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Editorial

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For students of social dynamics, the advent and growing prevalence of longitudinal data sets has made it possible to fine-tune and analyze more deeply concepts and models of social change (Berthoud and Gershuny 2000, Menard 1991, Rose 1995). Although the individual level of panel studies does not directly measure the levels of or changes in macrosocial factors, panel data reflect them because these factors affect individual behavior. That is, macrosocial factors get reflected in the social changes that occur on a *microsocial* level. Panel studies therefore offer another tool by which students of society can better understand the processes, causes and effects of social changes. Of course, researchers also use other complementary types of data. For example, researchers can use data from repeated cross-sectional surveys to calculate *net transitions* from one state to another (e.g. a rise in total unemployment). But these data cannot be used to measure other states that are of interest. For example, one cannot use cross-sectional data to measure the transition of individuals between states of interest (e.g., the number of workers who were unemployed last period and who are still without a job this period). Panel data *uniquely* open a window through which we can observe and better *understand* whether, when, and why individuals, families, and households move from one level of circumstance to another. Through this window of panel data, students of social dynamics can better understand how changes in circumstances (employment, income, residence) and life events (family, marriage, health, etc.) cause people to move into and out of a given state of interest (e.g. poverty, a marital status, a level of health). In long running panels, one can study movements across generational lines. By observing the same individuals over time it is not only possible to study the change in numbers but also the flow of movements between various states and to establish links of causality between different factors and events (see e.g. Lieberson 1985, chapter 9). Additionally, panel data permit researchers to use statistical methods that better control otherwise unobserved heterogeneity that may be correlated with social determinants of behavior (Wooldridge 2002, Baltagi 2008). Consequently, panel data are critical inputs when policy makers need to monitor and evaluate social and public policies. In sum panel data complement and enrich social science and policy research because they shed important light on multiple aspects of social change that advance scientific understanding of dynamic social processes, and inform ongoing policy discussions.

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In this issue we present research that exemplifies some of the many benefits afforded by studies that use panel data. We focus on current longitudinal research that uses Swiss panel data as a way to demonstrate the scientific interest in and the possibilities offered by Swiss data. To set the stage for what follows we first review some basic terminology, describe the family of longitudinal surveys that are being currently conducted in Switzerland, and summarize some of the main features of the data each survey provides.

Longitudinal surveys (a term that we use interchangeably with the phrase *panel study*) are of two main types. Panel studies can be differentiated by a) the population that is represented and b) the time period over which the sample population is followed. A *cohort study* follows a group of individuals born in more or less similar years. A *general population study* follows a representative sample of the broader population. These groups may be followed for a limited length of time, over their whole lives, and sometimes even beyond the end of their lives (for panel studies that follow the offspring of original study participants). Sometimes, panel studies follow a cohort or general population sample for short periods of time but do so repeatedly for successive groups. When such panel studies adopt this approach they *rotate* a particular group (a particular panel of participants) into or out of the study. Many statistical agencies around the world use these *rotating panel studies* for general statistics that describe a country's population and measure longitudinal changes.

In Switzerland there are six ongoing longitudinal surveys.¹ They are the Swiss Labour Force Survey (SLFS), the Statistics on Income and Living Conditions survey (SILC), the TRansition from Education to Employment (TREE) survey, the Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe (SHARE), the COmpetence and CONtext (COCON) survey, and the Swiss Household Panel (SHP). These six studies include panel studies of the types mentioned above. TREE, SHARE, and COCON are cohort studies, SLFS and SILC are rotating panel studies, and the SHP is a household panel survey. In Table 1 and Table 2 we summarize the main features of each of these panel studies.²

1 Note that there are other cohort studies in Switzerland. However, they are either completed (like the Swiss Interdisciplinary Longitudinal Study of the Oldest Old, Swilsoo) or specific to one area of social science (like the Swiss HIV Cohort Study).

