Editorial: Educational and health inequalities

High quality and large-scale longitudinal data enable researchers to explore an array of pressing research questions, and the UK is particularly fortunate to have a spectacular range of top quality data sets. In this themed issue, researchers showcase a number of UK and European longitudinal data sets and illustrate the importance of these resources for high quality research. Several of the papers draw specifically on the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children, which is a birth cohort data set of children who were born in 1991 in the Avon area, and some of the work presented here was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) through its large grant to promote the use of these data (‘The impact of family socio-economic status on outcomes in late childhood and adolescence’).

In addition to presenting high quality research on socio-economic inequalities, one key aim of this issue is to encourage greater use of these amazing data resources by researchers. Indeed it has been recognized by the ESRC and others that there is a need to facilitate more widespread use of these data sets, particularly cross-cohort comparisons within and across countries. To facilitate this, the ESRC have recently invested in ‘The cohort and longitudinal studies enhancement resources’ programme, which aims to maximize the use, value and influence of the range of UK longitudinal and cohort studies (http://www.closerprogramme.co.uk/). Building on this strong legacy, the UK is also investing in the development of a major new sociomedical cohort data set, ‘Life study’, which is a study of around 80,000 mothers and their babies, currently in the field (http://www.lifestudy.ac.uk/about). With such an embarrassment of cohort data, and more becoming available shortly, it is clear that the research possibilities are huge and, in this issue, five related papers document and analyse educational and health inequalities by using some of these rich data resources.

Most of the papers presented focus particularly on the pressing, and in some cases increasing, inequalities in children’s cognitive achievement, physical health and mental health. These are all crucial aspects of individuals’ lives with major longer-term effects on wellbeing and economic outcomes. Understanding the extent to which a child’s family background influences these outcomes is critically important if we are to make better progress in narrowing the socio-economic inequalities that exist across a wide range of domains. The papers use a variety of advanced statistical methods to explore socio-economic inequalities across a wide range of outcomes.

Washbrook, Gregg and Propper examine the complex relationship between parental income and a number of child outcomes, including cognitive, emotional and health outcomes. They find large socio-economic gaps in outcomes, though the extent of the gap varies by outcome.

In their paper Schurer, Shields and Jones find clear evidence that individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds experience considerably more pain, compared with their more advantaged peers, and this socio-economic gap widens through the life course. There are many potential explanations for this finding, including differential access to healthcare and the types of jobs that low socio-economic status individuals undertake which can impact negatively on individuals’ health.

Johnston, Propper, Pudney and Shields focus on mental rather than physical health. They explore whether reports of mental health problems are significantly related to the socio-economic background of the child, concluding that teachers are more likely to rate a poor child as having
a mental health problem, which is potentially an issue of concern to teachers, schools and policy
 makers.

Crawford, Dearden and Greaves consider a slightly different type of gap in children’s cognitive
and non-cognitive skills, namely that between children of different ages. They conclude that
children who are born later in the academic year do worse in terms of cognitive test scores
and view themselves as being less able academically. They suggest the need for some kind of
age adjustment in national tests of children’s achievement so that some allowance is made for
children who are born later in the year.

Lastly, Thiel, Thomsen and Buttner consider the relationship between education and per-
sonality traits, exploring the effect of a higher intensity of learning caused by a policy shift
on individuals’ personality traits. They find little evidence of a link between schooling and
personality in adolescence.

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this themed issue and whose very insightful comments contributed to improvements in the
manuscripts.

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