POLICY BRIEF 3

Étude Longitudinale Française Depuis L'Enfance (ELFE)

wellbeing

data

children

1 SUMMARY

This case study has been developed for the COhort cOmmunity Research and Development Infrastructure Network for Access Throughout Europe (COORDINATE) Horizon 2020 project. It provides evidence about how longitudinal studies on child wellbeing can affect policy, and is thus informative about the invaluable role that these longitudinal studies can have both in informing how policies addressing children and young people should be designed and in evaluating their effectiveness ex-post.

The case study is of the Étude Longitudinale Française depuis l'Enfance (ELFE): a French cohort survey jointly coordinated by the French National Institute for Demographic Studies (INED) and the National Institute for Health and Medical Research (INSERM). ELFE is a remarkable example of a multidisciplinary longitudinal study. It gathers data from more than 18,000 children, from birth until the age of 20 years old. The wide range of topics covered by ELFE questionnaires allows researchers to draw policymakers' attention to several areas where children's wellbeing can be improved. This policy brief presents ELFE's impact on three policy areas: (i) paternity leave; (ii) health inequalities; and (iii) exposure to screentime and the use of digital devices.

Regarding (i), ELFE data contributed to the 2021 reform of French paternity leave, which doubled from 14 to 28 days, seven of which are now obligatory. In the proposal, national policymakers reported ELFE findings that households' decisions on the uptake of paternity leave are related to education and income levels. In policy area (ii), a 2021 report from the Court of Auditors used results from ELFE data to document children's health inequalities according to their families' income, level of education, and geographical location. Concerning (iii), ELFE data highlighted the risks for children's health stemming from excessive screentime, and this evidence was reported in a proposed law designed to address the problem. National policymakers cited ELFE data to support the law in the Social Affairs Committee of the French National Assembly, which approved the proposal in March 2023.

2 INTRODUCTION

Growing Up In Digital Europe (GUIDE) is a proposed European longitudinal survey on children and young people's wellbeing. The survey is currently being developed through the COhort cOmmunity Research and Development Infrastructure Network for Access Throughout Europe (COORDINATE) project, which is led by the Policy Evaluation and Research Unit (PERU) at Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) in the UK .

The aim of GUIDE is to provide deep, insightful, comparative, and longitudinal data on the wellbeing and experiences of children and young people across Europe. With such data, researchers, governments, and other relevant stakeholders might better understand – and take steps to improve the life chances, outlook, happiness, and wellbeing, of children and young people.

To understand whether and how GUIDE might have such an impact, researchers from the University of Bologna (UniBo) and MMU have developed a series of Policy Briefs. These examine policy impacts that longitudinal surveys have delivered in the past, in a range of contexts throughout the world. They explore how and in what ways these surveys have affected government policies, by asking three important questions:

1.   How did the survey affect policy? Did survey analysis directly lead to new or changed policies? Did it contribute to wider discussions on the need for policy change?

2. What type of knowledge or insight did the survey provide? Did the survey provide insight into social problems? Or did survey evidence show which policy interventions worked and which ones did not work? Did they provide insight into how to make policies more effective?

3. Was the survey useful to evaluate the policies that were implemented? Is there any evaluation or other research evidence which shows that implemented policies were effective and had positive effects in the ways intended?

These impact case studies provide valuable insight into the policy and wider impact of longitudinal surveys.

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[1] French Longitudinal Study of Childhood

3 THE CASE STUDY

ELFE is a multi-disciplinary national longitudinal study on children's wellbeing. It investigates the life of approximately 18,300 children born in France in 2011.

When the child was born, researchers collected data about the pregnancy, birth, the home environment, and the family. After two months, parents provided updated information about the health of the family members and their environment. In the next 8 months, researchers collected data mainly concerning the child's nutritional habits. Yearly interviews have provided data about the development and environment of surveyed children. Children have been directly involved in the study from the age of three, and the study aims to gather data about them until they are 20 years old.

