

Data Discovery: Ageing

A wealth of data within Europe can be used to address research questions and policy challenges relating to ageing and its effects on individuals and society. Research infrastructures such as national data services and archives provide access to data collections from large scale academic projects alongside outputs from smaller research teams and individual researchers. Collections include several major Europe studies focusing on collecting data for research into ageing including longitudinal surveys. Microdata from social surveys provide a rich resource for examining social and economic factors relating to ageing such as patterns in health trajectories, determinants of economic position in older age, retirement and post-retirement labour market activity and predictors of well-being in later life. Many major surveys also collect biomarkers including performance measures such as walking speed and biological markers from blood samples. Harmonisation across key studies and dedicated cross-national projects also facilitate comparative research.

This guide maps the landscape of data for researching ageing in Europe by highlighting key data sources for research on ageing (and how to access them). It includes

1. Key studies on ageing
2. Cross-national social surveys
3. Examples of data available from national data services

The aim is to provide a useful first step in a data search by highlighting key data sources and how to access them. It is not a catalogue of all data available for researching the topic! Equally, though effort has been made to ensure correct information, errors may occur and information will become out of data. Always defer to the respective data service or research centre, if information conflicts with details in this guide.

CESSDA

The Council of European Social Science Data Archives (CESSDA) provides large scale, integrated and sustainable data services to the social sciences. A core activity of CESSDA is to support researcher access to resources important to the European social science research agenda regardless of the location of researcher or data. Current projects include a wide-ranging plan to establish a common infrastructure for CESSDA member, which includes the building of a Products and Services Catalogue.

1. Key data on ageing

A family of health, ageing and retirement surveys

Many of the most significant studies for ageing research belong to a family of surveys focused on health, ageing and retirement. Building on the U.S. Health and Retirement Study (HRS), these studies include common questions enabling comparative research. These multidisciplinary studies cover topics such health, healthcare, finances, employment, retirement and pensions and family and social networks. The individual studies in Europe are described below with details of how to access the data. You will also find information about Gateway to Global Aging Data, a resource that offers tools for navigating and producing harmonised datasets for these studies.

English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA)

<https://www.elsa-project.ac.uk>

English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA) commenced in 2002 and collects data from a representative sample of the English population aged 50 and older. The cohort is followed up every two years, with periodic refreshment to maintain the age profile.

Content: Objective and subjective data relating to health and disability, biological markers, economic circumstance, social participation, networks and well-being. Data are collected using computer assisted personal interviews and self-completion questionnaires, with additional nurse visits every four years. Special datasets/feature include

- Genetic data
- Wave 3 Life History Essays: 558 transcripts of short essays ("Thinking back over your life, with its wide variety of enjoyable as well as difficult experiences, please write about three aspects of your life that have been especially important to you, and how they affected you.")

Access: through the UK data service. The current deposit comprises Waves 0-7 of the survey. To access ELSA data, registration with the UK Data Service is required. Both standard conditions of use and additional special conditions of use apply. For use of ELSA genetic data, Dr Nina Rogers (n.rogers@ucl.ac.uk) is the first point of contact.

Teaching: ELSA data can be used for most teaching purposes. The UK Data service has a Teaching Access Agreement that allows teachers to register and then share data with students. There is a teaching dataset based on Wave 1, 2002-2003.

Harmonisation: The ELSA data collection distributed by the UK Data Service contains the Harmonised ELSA dataset, developed by Gateway to Global Aging Data and funded by the National Institute on Ageing (R01 AG030153, RC2 AG036619, 1R03AG043052).

Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing (TILDA)

<http://www.ucd.ie/issda/data/tilda/>

The first wave took place 2009-2010 with a sample cohort of 8,504 people aged 50 and over (or their spouses/partners) and resident in Ireland. The study will involve interviews on a two yearly basis.

Content: TILDA collects a wide range of data on the health, economic and social aspects of participants' lives through personal interviews, self-completion questionnaires and health assessment measures. A distinctive feature of TILDA is the range of physical, mental health and cognitive measures that come from the inclusion of a detailed health assessment.¹ The current release of TILDA includes some health measures (along with data from the main interview and self-completion questionnaire) and additional measures are due to be added in future releases.

Access: by request via The Irish Social Science Data Archive (ISSDA) for bona fide research projects. Data can be requested by returning a completing request form for research purposes to ISSDA via email (issda@ucd.ie). ISSDA maintains an opt-in register of projects using TILDA data.

Teaching: Requests to use TILDA data for teaching are approved on a once-off module/workshop basis and subsequent occurrences of the module/workshop require a new teaching request. Requests via a completed request form for teaching purposes.

