Call for Understanding Society Research Data Fellowships

Deadline 5pm on 30 June 2022

*Understanding Society* is one of the largest household panel studies in the world and a major infrastructure investment for UK health and social sciences. By enabling researchers to track individuals over time, the data can be used to assess the causes and consequences of change in individuals’ circumstances (such as the birth of a child, marriage, separation, retirement) for themselves and their families (e.g. poverty, income, health, parenting). It also allows researchers and policymakers to gain a deeper understanding of issues such as poverty, unemployment or mental health, by allowing researchers to examine whether conditions are persistent or transitory. The data is also amenable to evaluating policy change as before and after measures are reported at the individual and household level. At the same time, *Understanding Society* provides significant opportunities for methodological research. This has often been focused on formal experiments carried on the Innovation Panel, but there are many opportunities for methodological research on the main survey as a result of changes in design over time (e.g. changing modes due to the pandemic).

The *Understanding Society Fellowship Programme* enables researchers to take time out to focus on research projects based on the Study’s data. Funding is available for 12-month Fellowships to undertake a project based on *Understanding Society* data, with additional resource for follow up dissemination and impact generation activities. Practical support will also be available from the Study team, for example, to advise on data and analysis plans and communication and impact strategies. Each fellowship call has a specific theme; previous rounds have included a focus on our biomarker and genetics data, methodological research on representativeness and mixed modes, the creation and analysis of event histories, research focusing on family dynamics, the use of linked administrative data, and policy focused projects. Details of fellowships awarded in previous rounds can be found here.
The May 2022 call focuses on five themes: understanding youth non-response; improving the collection of participant contact details; the use of biomarkers in addressing novel survey method questions; cross-country comparative research; and research making use of the unique value of Understanding Society. We will announce the topics of our next call in 2023.

**Requirements of a fellowship**

Specifically in this round of funding we are seeking applications on five themes:

**Youth nonresponse -**

In longitudinal studies, a particular nonresponse problem is presented by people in their youth, specifically during the period of life when young people leave their parental home, typically for work or study, move addresses, sometimes multiple times in a year, and lead busy lifestyles. Young people are often lost permanently to the study (attrition) once they stop participating.

We are interested in research that identifies the triggers and factors associated with nonresponse by young people. The research could describe the characteristics and experiences of young people who are more likely to continue participating compared to those who are more likely to drop out and how this affects longer-term measures. For example, are those who don’t leave the parental home at a young age more likely to continue responding and do they differ from others in terms of marital, parental and employment outcomes? Note, some potential predictors of attrition (e.g. events that took place since the last wave at which they were interviewed, such as leaving the parental home, marriage, obtaining employment) will not be directly observed from the sample member, but may be available from the household data collected from other (ex-) household members.
Our interest is in projects which can either describe the group at higher risk of attrition and explore their identification in the data using existing information (e.g. from their households), and therefore create predictors for nonresponse correction; or in projects that look into potential methods for correcting for such nonresponse, e.g. by developing statistical methods for taking into account this NMAR situation in this specific context.

**Improving the collection of participant contact details -**

*Understanding Society* provides high-quality longitudinal data to conduct research that answers challenging questions about our society. However, the quality of the survey estimates can be compromised if some panel members do not participate in a single or several waves – wave nonresponse – or drop from the study – panel attrition. A longitudinal study can achieve higher response rates by enhancing the trace and contact protocols using additional contact details collected at the previous waves. For instance, mobile numbers or email addresses can help trace participants moving out between waves. Moreover, mobile numbers or emails can be used to send invitations or reminders in addition to letters, significantly reducing the likelihood of the contact being unintentionally ignored (see *Cabrera-Álvarez and Lynn, 2022*). Also, novel methodological developments, such as event-triggered data collection, in which participants are questioned about recent changes in their lives, require up-to-date participants’ contact details (see *Jäckle, Burton and Couper, 2019*).

At the moment, *Understanding Society* asks participants to provide or update their address, landline number, mobile number and email address. However, some of the participants refuse to give their contact details. For example, in Wave 10 of the main study, 27% of the active panel members interviewed in the past had not provided a valid mobile number. In the frame of developing the event-triggered data collection strategy, two experiments have tested design changes to increase the number of participants that report or update their mobile numbers. In the 12th wave of the Study’s Innovation Panel (IP12), an experiment tested a new design to ask participants to provide or update their mobile numbers. The treatment group received a question asking to update or report their mobile number first, while the control group were asked to provide or update all details in the same question. In
the forthcoming wave of the Innovation Panel (IP15), an experiment will test a new wording of the questions asking for the mobile number.

