

Data Resource: The Wisconsin Longitudinal Study

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For nearly sixty years, the Wisconsin Longitudinal Study (WLS) has followed Wisconsin's high school class of 1957. The WLS includes six waves of survey data on the 1957 class members and four waves of data on siblings of the class of 1957. Genetic data, a variety of administrative data, and the potential to link to Medicare and Social Security data are also available. Our poster will educate current and potential WLS data users on the content and availability of the WLS dataset. Visitors to the poster will also have the opportunity to ask questions directly to a WLS expert.

Description of the WLS: WLS is based on a 1/3 sample of all 1957 Wisconsin high school graduates (N=10,317) and a sibling of these graduates (Sewell et al., 2004; Hauser, 2009). The WLS was initially designed to assess the demand for higher education in Wisconsin, yet has since become an influential resource for studies of social stratification in the United States, and its design and findings have had world-wide influence. The graduate respondents completed an in-person questionnaire in 1957, which was followed with data collection in 1964 (a mail survey of parents), 1975 (telephone survey), 1993 (telephone and mail surveys), 2004 (telephone and mail surveys, as well as a spouse telephone survey), and 2011 (in-person interview and mail survey). The paired sibling was randomly selected from a roster of all siblings except when the graduate was a twin, in which case the twin was selected. Roughly 2,000 siblings were recruited to the study in 1977, and the full sibling sample was implemented in 1994. Once empaneled, a sibling survey has been fielded shortly after the completion of the graduate survey in each round, except for 2011 when siblings were surveyed concurrent with graduates for the in-person interview. Data and documentation including details of response rates are publically available at <http://www.ssc.wisc.edu/wlsresearch/>.

A central advantage to these data is their 55 year longitudinal nature, the breadth of measures, and subsamples focused on special populations. The content of WLS surveys has changed to reflect the life course of participants: education provided the impetus for the initial data collection (1957), familial and career outcomes received greater attention from respondents in young adulthood (1975/1977) and midlife (1993), and later rounds have given increased attention to respondent's health, cognitive status, psychological well-being, non-work activities, caregiving and social support, and preparations for end-of-life (2003, 2011). Another advantage is the wealth of administrative and supplemental data. WLS has collected a range of non-survey derived measures. Cognition: IQ test scores from high school; Education: high school class rank; archival data on high school and elementary school resources; information on social

participation, facial obesity, and attractiveness from yearbooks; Work and Income: a four-year average of earnings of parents from state tax records, employers, industries; Geographic: communities of residence; Health; matches to the National Death Index mortality data. Linkages to claims data for all Medicare-eligible participants and to Social Security earnings and benefits are also possible. The 2011 wave collected direct biometric measures: height, weight, waist/hip circumference, grip strength, lung function, gait speed, mobility, as well as an array of measures of cognitive performance. The strengths of the WLS as a resource for studying life-course processes and aging in a family context lie in its *longitudinal scope*, its exceptional *sample retention*, the broad *content and quality* of survey and administrative data, and its *relational design*: It has followed a *large* and *socioeconomically diverse* sample from high school graduation to the retirement years, and it tracks social and economic relationships among the graduates and their significant others; parents, children, siblings, nieces and nephews, and high-school friends. The National Research Council report *New Horizons* extols the value of the classic British birth cohort surveys but then adds, “in the United States, the WLS ... is the closest to the British birth cohorts in richness of psychosocial information, but goes well beyond the British studies” with its assessments of education, occupation, and sibling, spouse and parent data (National Research Council 2001c: 105). Since 1991, the WLS has been supported principally by the National Institute on Aging.

References

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