

## POLICY BRIEF 1

# Growing Up In Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC)



# 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 of how longitudinal studies of child wellbeing can affect policy, and is thus informative of the invaluable role of longitudinal studies in informing how policies addressing children and young people should be designed.

The case study is *Growing Up in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC)*: an ongoing cohort survey jointly led by the Australian Department of Social Services (DSS) and the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS). In 2003, LSAC started collecting data from around 10,000 children, divided into two cohorts (0-1 year and 4-5 years). The study covers a wide range of topics including health, development, education, and relationships. In the future, researchers will collect data related to new areas such as gambling.

LSAC data are valuable inputs for policymakers to develop policies pursuing the wellbeing of Australian children. This policy brief presents LSAC's impact in the domain of children's human rights. LSAC data contributed widely to the annual reports on Children's Rights submitted by the National Children's Commissioner to the Australian governments since 2013. Each year the report describes the status of children's human rights across various fields such as employment, health, and housing. It highlights topics that, according to the Commissioner, need particular attention from policymakers to develop relevant policy recommendations.

Over the years, the Commissioner cited LSAC to support opinions and recommendations concerning several fields. More specifically, the Commissioner cited findings related to domestic violence, the financial and occupational problems faced by young parents, the high rate of suicidal and self-harm behaviour, and bullying. Moreover, the Commissioner constantly highlighted the importance of LSAC to provide data to understand the status of human rights among Australian youth.



## 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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<sup>1</sup>The project is funded under the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under grant agreement No 101008589.

### 3 THE CASE STUDY

LSAC is a multi-disciplinary longitudinal study on children's development that began in 2003 (with an official launch in 2004) and is still ongoing. It investigates the life of slightly more than ten thousand Australian children, divided into two cohorts: one including children that were between 0 and 1 year old in 2003 and the other one including children that were between 4 and 5 years old in the same year.

Researchers gathered data about the two cohorts every two years. The first wave was conducted in 2003. Data were collected from children and their parents, teachers, and caregivers. In the first two waves, parents recorded children's activities (e.g., sleeping, eating, being bored) in a daily diary divided into 96 15-minute intervals starting at 4am. Researchers aimed to understand how factors related to the children and the environment in which they live are related to their development from multiple points of view such as health, social skills, and psychology. Because of this, the study collects multi-disciplinary data including those related to the demography of the family, education, health, home environment, and social capital. In 2015, the year of the seventh wave, participants aged 11-12 and their parents took part in a one-off Health CheckPoint by the Murdoch Children's Research Institute. The CheckPoint provided the first national dataset on the health of Australian children of this age and their parents. In 2020, wave 9 was interrupted because of Covid, and completed online in 2021. It included questions dedicated to the children's pandemic experience. Almost 40% of the original cohorts completed it. Wave 10 started in January 2023.



LSAC was originally funded in the framework of the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy (SFCS) of the Australian Department of Family and Community Services. SFCS aimed to improve the relationship between families and their communities with the final goal of increasing youth's wellbeing and development prospects across multiple dimensions.

The richness of the LSAC dataset made it possible for researchers to explore the drivers of children's different paths of development, and understand which policies can benefit them in areas such as poverty (Warren, 2017), health (Hayes et al., 2021), educational performance (Watson et al., 2022) and socio-emotional wellbeing (Nucifora and Walker, 2021). In this policy brief, we focus on its contribution to the understanding of the status of enjoyment and protection of children's human rights in Australia. This case study demonstrates that longitudinal surveys are important tools that can help policymakers to address policy issues related to youth wellbeing.

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<sup>2</sup>See: <https://growingupinaustralia.gov.au/about-study>

## 4 POLICY IMPACT

### The Children's Rights Reports of the National Children's Commissioner

Over the years, LSAC's findings have made influential contributions to the Children's Rights Reports of the National Children's Commissioner.

The Commissioner was established in 2013 and is part of the Australian Human Rights Commission. One of its duties is to submit an annual report to the government concerning the human rights of Australian children. The document can highlight key topics that, according to the Commissioner, need particular attention from policymakers, and can also issue recommendations. In these reports, the Commissioner re-stated multiple times the importance of LSAC and cited its data in analysing several topics.

Over the years, the Commissioner has consistently highlighted the need for high-quality data about Australian children to assess their human rights and understand which policies are needed to protect them. The Commissioner cited several times LSAC as a positive example of data which can facilitate this. For instance, the first report by the commissioner described LSAC as "*essential in order to effectively monitor child wellbeing, and develop informed policy and program responses*" (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2013, pg.45). In 2017, the Commissioner defined LSAC as "*extremely significant*" (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2017, pg.42) and, two years later, cited it among the "*significant initiatives which contribute to understanding the issues facing children in Australia*" (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2019, pg. 45).

LSAC data were cited multiple times to support the Commissioner's remarks and recommendations to the government concerning topics of national importance. In 2015, the Commissioner drew the attention of the government to family and domestic violence in Australia.



In doing so, it reported key findings from LSAC data showing that mothers experiencing domestic violence had higher psychological distress, less social support, and children with higher emotional and social problems (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2015, pg. 252). In 2014, highlighting that there was a lack of data concerning the understanding of child suicidal behaviour, LSAC's work was defined as "commendable" due to the inclusion of questions related to this topic in its surveys (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2014, pg.68). Three years later, the Commissioner urged the government to develop interventions and prevention strategies to address the problem of young people's self-harm and suicide. Supporting this claim, it cited LSAC data about the high proportion of children aged 14-15 who reported self-harm (10%) and suicide attempts (5%) over the preceding 12 months. In the same document, the Commissioner reported on the problems faced by young parents citing LSAC data about employment (being a young mother negatively affects work and education opportunities) and housing (young mothers living with parents tended to be financially better off). The Commissioner recommended that the Australian Government promote further research about these topics (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2017). In 2019, the Commissioner highlighted the problems related to children's safety citing, among others, LSAC data showing that 20% of children between 14- and 15-years experienced bullying (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2019).

## 5 CONCLUSION

LSAC stands out among other longitudinal studies on children's wellbeing thanks to the variety of topics analysed, the sample it studies, and its long-term approach. It followed a representative sample of two cohorts of around 5,000 children each from 2003 and is still ongoing and evolving.

It gathers data about children and the environment in which they grow up, including family, housing, and school. Researchers also interviewed parents, teachers, and caregivers. In 2015, the one-off health CheckPoint provided the first national dataset about the health of Australian young people aged between 14 and 15 years old and their parents. As with the other case studies analysed in this series of policy briefs, topics covered include the child's economic conditions, education, family structure, healthcare, physical activity, psychology, and schooling.

This Policy Brief has illustrated the contribution of LSAC data in understanding the status of children's human rights in Australia. LSAC data has supported analysis, opinions, and recommendations of the National Children's Commissioner across several years. Thanks to these data, the Commissioner was able to identify issues faced by Australian children and drive policymakers' attention to them. Thanks to the broad scope of LSAC, data cited by the Commissioner over the years concerned different topics such as suicidal and self-harming behaviour, safety, and being a young parent. The Commissioner also recognised multiple times the importance of studies such as LSAC to provide empirical data about children.

The Commissioner's remarks over the years highlight the effectiveness of longitudinal studies to develop a good understanding of child wellbeing. They also show the importance of these types of studies being as cross-disciplinary as possible. From this perspective, GUIDE can meet the needs of future European policymakers for a rich source of data about children's wellbeing across multiple fields, allowing them to craft effective evidence-based policies.

## 6 REFERENCES

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