Your research should aim to analyse the contact information currently available in the main Understanding Society study (a binary variable; yes, contact provided / no, not provided) and provide insights to develop a research strategy in this field. We welcome fellowship applications that will undertake to:

1) develop a descriptive analysis of the participants’ contact details provided (yes/no) and updated over waves;
2) explore the factors related to the propensity to provide or update contact details, particularly mobile numbers and emails;
3) perform a comparative analysis of the strategies used to collect and update contact details implemented by other UK-based longitudinal studies, and
4) suggest future lines of research and innovative approaches to encourage respondents to provide their contact details.

Use of biomarker data in addressing novel methodological questions -
Understanding Society provides researchers a unique and extensive data source, as beyond the wealth of longitudinal social and economic data collected, the study has also collected biomarker data from respondents. Biomarkers have been collected in both the main survey and in the Innovation Panel samples. In Wave 2 and Wave 3 of the main study, adult participants received a follow-up health assessment visit from a registered nurse. A number of bio-measures were collected from around 20,000 adults, including blood pressure, weight, height, waist measurement, body fat percent, grip strength and lung function. Venous blood samples were also taken at these visits and the following biomarker data are included with respondents’ survey data:

- Measures of fat in the blood (cholesterol and triglycerides)
- An indicator of diabetes (Glycated haemoglobin HbA1c)
- Measures of inflammation and the immune system—(High sensitivity c-reactive protein, fibrinogen and CMV seropositivity)
· Measures of anaemia (Haemoglobin and ferritin)
· Liver and kidney function
· Hormones that build up the body – (testosterone, DHEAs, IFG-1).

Further details on these main study data can be found at:
https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/documentation/health-assessment

In the 12th wave of the Innovation Panel (IP12), a mixed mode (nurse, web, interviewer) design was utilised to collected biomarkers throughout the course of the survey interview. Which biomarkers were collected and how, was determined by mode of completion. All three modes self-reported blood pressure in the same manner; blood pressure (again), height and weight were measured the interview by nurses and interviewers; and nurses collected venous blood. While mode impacts the way these biomarkers were collected, hair and dried blood samples were collected across all three modes, and the same analytes extracted from all samples. From hair, these include cortisol, cortisone, testosterone, progesterone, dehydroandrosterone. The blood samples were analysed for cholesterol, triglycerides, and an indicator of diabetes (Glycated haemoglobin HbA1c).

Further details on these IP data can be found at:
https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/documentation/innovation-panel/user-guide

We would welcome fellowship applications that propose to use these biomarker data in assessing methodological issues in a novel way. Significant research has previously focused on consent to participate in these biomarker collections and the impact mode can have on the likelihood to respond to these requests. Therefore, we look for research that uses the bio-measures themselves as a key part of the analysis. This may include the measurement properties of the bio-measures as a methodological concern, or the use of bio-measures to understand other survey methodological outcomes (e.g. response patterns, item or unit non-response, measurement). The goal of the research should be to identify new pathways in methodological research and to showcase the use of the data to a wider audience.
Cross-country comparative research -

*Understanding Society* is one among a [worldwide group of household panel surveys](https://www.understandingsociety.org.uk). There are broadly equivalent studies in each of the United States (Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID)), Australia (Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA)), Germany (German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP)), Switzerland (Swiss Household Panel (SHP)), Korea (Korean Labour and Income Panel Study (KLIPS)), Japan (Keio) (Keio Household Panel Survey (JHPS/KHPS)), China (China Family Panel Studies (CFPS)), South Africa (National Income Dynamics Study (NIDS)), Canada (Survey of Labour and Income Dynamics (SLID)) and Russia (Russia Longitudinal Monitoring Survey (RLMS)). For the most part, these studies, like *Understanding Society*, are well-established multi-topic, multi-purpose longitudinal studies.

A number of [recent publications](https://www.understandingsociety.org.uk) have used *Understanding Society* data as part of a cross-country comparative analysis. We feel that there is much more that can be done in terms of comparative research using the Study and this call for fellows is intended to highlight the potential of using our data as part of a multi-country research project.

We are therefore encouraging applications that propose to analyse the Study’s UK (or national) data comparatively alongside data from at least one other national longitudinal household panel survey. There are no limitations set on the research topic but, in addition to the research outputs themselves, the project should produce reusable code and documentation that, among other things, provide detail on how any issues of non-equivalence and harmonisation across the studies have been dealt with.

