

Dataset Name: **Wisconsin Longitudinal Study (WLS)**

Sponsoring Organization: **National Institute on Aging**

Principal Investigator: **Robert M. Hauser**

Data Collection Organization: **University of Wisconsin Survey Center
University of Wisconsin-Madison**

Purpose:

The WLS cohort of men and women, mainly born in 1939, precedes by about a decade the bulk of the baby boom generation that continues to tax social institutions and resources at each stage of life. For this reason, the study can provide early indications of trends and problems that will become important as the larger group passes through its fifties. This adds to the value of the study in obtaining basic information about the life course as such, independent of the cohort's vanguard position with respect to the baby boom. In addition, the WLS is also the first of the large, longitudinal studies of American adolescents, and it thus provides the first large-scale opportunity to study the life course from late adolescence through the mid-50s in the context of a complete record of ability, aspiration, and achievement.

Description:

The WLS is a long-term study of a random sample of 10,317 men and women who graduated from Wisconsin high schools in 1957 and of their randomly selected brothers and sisters. Survey data were collected from the original respondents or their parents in 1957, 1964, 1975, and 1992 and a selected sibling in 1977 and 1993. These data provide a full record of social background, youthful aspirations, schooling, military service, family formation, labor market experiences, and social participation of the original respondents. The survey data from earlier years have been supplemented by mental ability tests (of primary respondents and 2000 of their siblings), measures of school performance, and characteristics of communities of residence, schools and colleges, employers, and industries. The WLS records for primary respondents are also linked to those of three, same-sex high school friends within the study population. Social background measures include earnings histories of parents from Wisconsin state tax records. In 1977 the study design was expanded with the collection of parallel interview data for a highly stratified subsample of 2000 siblings of the primary respondents. In the 1992-93 round of the WLS, the sample was expanded to include a randomly selected sibling of every respondent (with at least one brother or sister), and the content was extended to obtain detailed occupational histories and job characteristics; incomes, assets, and inter-household transfers; social and economic characteristics of parents, siblings, and children and descriptions of the respondents' relationships with them; and extensive information about mental and physical health and well-being.

The WLS sample is broadly representative of white, non-Hispanic American men and women who have completed at least a high school education. Among Americans aged 50 to 54 in 1990 and 1991, approximately 66 percent are non-Hispanic white persons who completed at least 12 years of schooling. The sample is mainly of German, English, Irish, Scandinavian, Polish, or Czech ancestry. Some strata of American society are not well represented. Everyone in the primary sample graduated from high school; about 7 percent of their siblings did not graduate from high school. It is estimated that about 75 percent of Wisconsin youth graduated from high schools in the late 1950s. Minorities are not well-represented; there are only a handful of African American, Hispanic, or Asian persons in the sample; given the longitudinal design of the WLS, and the miniscule numbers of minorities in Wisconsin at the time the study began, there is, unfortunately, no way to remedy this omission. About 19 percent of the WLS sample is of farm origin, and that is consistent with national estimates of persons of farm origin in cohorts born in the late 1930s. As in the later, large, longitudinal studies of school-based samples, age variation occurs in repeated observations, rather than in cross-section. Also, siblings cover several adjoining cohorts; they were mainly born between 1930 and 1948. In 1964, in 1975, and again in 1992, about two thirds of the sample lived in Wisconsin, and about one third lived elsewhere in the U.S. or abroad.

The 1992/93 follow-up survey of about 9,000 men and women who were first interviewed as seniors in Wisconsin high schools in 1957 and have subsequently been followed up in 1957, 1964, and 1975 has

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been completed; most respondents were 53 or 54 years old when interviewed. Other members of the original sample who were not interviewed in 1975 (475 of 850 surviving non-respondents) have also been interviewed. In all, 8493 of the 9741 surviving members of the original sample have been interviewed. In 1993/94 randomly selected siblings of the high school graduates were interviewed. Some 2000 siblings were previously interviewed in 1977, and they and approximately 2800 more siblings were interviewed in this round of the study. The surveys included a 1-hour telephone interview, followed by a 20-page, self-administered questionnaire. Brief, close-out interviews have been carried out with a relative of respondents who have died, and, in cases where the selected sibling has died, close-out data from the original respondent have been obtained.