Harmonisation: A Harmonised TILDA, developed in conjunction with Gateway to Global Aging Data (G2G), is available from ISSDA (currently available in STATA, SPSS and SAS formats). Full metadata and codebooks are available through Gateway to Global Aging Data (see below for further details).

Survey of Health, Ageing, and Retirement in Europe (SHARE)

<http://www.share-project.org>

First conducted in 2004 in 11 European Countries, SHARE is a cross-national panel database of microdata on health, socio-economic status and social and family networks of individuals. SHARE currently covers 27 European countries and Israel.

Content: health, psychological, economic, and social-support variables, as well as biomarkers and health anchoring vignettes. Special datasets/features include:

- Biomarkers: All waves include some objective health data and Wave 6 included a blood sample collection in 12 SHARE countries in form of dried blood spots (DBS) (results to be available in the second half of 2017). See website, for measurements in each wave.
- Job Episodes Panel (JEP): a retrospective panel dataset based on data collected in Wave 3. It contains labour market status of each SHARELIFE respondent throughout her/his life.

Access: via the SHARE Research Data Center, from the main SHARE website. Registration is required. The data are available free of charge for scientific use globally, subject to European Union and national data protection laws as well as the publicly available Conditions of Use.

Teaching: easySHARE is a simplified dataset for training/teaching. It is a single file that includes all observations but only a subset of variables. easySHARE is stored as a long format panel dataset covering respondents from all SHARE countries and hence it is very suitable for teaching longitudinal as well as country-comparative analyses. Registered SHARE users can download easySHARE from the SHARE Research Data Center and a teacher application process allows teachers to share with students.

¹ For details of the health assessment, see Cronin, H., O'Regan, C., Finucane, C., Kearney, P. and Kenny, R. A. (2013), Health and Aging: Development of The Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing Health Assessment. *J Am Geriatr Soc*, 61: S269–S278. doi:10.1111/jgs.12197

Gateway to Global Aging Data

<https://g2aging.org>.

The Gateway to Global Aging Data is a platform for population survey data on ageing around the world, including English Longitudinal Study on Ageing (ELSA), Survey of Health, Ageing, and Retirement in Europe (SHARE) and Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing (TILDA). The Gateway provides:

- Digital library of all HRS-family surveys
- Search engine for finding relevant survey questions
- Concordance information across surveys and within a survey over time
- Set of identically defined (Harmonized) variables for cross-country analysis
- Population and sub-population estimates for key Harmonized variables, and
- Interactive graphs and tables to quickly examine selected variables and compare the characteristics of older populations in more than 25 countries.

Access: You need to register, to fully access the resources provided by the Gateway. The Gateway does not generally provide data to download. Studies included in the Gateway distribute their own data (see above for access details for European studies). The Gateway produces internationally harmonized datasets for many studies. Many of these Harmonized datasets are distributed by the original study along with their study data (e.g. ELSA). For studies that do not distribute Harmonized datasets, The Gateway distribute a Stata program for users to download which transforms the original survey data into the Harmonized dataset (e.g. SHARE).

Other major ageing data resources in Europe

Netherlands: Longitudinal Aging Study Amsterdam (LASA)

<http://www.lasa-vu.nl>.

The Longitudinal Aging Study Amsterdam (LASA) aims to determine predictors and consequences of ageing. It is the largest data source on ageing in the Netherlands. Data collection started in 1992 among a cohort of 55-84 year olds (N=3,107). Second and third cohorts, with about 1,000 respondents each, began in 2002 and 2012. Cohorts are surveyed about every three years.

Content: The main interest is autonomy (ability to function) and quality of life (personal evaluation of that functioning) of older persons; it focuses on physical, emotional, cognitive, and social functioning, connections between these aspects, changes that occur over time and the consequences of these changes. It includes clinical measurements, taken during a face-to-face interview.

Access: LASA data is available for addressing specific research questions. Research proposals must be submitted to the LASA steering group via an analysis proposal form available from the website. A data access agreement also needs to be signed.

Norway: Norwegian study on life course, ageing and generation (NorLAG)

A longitudinal study which includes data on well-being, health, work, care, and family relations in the second half of life (age 40+). Data available from two waves. The first wave (NorLAG 1) was conducted in 2002-03. The second wave (NorLAG 2) was conducted in 2007-08. The second wave is part of the nationally representative LOGG study (Life course, Gender and Generation). The two waves and the combination of two studies give three analytical samples: NorLAG 1-sample: 40-79 years, NorLAG 2-sample: 18+ years and NorLAG panel sample.

Access: Anonymous data from NorLAG and LOGG are available through the Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD).