ELFE provides important insights on several themes related to children's wellbeing, and is multi-disciplinary in scope, drawing from diverse research fields that include social sciences, health, and environment-health. It demonstrates how a single longitudinal study can inform policies on multi-sectoral outcomes, gathering data on social relationships, diet, pollution, school, free-time activities, and others. At the end of the study, researchers will be able to analyse how children's social development and health is affected by factors including social inequalities, family dynamics, pollution, diet, and technology. ELFE data has already provided valuable inputs to policy design and/or debate in multiple areas. In this policy brief we focus on three particular policy impacts in the areas of: (i) paternity leave; (ii) health inequalities; and (iii) exposure to screentime and the use of digital devices. The study highlights the longlasting effects of paternity leave on a family's psychological health and on a balanced division of childcare tasks among parents. It also demonstrates how differences in families' income, education, and geographical location, affect the health of French children. It raises concerns about the effects on children's health of excessive exposure to screens and digital devices.

In this respect, ELFE sheds light on the effectiveness of longitudinal studies in influencing, and shaping, policies aimed at enhancing children's wellbeing.

4 POLICY IMPACT

The reform of paternity leave

On 10 May 2021, paternity leave in France doubled from 14 to 28 days, 7 of which are compulsory. Previously, the leave was optional and limited to 14 days. The law draws on an extensive debate to which data from ELFE contributed substantially.

In 2018, the General Inspectorate of Social Affairs requested a study on paternity leave in France, from the National Institute of Demographic Studies (INED). Using ELFE data, INED highlighted two main findings. It showed that paternity leave has long-term effects on a more equitable division of housework among parents, and that its use was positively correlated with the father's education and wage (Pailhé et al., 2018). The General Inspectorate reported these results in its official evaluation of paternity leave in France (Gosselin and Lepin, 2018). Subsequent research argued that the relatively low participation of French fathers in leave programs was mainly due to economic reasons, gender stereotypes, and fear of the impact on their professional life (Secrest, 2020).

Two years later, on 16 June 2020, policymakers cited the findings from ELFE data in a proposal for a law that would double the duration of paternity leave to 28 days and make at least part of this leave compulsory.11 The signatories of the proposal argued that optional leave is a symptom of patriarchal values that promote a gendered organisation of family life. Compulsory and extended paternity leave could change the concept of parenthood by fostering a balanced division of time spent with children. Signatories cited ELFE data to argue that this measure would also fight inequalities:

> *"The ELFE study shows a lower take up rate [of paternity leave] among fathers with low education and low wages. (...) the law must provide better protection for workers, those who constrain their own behaviour because they are afraid of being judged by their superiors, and the weakest, who sometimes do not even know that this right exists."*

On May 10, 2021, France doubled paternity leave from 14 to 28 days, 7 of which are now compulsory. New research from ELFE further supports the importance of prolonged paternity leave. Berry et al. (2023) utilised the Edinburgh Postnatal Depression Scale to measure post-partum depression of parents participating in ELFE whose children were born in 2011. The researchers found that two weeks of paternity leave decreased the probability that fathers suffered from post-partum depression (but did not bring benefit to the mothers). Given these results we expect the current expanded paternity leave to improve families' mental health, allowing children to grow up in a healthier environment. The French reform has already been cited as an ideal policy for the United States (Bergmann, 2021).

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[3] Proposal of law n°3100 to make paternity leave compulsory and extending its duration to four weeks.

Children's health and inequalities: A 2021 report by the Court of Auditors

The French Court of Auditors relied on ELFE data to carry out a study on children's health requested by the Social Affairs Committee of the French National Assembly (Cour des comptes, 2021). The Court published this study on December 15, 2021. The study relied on a partnership with INED and focused on childhood health inequalities from a socio-economic and regional point of view. ELFE data showed an overall improvement in several health indicators in the second half of the 20th century, but it also pointed to the influence of social inequalities on the health of children.

Evidence from the survey highlighted a strong correlation between children's health and parents' income and education. This was apparent for several health indicators, including language and psychomotor development difficulties, tooth decay, and obesity. Parental income and education also influence the use of healthcare professionals: children from lower-income families are less likely to visit paediatricians, but more likely to attend emergency departments. From the point of view of geographical disparities, the study highlights the relatively poor health of children in overseas territories, compared to those of metropolitan France.

Overall, thanks to ELFE data, the Court of Auditors could draw the attention of the French National Assembly to the inequalities affecting children's health. It formulated several recommendations to improve governance and management, reinforce care provision for children, and build a localised care pathway. Among them, it suggested managing children's health through an approach that operated across government ministries, and better use of medical-administrative data that can help improve the quality of health indicators. It also supported increasing the responsibilities of the child's family doctor to enhance preventive measures and, in a communication to the Senate Finance Committee, it highlighted the need for higher funding for children's health services (Cour des comptes, 2022).

