

Introduction

RICHARD LAYTE

The Economic and Social Research Institute, Dublin and Trinity College Dublin

HELEN RUSSELL

The Economic and Social Research Institute, Dublin

This special issue of the *Economic and Social Review* draws upon four papers originally presented at the 2015 research conference of the *Growing Up in Ireland* study (GUI), the longitudinal study of children in Ireland. Although there can be few readers of *Economic and Social Review* in Ireland who are not aware of GUI, it is still worth providing some detail on the origin and structure of the study as it is the largest social survey ever undertaken in Ireland.

GUI resulted from a recommendation in the first National Children's Strategy in the year 2000. The study itself began in 2006 with funding from the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (then the Office of the Minister for Children). The core study team involved researchers from the ESRI and TCD and was led by James Williams of the ESRI and Sheila Greene of the Children's Research Centre in TCD as the original principal investigators. In addition to the core team the GUI study draws on a very wide range of expertise within Ireland and beyond. At each wave, members of the scientific and policy communities contribute to the development of the instruments through scientific advisory panels. The Central Statistics Office plays a key role alongside personnel from the Department of Children and Youth Affairs in overseeing the study.¹

¹ The DCYA continues to be the main funder of the GUI and in Phase 2 Atlantic Philanthropies provided an additional financial contribution to the study.

GUI follows two cohorts of children and their families: one cohort, often referred to as the 'Infant' or '2008' cohort is made up of 11,134 children originally visited between September 2008 and April 2009 when they were 9 months of age. The families were visited again between December 2010 and June 2011 when the children were 3 years of age and once again in 2013 when the children were 5 years of age and when the majority had just made the transition to primary school. The next scheduled visit to the families in this cohort will be in 2018 when the children will be 9 years of age, although a shorter, more focused telephone interview was carried out with parents at age 7. The Infant cohort used the Child Benefit Register for Ireland as the sampling frame and is essentially a random sample of approximately one-sixth of the children born in 2008. As such, the families are spread almost evenly across Ireland (excluding Northern Ireland).

The second group of children in the GUI study are the 'Child' or '1998' cohort made up of 8,568 children and their families first interviewed between September 2007 and May 2008 when the children were within a month of their ninth birthday. This sample was followed up at age 13 in 2011/12 and fieldwork with the same young people at age 17 was successfully completed in 2016. One of the primary objectives of the Child Cohort Study was to gain information that would allow researchers to examine the role of school in explaining variation in children's outcomes. To make this possible, a two-stage sampling strategy was used: in the first stage, 910 primary schools were randomly selected from the population of 3,200 nationally, whilst in the second stage a random sample of 9-year-old children in each school was sampled. This strategy means that there are enough children in each school to estimate school effects (an example of this approach can be seen in Smyth's article in the current volume).

One of the most valuable aspects of both cohorts of children is the range of respondents who provide information. As well as gathering information from the child, instruments are also used to collect information from parents including non-resident parents, other carers (who cared for the child for eight hours or more per week), school principals and teachers. Each respondent not only reports on the child but also provides information on themselves. Children also provide information on parents and teachers. This data structure means that it is possible to achieve a 360 degree view of the child through the reports of different individuals. In addition, each study also objectively measures child and parent weight and height.

As discussed in Greene *et al.* (2010b, p13), the conceptual framework for the study was derived from the work of Urie Bronfenbrenner and colleagues (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 2000; Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006) in that the child was viewed as being nested within a series of multi-layered systems

(e.g. household and family, school and neighbourhood, wider institutional environment and culture), all of which exert an influence on the child's development. At the same time, the child is conceptualised as being an active agent in the process through his or her interactions with parents, siblings, peers and teachers. As well as providing access to the layers of the conceptual structure, both cohorts were also designed to focus on three main domains of children's lives:

- Physical health and development;
- Socio-emotional and behavioural wellbeing;
- Educational achievement and intellectual development.

The GUI study provides an important research infrastructure for those working in the fields of health, economics, sociology, psychology, education, social policy and other related disciplines. The numbers of researchers accessing the data (through the CSO and the data archive²) increases with each wave of data collection as the opportunities for longitudinal research expand. The annual GUI conference showcases much of this ongoing research, from PhD students through to senior researchers. Each year between 20 and 25 papers are presented. This special issue publishes four of the papers presented at the Annual Conference held in Dublin Castle in December 2015.³ The selection of papers highlights the richness and quality of the GUI data and the variety of questions that it can be used to address.

The papers included in this special issue draw upon data from both cohorts. Thérèse McDonnell uses data from the Infant Cohort to examine the influence of maternal employment on the development of what are referred to as 'non-cognitive' traits, largely emotional and behavioural problems, measured using the 'Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire' (SDQ) at age 3 as reported by the child's mother. The paper considers the role of childcare type in mediating the effects of maternal employment. Delma Byrne's paper also focuses on childcare, in this case after-school care among children aged age 9 and 13 using data from the Child Cohort. The study shows that the level of provision is very low and explores the factors influencing access to after-school care. The role of childcare in the development of child emotional and behavioural difficulties (again using SDQ) and in the child's performance on standardised educational test scores is also examined. Dorothy Watson and colleagues also use the Child Cohort but

² The Anonymised Micro-data File (AMF) is available through the Irish Social Science Data Archive: <http://www.ucd.ie/issda/data/growingupinirelandgui/>. Access to the more detailed Research Micro-data File (RMF) is provided by the CSO through the DCYA.

³ The papers went through the normal peer review process of the ESR involving two anonymous referees for each paper.

they make use of the timing of the waves of the GUI study to structure a 'natural experiment'. The first wave of the Child Cohort was collected in 2007 just as the Irish economy was beginning to weaken in the face of the international banking crisis and gathering clouds of recession. The second wave was collected in 2011/12 just after the trough of the recession. Watson *et al.* examine the varying impact which the recession had on households and children. The paper by Emer Smyth takes advantage of multiple informant sources within GUI, using reports by parents and by the children themselves to assess difficulties in the important transition from primary school to secondary school. The research also exploits the sample design to test the role of school-level effects on the transition process. The paper highlights the role of parental support, peer relationships and positive interactions with teachers in preventing transition difficulties.

We hope that the following papers will encourage other researchers to explore the many opportunities the GUI study offers to investigate the lives of children, young people and their families in Ireland in the 21st Century.