Sweden: National E-Infrastructure for Aging Research (NEAR)

<http://www.near-aging.se/>

NEAR Includes 13 individual Swedish longitudinal databases on ageing and health. Each database includes cohorts of individuals aged over 50 and data on ageing, health and care of older adults.

Denmark: Longitudinal Study of Aging Danish Twins

This study focuses on the causes of variation in survival, health, diseases, loss of abilities, and cognitive functions among the elderly and oldest-old. The study comprises interviews of elderly Danish twins aged 75 years and older (later 70 years and older). It was conducted every two years between 1995 and 2005 and consists of six waves.

Access: Online application via Danish Data Archive (DDA)

Researcher Profile: Bram Vanhoutte

Bram is a Research Fellow in Sociology at the Cathie Marsh Institute for Social Research (CMIST), The University of Manchester. Bram was appointed as a UK Data Service Data Impact Fellow for 2016-2018 and his research focuses on wellbeing in later life. In the Questions and Answers below, Bram introduces his research and the data he uses.

What aspects of ageing do you work on?

The main focus of my research is the different ways in which people age, and in particular how ageing is influenced by individuals' earlier lives. Ageing does not happen when you turn seventy, but is a lifelong process that varies in speed and modularity from person to person. Ageing is by definition a multifaceted process, encompassing institutional, social as well as biological changes, and by collaborating with researchers in other fields I try to do justice to do this plurality of perspectives. My research practice has concentrated on later life wellbeing: how to measure it, how it evolves over time and also how our social trajectories through life influence it. I have just started working on a new research project, [The road to resilience: A comparative life course study](#), which examines the different ways in which people live through adverse events that define ageing in the public eye, such as loss of health, loss of partner and loss of wealth.

What data do you use?

My main data sources are the [English Longitudinal Study of Ageing \(ELSA\)](#) and its sister studies, the US [Health and Retirement Study \(HRS\)](#) and the [Survey of Health and Retirement in Europe \(SHARE\)](#). These panel studies allow studying how individuals change over time, how people differ from each other as well as how different countries compare, since they are conceived with international comparisons in mind. [Gateway to Global Aging Data](#) is an enormously useful resource in that regard, as it provides harmonized datasets to compare the different studies.

What are the most exciting developments in data for researching ageing?

I think two exciting new types of data are being collected more often in freely accessible large sample panel studies such as the ones I tend to work with: Life history data and Biomarkers. Life history data are retrospective, and collect reliable information on sequences of events in different life domains, such as work, family or housing. These data allow investigating the past in more detailed way, paying attention to the duration of phases, timing of transitions and order of events. Biomarkers are biological measures, often obtained through analysis of blood samples, extending possible analysis of health to aspects which are hidden under the skin and in the past were often not routinely collected in survey research.

What kinds of data are vital for furthering research in this area?

They key point in an area like ageing is to keep on collecting representative, large scale panel data of different types. Because of the large evolution over time of the circumstances in which people grow up, as well as the continual changing of historical contexts people grow older in, each generation ages in its own way, so that knowledge on ageing evolves as different cohorts age.

2. Key cross-national studies

Generations and Gender Programme (GGP)

<http://www.ggp-i.org>

The GGP is a Longitudinal Survey of 18-79 year olds, across several countries, that aims to improve our understanding of the various factors -including public policy and programme interventions - that affect the relationships between parents and children (generations) and between partners (gender). The survey has an average of 9,000 respondents per country. 19 countries - Australia, Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, France, Georgia, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Japan, Lithuania, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Romania, Russian Federation and Sweden - took part in Wave 1, conducted in 2004. 12 countries took part in Wave 2.

Content: Many topics are covered by the survey including fertility, partnership, the transition to adulthood, economic activity, care duties and attitudes. An accompanying contextual database (CDB) is also available containing data from over 60 countries on legal norms and regulations, measures of welfare state policies and institutions as well as economic and cultural indicators.

Access: Access to the documentation, metadata and contextual database is unrestricted and does not require registration. Access to the GGP micro data requires registration and an application process in which an academic or policy research question is stated.

Harmonisation: A harmonised histories data file has been created by the Non-Marital Childbearing Network. It harmonises childbearing and marital histories from 13 GGP countries with data from Spain, the UK and US. Users with access to the GGP micro data automatically get access to these data.

European Social Survey (ESS)

<http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/>

The European Social Survey (ESS) is an academically driven cross-national survey that has been conducted across Europe since its establishment in 2001 and covering surveys in over 30 nations. Its aim is to measure and explain trends in attitudes, beliefs and values across countries in Europe and its close neighbours. Round 4 (2008) includes module on ageism, focusing on attitudes towards and experiences of ageism, age related status, stereotypes, experience of discrimination and contact with people in other age groups.

