The Predictors of Wellbeing Study: a case study of research and policy working together

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1. Purpose of the presentation & background to the wellbeing agenda

This is a case study of how a Government Social Researcher (GSR) and a research agency have worked together to inform the wellbeing evidence base to support policy making.

Wellbeing is about feeling good and functioning well, and wellbeing policies are a cross government initiative. Wellbeing is relevant across the whole of people's lives, and health is one of the top things that the public say matters to their wellbeing. The literature suggests that wellbeing adds years to life, improves recovery from illness, has implications for patient care practises and services, and may ultimately reduce the healthcare burden.

Analysts within the Department of Health (DH) have been working to build the evidence base around wellbeing and health, in order to start to embed wellbeing into policy making. Building the evidence base for policy has been a major undertaking, however having a sound evidence base and explaining its policy relevance is critical if wellbeing is to be considered in policy making. The *Predicting Wellbeing* report was commissioned to support this work on building the evidence base. The aim of the report was to explore the predictors of wellbeing across the lifecourse, from early childhood to adulthood. Identifying predictors of wellbeing is crucial to inform health policy and target interventions effectively.

2. Secondary analysis: cost-effective research findings

DH has placed wellbeing questions on the Health Survey for England for 4 years now. The Department also contributes funding to some major longitudinal surveys, specifically Millennium Cohort Study and Understanding Society. DH was keen to make the most of these investments and large datasets and commissioned NatCen to conduct secondary analysis using these datasets. Secondary analysis of existing data sources is great way to make sure that we maximise the learning from the investment that has gone into collecting the data.

However, there are also some limitations. One of the main frustrations of secondary analysis is that the information needed is not always available in the form the researcher would ideally like it captured for the particular project. For example, this project looked to establish what *predicts* wellbeing so we were keen to use the longitudinal nature of Understanding Society. This was possible for the analysis focusing on young people because the wellbeing questions were asked in both of the waves available at the time. However, for the adult analysis the wellbeing scale was only asked in the first wave and furthermore, the health behaviours we were interested in as predictors were asked in the following wave so we were not able to include these as predictors.

Secondary analysis can therefore require some flexibility and creativity from the researcher. With respect to the issue above, we decided to focus the Understanding Society adult analysis on the social aspects of life, and use the Health Survey for England to explore health and health behaviours as predictors of wellbeing.

3. Findings

The majority of the findings of what predicts wellbeing were in the expected direction. In this presentation we pull out some of the more unexpected findings as examples for discussion.

The lifecourse focus to the analysis identified three dips in wellbeing: mid-teens, mid-life and in old age among women. The observed dip in wellbeing in mid-teens can be explained by social circumstances but the mid-life dip remains statistically significant after controlling for other factors.

In terms of health behaviours among children, the report did not find strong evidence that various diet and exercise behaviours predicted variation in wellbeing but screen time was related to wellbeing.

- o The frequency of having unhealthy snacks was not related to wellbeing in 7-year olds or in 11-15 year olds. Number of daily portions of fruit and vegetables was also unrelated to later wellbeing in 11-15 year olds.
- o Exercise was not related to wellbeing among 11-15 year olds and we had mixed results for the 7-year olds. While children who reported enjoying PE lessons were also more likely to report being happy and not worrying, and while their parents were less likely to view them as unhappy if they attended sports clubs regularly, the children themselves were more likely to feel worried if they attended organised sports clubs.
- o Parents of 7-year olds who watched a very large amount of television (five hours or more a day on weekdays) were more likely to regard them as unhappy. The children themselves were most likely to not worry if they watched very limited television (less than one hour per week day). With regards 11-15 year olds, time spent playing computer games was significantly (and negatively) associated with wellbeing.

4. Managing the findings of the report

One of the roles of a GSR analyst is to manage research findings, particularly when findings are unexpected or controversial. The finding that health behaviours were not strong predictors of wellbeing, particularly in young people, was a surprise for some policy colleagues. It is part of the role of GSR to manage this situation by putting the findings into context. For example, although health behaviours are not critical for wellbeing at a young age, it is important to instil positive health behaviours in young people early, for adulthood. We know that in adulthood, smoking and fruit and vegetable consumption impacts on physical health. This report also found that smoking and fruit and vegetable consumption are also associated with variations in wellbeing in adulthood, when controlling for the relationship between physical health and wellbeing. So it is important to take a long life course perspective to wellbeing even if an immediate association is not observed among young people.

5. Impact of the report

The *Predicting Wellbeing* report has been a successful piece of work which has been widely disseminated both within government, and to the wider research community. Within DH, the report is one of the main tools used to engage with policy makers on the wellbeing agenda. The report has also been developed to produce short, policy friendly factsheets on wellbeing across the lifecourse.

The report underpinned a national social marketing campaign, Change4Life, focusing particularly on the findings on screen time and wellbeing. The report has also been presented at the Public Health England annual conference, and other government departments have also been interested in the findings.

Outside of government, the report has been used for an article in the New Statesman, as a case study for the UK data service, and as a podcast for Understanding Society.

The full report by Jenny Chanfreau, Cheryl Lloyd, Christos Byron, Caireen Roberts, Rachel Craig, Danielle De Feo and Sally McManus is available online
http://www.natcen.ac.uk/media/205352/predictors-of-wellbeing.pdf