

Panel Studies and their Implications for Policymaking

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[IPS Social Lab's](#) flagship project will be a longitudinal study of 5,000 households, or up to 10,000 individuals, representative of the Singapore population. The Panel Study on Social Dynamics (PSSD) will be launched this year to measure family dynamics and societal values, as well as attitudes, perceptions and behaviours relevant to national identity and social mobility over time.

To kick start the year, IPS Social Lab invited Dr Frank Stafford, Professor of Economics from the University of Michigan to conduct a series of workshops. Dr Stafford is Co-Investigator of the US-based Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID), the longest-running longitudinal household survey in the world. From 14–15 January 2014, academics, and researchers from Singapore's government ministries and agencies engaged Dr Stafford in discussion. Among the participants were Dr Aline Wong, Academic Advisor of SIM University and Adjunct Professor at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, and Dr Wei-Jun Jean Yeung, Professor of Sociology at National University of Singapore and Adjunct Research Professor at University of Michigan.

Learning Points from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics

Dr Stafford shared his experience on working on the PSID, and offered his perspective on the PSID's value and outcomes, the challenges ahead and lessons and implications for other national panel studies.

The PSID operates with a five-year funding cycle, with two to three waves of data collection within the cycle. Since 1997, the study incorporates off-years, also known as skip years. Dr Stafford stressed that it is not necessary to repeat the full questionnaire every year, although there are core variables that have to be determined at each round of interviews; for instance, socio-demographic characteristics, including marital status, occupational class, income and taxes.

At the same time, there is constant pressure from project stakeholders and funding agencies to broaden the scope of the PSID. One way of accommodating this is to have supplementary waves or subsets of questionnaires to explore specific areas of interest. The Disability and

Use of Time Supplement, the Child Development Supplement, and the Transition into Adulthood study are examples.



Dr Stafford (facing camera) sharing his knowledge on the PSID with representatives from IPS and government ministries.

Responding to a question on the scope of panel studies, Dr Stafford noted that the dynamics of family resilience could be a good overarching theme for the PSSD in Singapore. It has the advantage of being multi-level in that this approach will cover individuals and households, and encompass families, local communities, neighbourhoods, districts and geospatial units.

He cautioned that errors are compounded in historical longitudinal panel studies. Hence, it is critical for methodology to be sound. In the case of the PSID, much time and effort goes into defining family structures. Researchers frequently have to engage in detective work, using complex algorithms and combing through interviewer notes, sometimes case-by-case.

Challenges in Case Management

Among some of the insights provided by Dr Stafford was the importance of back-end data processing and a robust system of case management. The massive amount of data collected over time and the rapid advances in technology compound the challenges of ensuring that data in the archives remain usable and accessible. The PSID data is available

to the public at no cost, and much time and effort goes into transferring data from the archives to the current system.

Public engagement and outreach programmes, combined with a team of skilled interviewers, are critical to ensure the momentum and relevance of panel studies. The PSID boasts a response rate of over 90% (compared to the Singapore average of 50%–60%). Much time and effort goes into training and motivating interviewers. Strategic positioning and communication are important tools to reduce attrition and drop-out rates from the panel households.

The PSID and other longitudinal household panel surveys produce a wealth of data that measure and explain stability and change in living conditions, health and well-being, as well as individual outcomes and behaviour.¹ The value of panel studies comes from following people over a long period of time. However, it is often not possible to re-interview people due to mortality, relocation, loss of contact and natural attrition rate. In addition, it is also important to conduct regular sample refreshers in order to maintain the panel's validity as a representative of the national demographics over time.

Conclusion

From the policymakers' perspective, studies on panel survey data provide clear and robust evidence on key issues affecting society. Some of the areas of study that have benefited from the use of panel survey data include income and poverty dynamics, employment paths, intergenerational mobility, impact of social security on length of unemployment, impact of changes in life circumstances on voting behaviour and party preference, and impact of relocation on life chances.

Established in November 2013 under the leadership of sociologist Associate Professor Tan Ern Ser and IPS Senior Research Fellow Dr Leong Chan-Hoong, IPS Social Lab is committed to serve the public interest as a national resource centre for longitudinal data. Policymakers can also tap on Social Lab to broaden their research capability. The centre is ideally situated within a university environment to benefit from interdisciplinary interaction with members of the academic community.

If you have comments or feedback, please email ips.eneews@nus.edu.sg



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¹ Understanding Society: the UK Household Longitudinal Study – Longitudinal Studies Guide <https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/about/longitudinal-studies-guide>

APPENDIX

Dr Frank Stafford and the PSID

Dr Frank Stafford is Co-Investigator of the US-based Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID), the longest-running longitudinal household survey in the world. As Project Director (1994–2009), Dr Stafford provided scientific oversight for all aspects of data collection, facilitating the integration of the data into a coherent infrastructure.²

He has also served as Principal Investigator of the Child Development Supplement of the PSID to examine the time use patterns of children and their parents and the impact of time use on the child's development as well as labour market careers of the parents. In addition, Dr Stafford has served as Principal Investigator of a project funded by the National Institute of Aging in the United States (US), on Wealth and Health over the Life Course in the PSID.

Dr Stafford is responsible for many innovations in data collection, including the use of unfolding brackets for the measurement of wealth. He has written extensively on various dimensions of wealth, and has led the effort to implement the wealth and pension modules in the PSID.

The study began in 1968 with a nationally representative sample of over 18,000 individuals living in 5,000 families in the US. Information on these individuals and their descendants has been collected continuously since, including data covering employment, income, wealth, expenditures, health, marriage, childbearing, child development, philanthropy, education and numerous other topics.

The data are used by researchers, policy analysts, and educators around the globe. Over 3,200 peer-reviewed publications have been based on the PSID — an average of two new publications a week.

Recognising the importance of the data, numerous countries have created their own national panel studies based on the PSID that now facilitate cross-national comparative research: The British Household Panel Survey, German Socio-Economic Panel Study, Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia, Beijing's Chinese Family Panel Study and Taipei's Panel Study of Family Dynamics, to name a few.

². Survey Research Center, University of Michigan: Faculty Profile – Frank Stafford
http://www.src.isr.umich.edu/content.aspx?ID=about_src_people_faculty_profile&unique=fstaffor