friends on Zoom. It was lovely. It was you know, in a strange way, despite all the circumstances, it was just nice to have a nice quiet day with the family, the sun shone, we were able to sit in the garden, play some board games, go for a walk. So, you know, in some ways, a simple day. You know, we couldn't do too much, but in a way, quite special.

**Lee Elliot Major** 16:49

Professor Alissa Goodman has been director of the Centre for Longitudinal Studies, the home of BCS70, since 2015. Alissa shares her plans and aspirations for BCS70 and the other birth cohort studies for the future. Can you tell us when you first encountered the cohort studies, and BCS70, in particular?

**Alissa Goodman** 17:11

The first time I ever encountered anything like a longitudinal study was in primary school when I watched the 7 Up series at school, which I was absolutely captivated with and really loved, like, lots of people, I think who have gone on to work on the cohort studies. But I first encountered our birth cohorts back in the mid 90s when I was a young economist working at the Institute for Fiscal Studies.

**Lee Elliot Major** 17:40

They both kind of tap into our yearning to understand how lives develop. That's right, isn't it? They both tap into I think what we all wonder about, is where we start and where we end up and what are the factors that shape our lives.

**Alissa Goodman** 17:59

I think they absolutely do. And I do think that is what explains the phenomenon that I and many researchers encounter when we start working with the cohort studies, which is almost like falling in love. It's like you get to see how lives unfold and to understand the important things about that through the tools of your own work, as well as really meeting this kind of yearning, like you describe, this fascination for how people's lives unfold and sort of resolution on sort of what's happening and why in this sort of broader sense. So yeah, I agree with you completely.

**Lee Elliot Major** 18:38

Are there any other things coming out of the special COVID-19 survey that I know you spent a lot of time at very quickly producing? Some extra questions for those involved in the surveys? Can you give us an idea of what are the sort of issues that you'll be exploring through that?

**Alissa Goodman** 19:01

So the first of our rapid COVID surveys was in the field in May of 2020. So it's capturing the experiences of BCS70, and four other longitudinal cohorts, each at different ages during this sort of period, which lockdown had been going on for quite a while, and hadn't yet started to be significantly relaxed. So it's a snapshots of BCS70, and groups or other age groups – their experiences in terms of their mental health, their family circumstances, their work, their physical health, their health behaviours, and a wide range of things about their life, how they're using their time. It's going to be incredibly powerful, in particular, in the context of all the life course data that we've already collected within these cohorts. So I think everybody now has a strong sense that the COVID crisis is not some great leveller of any kind, everybody's equally vulnerable to its impacts. Quite the opposite – it's probably going to be deeply entrenching inequalities. And on the other hand, there will be some people who appear to be exceptionally resilient, despite maybe some risk factors that they've already experienced. And it will be absolutely fascinating to understand from a life course perspective, which life experiences have made some people especially vulnerable – or who need particular policies enacted now in order to cushion them from very serious long term effects – and against who's been resilient and why.

**Lee Elliot Major** 20:48

It's really interesting isn't it, because I think certainly, in the late 20th century, early 21st century, we have this sense that each generation must progress and be better in some sense than the one before both in terms of health, education or in other aspects – but it's almost like we progress in some ways, but then things get worse in other ways. Did you think generations are getting better in some sense, or do you think it just all evens out?

**Alissa Goodman** 21:20

There has been a postwar expectation over a period of time that progress steadily is happening and that each generation is in many ways better off than the one before, and I do think that that paradigm is no longer one that we would all unquestioningly accept. And I think you know, BCS70 is a really interesting generation from that point of view, because I can see a mixture of both in the sense that they are better educated, they are better off overall on average than their parents were and the previous generations are, but that rate of progress at the very least, you know, has been slowing and or else is mixed in the way that we've described. I think, in terms of how this generation goes forward into their older age, they're certainly not the golden generation of pensioners and you know, they're not the Baby Boomers who have enjoyed gold plated pensions and high housing values and savings. Obviously, there's inequalities in the older generations as well. But I do think that the BCS70 is one that's going to be approaching its old age with a lot more financial pressures and strains than previous generations.

**Lee Elliot Major** 22:44

Can you say a little bit about what you think the future holds for the cohort studies overall?

**Alissa Goodman** 22:51

There's a lot more work going on across the interface of the biomedical and the social sciences, and I think we'll see a lot more of that in the future. So epidemiologists and health experts working together with economists and sociologists and psychologists and so on to really understand in a holistic way about how people's lives unfold and why, and the links between their social circumstances and their health. I think we'll be really strong on that in the future. We're also developing methodologically all the time. So the types of data that we can link and bring into the cohorts and analyse alongside the survey data is growing all the time. I mentioned accelerometry data, for example. So objective measures of physical activity, that's incredibly complex data – that is now available to use. We've talked about genetics and genomic data and measures of things from people's blood. Increasingly I think we'll be using imaging and understanding how the things that you can get through imaging of individuals in different parts of their body will shed light on their health as they grow older. And we're also doing a lot of work on the social science side, trying to get the most of things like open text. So when we have information from study members about their experiences that they've written themselves, which we've done – which we've included in the COVID study, for example – we now have really strong methods to extract quantitatively features from those text and to analyse those as well.