Law proposed to prevent excessive exposure of children to screens

Deputies cited ELFE data in a proposed law that aimed to prevent the excessive exposure of children to screens and digital devices. The law aims to mitigate the risks associated with excessive screen time, risks which include high blood pressure, obesity, and difficulties in cognitive and relational development. Proposed in January 2023, the French National Assembly approved the law in March 2023, and it is now under review by the Senate.

The proposal cites ELFE data on the excessive exposure of children to television and the lack of societal awareness on this topic (Berthomier and Octobre, 2019; INED/Inserm/CRESS, 2018). The report about this topic, written for the Social Affairs Committee of the National Assembly, cites ELFE data on the socio-cultural determinants of different amounts of screen exposure (Poncet et al., 2022). For instance, it mentions the finding that daily reading habits are correlated with adherence to the national recommendations on excessive screen time. During debates on the proposed legislation, two Committee members supported the law by citing ELFE findings about the high proportion of children regularly using screens, and the low proportion of parents respecting recommendations on excessive screen time. Committee members reported ELFE warnings about the fact that excessive screen time among children between the age of 2 and 3 is correlated with higher risk of problems concerning sleep, behaviour, and learning process (Janvier, 2018).

The proposed law would establish an information platform for parents and professionals, it would mandate warnings on health risks on the packaging of digital devices and in advertising. It also introduces measures to limit the use of digital devices in day-care centres and nursery and elementary schools.
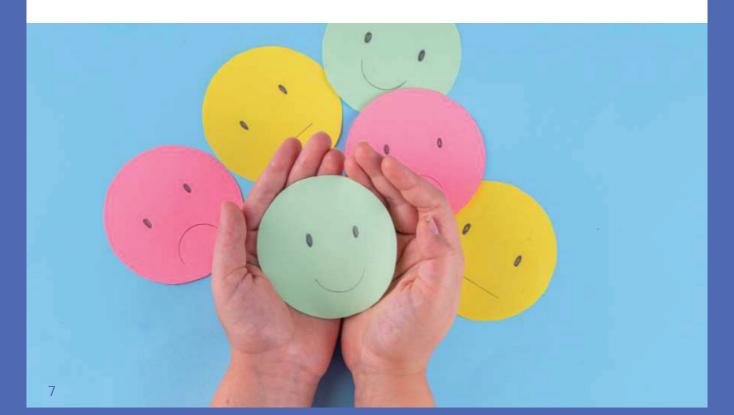

[4] Proposal No. 757 relating to the prevention of excessive exposure of children to screens

5 CONCLUSION

Among the longitudinal surveys of children's wellbeing, ELFE is significant for its broad scope and long-term approach. It follows more than 18,000 children from birth, and the intention is to continue following these individuals at least until their 20th birthday. It studies a range of inter-connected themes which are interesting in their own right and as determinants of children's future outcomes. Topics covered include: economic conditions, education, environment, family, healthcare, nutrition, physical activity, psychology, and schooling. This enables researchers to investigate the growth and development of children in a broad sense, and to have impacts in several different policy fields.

This Policy Brief illustrated how ELFE has prompted significant action in three policy areas: (i) paternity leave; (ii) health inequalities; and, (iii) the exposure to screentime and the use of digital devices. Concerning (i), the new French law on paternity leave demonstrates how a well-designed longitudinal study can help shape social policy. ELFE longitudinal data shed light on the long-lasting effect of paternity leave from the point of view of gender equality, as well as the socio-economic inequalities affecting its use. Regarding (ii), a report of the Court of Auditors on children's health cites ELFE data which demonstrates how a longitudinal study can help uncover dangerous inequalities not noticeable from aggregate indicators, and this should serve as a base for future policy action. On theme (iii), the proposed law regarding the excessive use of screens, already approved by the National Assembly, demonstrates how longitudinal data provide valuable and unique inputs to face the challenges coming from technological development.

Taken together, these examples show how a Europe-wide longitudinal cohort study such as GUIDE could help policymakers in the European Union to address the challenges presented by socio-economic and gender inequalities, and those coming from the digital transition.

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