New modules with college characteristics, company characteristics, and female job histories have been added. There is a new section with updated variables for occupational aspiration and additional high school test scores for brothers and sisters of graduates have been located. Multiple cause of death data from NDI-Plus have been linked for graduates and siblings, and links are now being created for parents of the graduates and siblings.

These new follow-up data, linked with the existing files, are a valuable public resource for studies of aging and the life course, inter-generational transfers and relationships, family functioning, social stratification, physical and mental well-being, morbidity, and mortality.

Future Plans:

We have received funding to continue the Wisconsin Longitudinal Survey (WLS) with a major round of data collection in 2002-2003, 45 years after the high school graduation of the original 10,317 participants. We want to exploit the unique scientific value of the WLS to pursue a broad agenda of research on social and economic factors in health and aging. The follow-up is being designed by scholars in diverse scientific fields – sociology, demography, epidemiology, economics, social and cognitive psychology, industrial engineering, neuroscience, social work, psychiatry, nursing, and medicine. The plan for data collection – of which the surveys are only the first phase – will span many modes: telephone and mail surveys, brain imaging, personal interview, anthropometric measurement, bio-indicators, content analysis of recorded interviews, and linked administrative records. These new data, along with the rich data presently available from the WLS, should resolve old questions and open new areas of interdisciplinary inquiry about health, aging, and the life course. All WLS data will be released to the research community as soon as they have been collected, cleaned, and documented. The survey will include one-hour telephone and 48 page mail surveys in 2002-03 of more than 9600 surviving graduates; they will be 63-64 years old when they are surveyed. (b) The new round of surveys also includes parallel telephone and mail surveys of 7150 randomly selected siblings of the graduates; they vary widely in age and most were first surveyed in 1994; about 2100 were first interviewed in 1977. (c) Shorter (30 minute) telephone interviews with spouses (N = 10,150) and widows of graduates and their siblings (N = 850) will also be conducted. Our goal is to extend and enrich our observations of the WLS cohort since their adolescence in ways that will answer important research questions in aging for decades to come.

Data Availability:

Data and documentation from the WLS are now available on the World Wide Web, accessible from <http://dpls.dacc.wisc.edu/WLS/wlsarch.htm>, including on-line codebooks, flow charts, and publication lists. In addition to background information about the WLS and downloading information, the WLS site includes instructions for joining a WLS listserv, which is maintained by the IPSCR at the University of Michigan (see Appendix). The study description, cumulative bibliography, and documentation may be downloaded without restriction. Data may be downloaded through a web browser or anonymous FTP after registration and agreement with a simple licensing policy. Most geography and institutional identifiers have been removed from the data, but the WLS is open to requests for special licensing arrangements. Data are available in modular form for users with limited disk space. Documentation and data are available in compressed form for PC (executable zip files) or UNIX (tar) platforms. In addition, a program (WLSGV) is provided for PC, and UNIX platforms that will generate code in SPSS or SAS to extract variables and merge data from different modules. The WLSGV package includes FORTRAN source code. Within the next year SAS, SPSS and Stata .SAV files will be available.

Additional source materials about the WLS are available from the Center for Demography of Health and Aging, The University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1180 Observatory Drive, Madison, Wisconsin 53706, or

send email to cdepubs@ssc.wisc.edu. For additional information about the WLS, send email to wls@ssc.wisc.edu.

Currently available data and documentation include the ninth addition of Wave 1, Graduates and Siblings 1957-77 (including modules on colleges and companies, and complete work histories for women from 1957-1993) (updated 12/2000); the eighth addition of Wave 2, Telephone and Mail Surveys of Graduates 1992-93 (updated 12/2000); and the fourth addition of Wave 3, Telephone and Mail Surveys of Siblings 1993-94 (updated 12/2000). Current editions of WLS data are also available from the Data and Program Library Service (DPLS) of the UW-Madison:

Data and Program Library Services
University of Wisconsin-Madison
3313 Social Sciences Building
1180 Observatory Drive
Madison, WI 53706
Phone: (608) 262-0750
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www: <http://dpls.dacc.wisc.edu>

Previous editions of the WLS data and documentation are archived at ICPSR (#6163).

Bibliography:

(Also available at <http://dpls.dacc.wisc.edu/WLS/wlsarch.htm>):

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