Examining the Feasibility of Establishing a Wales Longitudinal Study

Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

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Background

This Report is delivered as part of the WG Programme to Maximise the Use of Existing Data and aims to examine issues surrounding the feasibility of establishing a Wales Longitudinal Study. The existing Census-based UK Longitudinal Studies are the Office for National Statistics England and Wales LS (1% sample of the population), Scottish LS (5% sample) and Northern Ireland LS (28% sample). Whilst the design, content and coverage of these studies varies, it is the inclusion of Census data that is crucial to their importance as a research resource. Unlike other devolved administrations in the UK, the Welsh Government does not have legal authority for conducting the Census in Wales, with ONS being responsible for conducting the England and Wales Census. This poses a significant barrier to the establishment of Wales Longitudinal Study similar to those established in other devolved nations.

The absence of such a resource limits the ability to conduct research about the population of Wales in areas where law making powers have been devolved to the Welsh Government.

Aims of the Study

The two primary aims of this project have been to:

- Identify and evaluate the options for creating a 100% 'population spine' to facilitate analysis for detailed population sub-groups and to act as a basis for linking administrative and survey data sets for Wales, with particular attention being given to examining issues surrounding the inclusion of Census data in to such a study.

- Examine the extent to which the use of 'richer' social survey data sets can be maximised through using statistical matching or regression-based imputation methods to 'fuse' retrospective anonymised survey data to the 'population spine' in order to create a population of Wales.

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The project included a literature review, discussions with key individuals in Government Statistical Agencies and Data Access Infrastructures and exploratory analysis of relevant administrative and survey data sets. This project is closely related to the ONS Beyond 2011 (B2011) Programme reviewing options for future Censuses and the work of the UK Administrative Data Taskforce (ADT). The recommendations of the B2011 Programme could have a significant impact on the future landscape of Census longitudinal studies and the data that are available.

Key Findings

The responsibility of ONS for conducting the Census in Wales and their responsibilities to Census respondents as custodians of Welsh Census data has practical implications in terms of where and how a WLS could be constructed. The desired WLS sample size of 100% would also have implications in terms of public acceptability and maintaining the confidentiality of respondents. Whilst it would not be feasible to create a 100% Census-based WLS as currently constituted, several options that warrant further examination remain:

- In the absence of a 100% WLS, WG could work with ONS to explore whether mechanisms exist to make better use of the England and Wales LS, including as a spine to link administrative data. Whilst the sample size of the ONS LS may not support Wales-level analysis for detailed population sub-groups, projects that focus on linking administrative data for broader groups could be useful in highlighting the research potential of a Census based WLS.
- WG should consider whether it would be desirable to commission the ONS and the Health and Social Care Information Centre to produce a Census based WLS of sufficient size to support Wales-level analysis.
- WG should consider the recommendations made by B2011 and the UK ADT in terms of maximising the use of administrative data as a population spine to inform the development of an alternative or complementary non-Census based administrative database.
- Administrative databases tend not to include detailed socio-economic data such household structure or social class. These problems present a significant practical and methodological challenge to the application of statistical matching or imputation techniques to a WLS where a population spine was based on administrative data.
- There is currently uncertainty surrounding the recommendations that will be made by the Beyond 2011 Programme regarding the future design of the Census. However to be able to deliver a Welsh Longitudinal Study based on the Census, the Welsh Government would need to seek whether it can access Census data under future arrangements or consider whether they would wish to take responsibility for the Census in Wales.

Views expressed in this report are those of the researchers and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government

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