**Lee Elliot Major** 24:41

And do you think there will be a a new cohort you know, because one of the things when you look at the cohort studies, one of the things that immediately comes to mind is the fact that we had the BCS70 cohort, we didn't have a specifically commissioned cohort till the Millennium Cohort. And now we're 20 years down the line. Do you think we will have a new cohort soon?

**Alissa Goodman** 25:06

I very much hope that we will have a new cohort soon. And I'm optimistic that there will be. I think that the gap that there has been since the last one is regrettable. And we can see now with the COVID generations of children that are affected, not just in the short term by lockdown, but by some of the long term fallout from this crisis that we need a series of cohorts and not just one, to enable us to really understand how people's lives have been changed and the ways in which that goes on to affect people in the future. So we definitely need one and I very much hope that we'll have one soon.

**Lee Elliot Major** 25:54

So as we come to the end of our journey through five decades of the 1970 British Cohort Study, we look forward to the future of BCS70. The next data collection, the future groundbreaking discoveries, and the continuing importance of the study in informing public policy and scientific debate. Thanks for joining us in the celebration of the 1970 British Cohort Study. We hope you've enjoyed our journey through 50 Years of Life in Britain. We conclude the series where we started: telling the story of British life through our amazing participants.

**Study member** 26:31

It feels good, feels really good and it feels sort of quite significant. You feel like you, you know, you're a tiny little part. You know, there are so many of us have taken part in this, you're a tiny little part and so, you know, so much other research that's been done that probably adds to it. But you feel that you've contributed to it a bit in one way – and that's what I say to our students as well, you know, they talk about you know, the power of voice and when people do quotes in their interviews that they do for the research, and you get some really powerful statements there and that goes on to help to inform, you know, recommendations for the future, then you think, yeah, that's worth it. So it is important. So, whatever, you know, we say collectively as a group – we might all have different opinions – we were all born in that same week, but we've all had extremely different life experiences. But if all those life experiences collectively come together, to make a difference to the lives of people just now, or, you know, we've maybe made you know, we've made a difference in the lives of people in the past, but also the future generations as well – then, that's something to, that's something important to hold on to I think.

**Study member** 27:44

It just becomes part of you. You don't think twice of not doing it. It's like okay, that's come in, yep. Take some time to do that. Oh, okay yeah, we've got this Activity Monitor to wear, okay. Never kind of think, oh what are they doing that for? It's like, yeah, I'll do it, because it's become part of you.

**Study member** 28:02

It actually feels as an individual that you might have some impact on the country and social planning and obviously not on politics, but more on perhaps decisions that are made or advice that's given about education, the NHS, social care, maybe. You know, and that all understanding that you're part of a bigger group who are reflecting what's going on in society, and a sense of helping form the advice that's given to the people who are making the decisions. And in a way it feels like that as an individual, I've got more of an influence than I have, say, when I vote in a general election, where I don't feel that my voice is particularly well reflected, just because of you know, the way that politics works and votes and things like that.

**Study member** 28:56

All I can express is, you know, the feeling about it. I'm pleased to be partaking in almost like service, it's like a, it's like a contribution to your fellow citizens of the country. So it's not pride because that, you know, it's not about me, it's about happiness in partaking something which is bigger than yourself. So I'm not sure what the word is, but certainly it's in that area – there's, you know, I'm pleased to be able to make a positive change to the country I live in. That's kind of where it's at. And yeah, I'm happy to do it, no problem at all. It's great to see, you know, the messiness of the human story, with all its kind of quirks and unpredictability is – nonetheless there's patterns there. And these patterns are always evolving, constantly shifting.

**Study member** 29:49

It is good to feel as though you're contributing to something. You know, it's really important that decisions are made on basis of evidence. And it's really interesting – and maybe interesting is not the right word – but it's good to know that the information that I'm giving is going to be part of a bigger picture, that's then going to be used for people who make decisions or, you know, people can reflect back on decisions that were made in the past and the effects that they had – kind of political decisions, I suppose I mean. And also, it's interesting to feel that you're a little bit part of history in a way and kind of recording history and what happens over the years. You know, I think we're all obviously we're all a product of our nature and nurture, and the kind of social and political environment that we grown up in, affects what we're all like, and to be part of a study that's looking at that is really interesting and important I think.

**Study member** 31:01

It's such an important part of social history and we can use those cohort studies to inform behaviour. So it's not, you know, it's not just about documenting society at that moment in time, but it's what lessons can we learn from this as well. So, you know, to me personally, I never doubted that I would continue being part of the cohort study. And over the years, I've felt more and more honoured to be part of the cohort study. As I've recognised the importance of cohort studies to epidemiology and to society as a whole. So I just I feel incredibly privileged to be part of the cohort study. I am glad I was born in that week in April 1970.

**Narrator** 32:01

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