Potential applicants should be aware of two resources that already encourage cross-national comparisons. The [Cross National Equivalent File (CNEF)](https://www.cnef.org/) prepared by the Department of Human Sciences at the Ohio State University, contains equivalently defined variables for *Understanding Society* and its national equivalents listed above. The file is a simplified version of the panels but provides some derived variables that are not directly available on the original surveys. The [Comparative Panel File (CPF)](https://www.comparativepanelfile.org/) is an open science
project to harmonise the world's major and longest-running household panel studies from seven countries, including the UK. CPF provides an open-source code to construct a comparative dataset based on original data from the surveys. The code can be further modified and extended.

Applicants should be clear in their application about how they will gain access to the non-UK data, including providing indicative timescales if there are likely to be issues that may delay the research.

**Exploiting the unique value of the Study -**

As a research resource, *Understanding Study* is unique. It is a large-scale, nationally representative, multi-topic longitudinal household survey, collecting data from and on its participants annually. The Study benefits from a large sample size, allowing researchers to examine the lives of important population sub-groups over time, with an Ethnic Minority Boost sample and Immigrant and Ethnic Minority Boost sample increasing the numbers of different ethnic minority and immigrant groups. Data are collected on the whole household, providing the context for individual experiences but also allowing relations between generations, couples and siblings to be explored.

With participant consent, the Study’s survey data have been linked to administrative records. So far, this has taken place in the fields of education, health and the environment. The Study also allows for geographical data linkage, enabling researchers to investigate the role of neighbourhoods and regions on individual lives.

Our participants have also contributed biomarker and genetic data collected via nurse visits. This health and genetic information enables researchers to investigate the links between social and economic circumstances and health.

Taken together, this makes *Understanding Society* a unique resource. Fellowship applications on any topic that can demonstrate that they will make use of at least one of the
key features of the Study just listed – or, ideally, a combination of them – are welcomed. There should be a justification provided as to why your proposed research could not be conducted using any other resource.

**For all projects** the following outputs are required:

- the syntax you have written for your project, which if appropriate and acknowledging your authorship, would be shared on the Study website and/or used to create new datafiles for the Study
- an *Understanding Society* working paper which summarises your methodological approach.
- an *Understanding Society* blog or podcast summarising your fellowship.

Additionally, of course, we expect that you will submit your research to peer review journals and present it at relevant conferences.

On all topics we particularly welcome projects that also aim to actively promote policy learning, with additional funding would be available for such activities, including beyond the end date of the fellowship if helpful. Fellowships that wish to pursue policy engagement for their project will be supported by the *Understanding Society* policy and partnership unit to engage widely with policy makers, including *Understanding Society*’s co-funder group, and work with them to disseminate findings and generate impact.

Fellows will be required to attend three meetings with other fellows and *Understanding Society* team members during their fellowship: a kick-off meeting to meet other fellows in this cohort and to present their plans; a second meeting to share progress updates and receive feedback and support; and a final public workshop at which they will present their findings.
Communication and impact plans will be reviewed and discussed with each fellow at the first fellowship network meeting. To facilitate sharing among fellows, fellowships under this call should begin in January 2023.

**Selection Criteria and Eligibility**

Applications will be assessed on the basis of their scientific merit and potential to demonstrate the usefulness of the Study as a research resource and/or generate policy impact. Any researcher based in a higher education institution or research institute is eligible to apply (except the University of Essex), but people can only have an *Understanding Society* Fellowship once, so previously successful applicants should not apply. We welcome applications from researchers at any career stage. Early careers researchers (ECRs, < 3 years post PhD) should identify a mentor in their own institution.

Funding will be provided for the fellow’s salary, including NI and pension costs for up to 12 months (full or part time). The planned project must be achievable in the timescale of the project, and the application should demonstrate this. As noted above, we would be happy to discuss additional funding/time after the completion of the main fellowship to promote policy impact or create a well-documented shareable event history data file.

**How do I apply?**

People wishing to be considered for a fellowship under this call should apply using the application form by **5pm on 30 June 2022**. You are strongly advised to discuss your ideas with a member of the *Understanding Society* team in advance of submitting your application. Please contact Jack Kneeshaw ([kneijw@essex.ac.uk](mailto:kneijw@essex.ac.uk)) in the first instance who will put you in touch with the appropriate person to discuss your ideas with you.