Access: via ESS website. Users need to register with the Norwegian Social Science Data Service

Eurostat

<http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat>

Eurostat is the statistical office of the European Union. One of its key tasks is to provide statistics at European level that enable comparisons between countries and regions. The Eurostat database (previously known as Eurostat New Cronos) contains high quality macroeconomic and social statistics time series data from 1960 onwards for European Union (EU) Member states and in many cases EU membership candidate countries. The data are monthly, quarterly, bi-annual or annual data, depending on the variable and country selected and are organised into statistical themes.

Eurostat also provides access to microdata including the:

- European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) which collects microdata on income, poverty, social exclusion and living conditions.
- European Union Labour Force Survey (EU LFS) which gives harmonised data at European level on employment and related topics.

3. Examples of data from national data services

National data services provide access to extensive collections of social and economic data. This section lists examples of data collections relevant for research into ageing.

General social surveys/public opinion surveys

Many European countries have ongoing (often annual or biannual) social surveys that aim to track trends in public attitudes and behaviours. These surveys tend to include some questions on ageing related topics such as health, retirement and social networks.

For information about national data services, see the CESSDA guide '**Finding and accessing data from national data services**', available on the CESSDA website.

Examples:

- Sweden: **SOM surveys** – Since 1986, SOM surveys Swedes on issues ranging from politics and media to lifestyle, health and leisure habits. Access via [SND \(Swedish National Data Service\)](#)
- UK: **British Social Attitudes** – over 30 years of data on the attitudes of the British public towards a wide range of social issues. Access via [UK Data Service](#)
- Germany: **The German General Social Survey (ALLBUS)** - up-to-date data on attitudes, behavior and social structure in Germany. Every two years since 1980 a representative cross section of the population is surveyed using both constant and variable questions. [Access: via GESIS Data Archive](#)

Longitudinal studies

By repeatedly observing the same subjects, longitudinal studies allow analysis of change at the individual level. There are many longitudinal studies in Europe, including panel and cohort studies.

Examples:

- Denmark: **The Danish 1910 and 1915 Birth Cohort Study, 2011**. Measures health and functional ability among people born in 1910 or 1915. (Access conditions: Online application via [Danish Data Archive \(DDA\)](#)).
- UK: **National Child Development Study (NCDS)**, a longitudinal survey that monitors the development of a group of children born during one week in 1958. (Access conditions: Available from [UK Data Service](#)).
- Germany: **German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP)** (<https://www.diw.de/soep>) began in 1984. Variables include household composition, employment, occupations, earnings, health and satisfaction indicators. (Access: via DIW (German Institute for Economic Research) for research use by the scientific community only)
- Switzerland: **Swiss Household Panel (SHP)** - a yearly panel study covering a broad range of topics. (Access: via FORS, online application form).
- UK: **Understanding Society** - Following the lives of 40,000 UK households to provide valuable evidence about 21st century life. (Access: via UK Data Service)
- Germany: **German Family Panel pairfam** (<http://www.pairfam.de/en/>) - "Panel Analysis of Intimate Relationships and Family Dynamics" is a multi-disciplinary, longitudinal study for researching partnership and family dynamics in Germany. (Access: Via pairfam website, online application form).
- Netherlands: **Netherlands Kinship Panel Study** (<http://www.nkps.nl/>) (NKPS) - a large-scale, multi-panel study beginning in 2002. It is the Dutch participant in the Generations and Gender Programme (GGP). (Access: via NKPS Data Center, requires registration).
- Finland: **Welfare and Services in Finland 2013: Face-to-Face Interviews of the Elderly** - part of the Welfare and Services in Finland panel survey. This section was included in 2004, 2009 and 2013 and includes questions about health and lifestyle, care needs, social networks and social participation (Access: via [FSD, Finish Social Science Data Archive](#))

Qualitative

Though less common than quantitative data, several European national data services/archives give access to archived qualitative data such as in-depth interview transcripts, diaries, anthropological field notes, answers to open-ended survey questions, audio-visual recordings and images (not typically translated from the original language). In some countries, qualitative and quantitative data may be available through separate organisations. This UK Data Service webpage gives some useful information about qualitative data in European data services/archives. Qualitative data is typically on

Example:

- UK: Last Refuge, 1958-1959 data from study by Peter Townsend investigating long-stay institutional care for old people in England and Wales. Recently used to inform new qualitative study, see here for a case study. (Access conditions: Available from UK Data Service)*

Theme pages of national data

National data services may aid data discovery through web-pages highlighting good data sets or particular theme

- Finland: ageing and the elderly*
- UK: ageing*
- Sweden: aging and health*