Please feel free to seek guidance on the scientific direction of your proposal, data issues, communication and impact plans as well as practical queries. A signed statement of support from your Head of Department must be included.
The timeline for this Fellowship call is set out below.

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<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Date</th>
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<tr>
<td>Advert</td>
<td>19 May 2022</td>
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<tr>
<td>Closing date (5 weeks)</td>
<td>30 June 2022</td>
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<tr>
<td>Notify if shortlisted (or not)</td>
<td>End-July 2022</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>Early-September 2022</td>
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<td>Notify</td>
<td>Early-September 2022</td>
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<td>Expected start</td>
<td>January 2023</td>
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<td>Kick-off Fellowship meeting</td>
<td>End-January 2023</td>
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<td>Work-in-progress workshop</td>
<td>Summer 2023</td>
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<td>End of project event</td>
<td>December 2023</td>
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**Application guidelines**

1. Details of all researchers involved in the project should be provided. This must include the applicant for the Fellowship. If you are an early career researcher (<3 years post PhD) a mentor from your host institution should also be included on the project and they should write a supporting statement. Note that the mentor will not be funded as part of the Fellowship.

2. Please provide a short title for the project. A list of fellows, their project titles and, in time, outputs will be added to the Study website.

3. Please provide an executive summary of no more than 250 words. This should provide an overview of the proposed project including how it will contribute to informing policy, and to social science research.

4. Please outline (max 250 words) how your Fellowship will add value to *Understanding Society* (value added data, methodological understanding, policy engagement, highlighting unique features of the Study etc).
5. Please provide a brief summary of your own expertise in relation to delivering the project and support you may need from your host institution or the Understanding Society team.

6. Outline your project plan. You should have a clearly specified research question, methods, analysis and impact and dissemination plans (max 2 sides). You should be clear about the data that you will use, including the size of the analysis sample and whether it is sufficiently powered.

7. Please detail your plans for dissemination, knowledge exchange and for generating impact. You should indicate who your main audiences will be and what activities you will undertake in order to disseminate your findings to them. Any specific costs associated with these activities should be identified, except open access publication which should be covered by your own institution.

8. Please describe your project milestones and the deliverables you will achieve at the end of months 3, 6, 9 and 12. Final payments will only be made upon delivery of the required outputs set out at the top of page 3. If you are proposing additional work beyond your fellowship period to promote impact or develop a shareable datasets please clearly identify relevant additional milestones.

9. Provide an estimate of costs produced by your host HEI finance office. These should include the fellowship salary, NI and pension contribution. Staff costs are funded at 100% but we cannot cover indirects. The Fellowships fund your own salary costs if you have a research-only contract or for those on research and teaching contracts, the salary costs (normally starting at the most junior point of the lecturer scale at the institution concerned) of an individual to undertake the normal duties of the applicant for the duration of the Fellowship. Other costs necessary to complete your fellowship for example, travel, training, conference attendance and knowledge exchange activities should be clearly articulated and justified in the proposal. The fellowship can last up to 12 months, full or part time.

Dissemination and knowledge exchange activities, or additional work to create shareable well documented datasets, can be funded for up to 12 months after the
completion of your fellowship. These should be discussed with us in advance of completing your application and separately identified in the application form. The maximum budget per fellowship is £70,000 for staff and dissemination related-costs.

10. Please provide a supporting statement from your host organisation. This should be from a senior member of staff. This statement should outline the organisation’s commitment to the project, detailing the resources that will be provided and the support that will be given to Fellows.

11. Please attach a two page CV.

Assessing applications
External peer reviews of the fellowship applications will be undertaken, and shortlisted applicants will be invited to discuss their proposals with the team. The criteria against which applications will be judged are:

- Does the fellowship project have clear aims?
- Does the application clearly demonstrate the scientific benefits of the proposal?
- Is the proposed analysis feasible (e.g. is it sufficiently powered)?
- Are the proposed research methods appropriate for the aims of the fellowship?
- Does the project demonstrate the value of the Understanding Society resource?
- Does the project have an appropriate dissemination and knowledge exchange plan?
- Are the milestones and overall project goals realistic and achievable in the timeframe?
- Are the costs justified? Does the project represent value for money?
- For early career researchers, is there sufficient support in place for the Fellow?

Please send your completed form together with a 2-page CV to Jack Kneeshaw kneejw@essex.ac.uk by 5pm on 30 June 2022.