2 The Studies in this Special Issues that use empirical data acknowledge the sponsor of the survey. Specifically, data collected in the «Living in Switzerland» project, conducted by the Swiss Household Panel (SHP), is based at FORS, the Swiss Centre of Expertise in the Social Sciences, located at the University of Lausanne. The project is financed by the Swiss National Science Foundation. One paper is based on the Swiss Study of Children and Youth COCON. COCON is an interdisciplinary longitudinal study, is representative of the German- and French-speaking part of Switzerland. The study is located at the Jacobs Center for Productive Youth Development of the University of Zurich. It has been partly financed by the Swiss National Science Foundation. Finally one paper has been realized using on the one hand the individual statistical data of the “Swiss Higher Education Information System (SHIS)” on Master’s degree and doctorates as well as on habilitations, on the other hand the data collected in the “Swiss Graduates Survey”. Both enquiries are conducted by the Swiss Federal Statistical Office.

Two of the surveys (SLFS and SILC) are administered and managed by the Swiss Federal Statistical Office (SFSO). The other four studies are conducted by other Swiss social science institutions.³ The Swiss Federal Statistical Office designed the SLFS and SILC as rotating panels that sample the general population because they use the resulting data to generate statistics that describe the Swiss population. Three of the other four studies sample populations of particular ages in order to study age-specific outcomes and processes. The COCON survey samples children and youth to investigate the social conditions, experiences, and psychosocial development of that age group, the TREE survey follows a cohort of young school leavers to study how youth negotiate the transition from school to work; and SHARE focuses on persons aged 50 and older and their spouses/partners to study aging processes. Of the four longitudinal surveys administered by social science institutions, the Swiss Household Panel (SHP) is the only one that samples a general population living in an original set of households with a design that in principle indefinitely follows those individuals and their offspring.

Table 1 summarizes design features of the two main longitudinal surveys in Switzerland that are administered by the Swiss Government for statistical purposes.

Table 1: Overview of major government-administered Swiss longitudinal surveys

Survey	Start Year	Type (panel length)	Unit of Data Collection	Sample Size	Target Population	Survey Topics
Swiss Labour Force Survey (SLFS)	1991	rotating panel (5 years)	individual	45,000 persons (30,000 + 15,000 foreigners)	general population	Work income, labor market, employment, education
Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (SILC)	2007	rotating panel (4 years)	all household members	6,900 households, 11,300 persons	general population	living conditions, employment, income, health, social participation

As Table 1 shows, the SLFS and SILC share many common design elements. Both have samples that represent the general population aged 15 years and older. Both collect data from individuals and both administer individual questionnaires. But the SLFS interviews only one person per household while the SILC asks every household member 15 years old and older to complete an individual questionnaire. The sample sizes range from 11,300 to 45,000 persons.

³ This overview is restricted to (1) household/persons surveys and (2) representative surveys at the national level.

Table 2 summarizes design features of the main longitudinal surveys in Switzerland whose primary focus is to answer social science questions.

Table 2: Overview of major non-government-administrated Swiss longitudinal surveys

Surveys	Start Year	Type (panel length)	Unit of Data Collection	Sample Size	Target Population	Survey Topics
Swiss Household Panel (SHP)	1999	single panel	All household members	SHP_I: 5,000 households, 7,800 persons SHP_II: 2,500 households, 3,600 persons	general population	housing, living standard, living conditions, employment, income, health, social networks, education, political values and behavior, life events, social origin, leisure etc.
Transitions from Education to Employment (TREE)	2001	cohort study, annual (2001–2007)	individual	5,500 persons	young school leavers in 2000	education, employment, labor market, transition from school to labor-market
Survey on Health Ageing and Retirement in Europe (SHARE)	2004	cohort study, every 2 years	All household members 50+	1,000 persons	non-institutionalized population aged 50 and more	health, biomarkers, psychological variables, income, wealth and consumption, and social and family networks
Swiss Survey of Children and Youth (COCON)	2006	cohort study, every 3 years	school + household + individual	3,100 persons	children and youth	life course transitions (school enrolment, transition to apprenticeship, labor-market entry)

Table 2 shows that, of these four panel studies, only the SHP has a sample that represents the general population. The SHP includes people aged 14 and over. By

contrast, TREE is dedicated to young school leavers, COCON focuses on individuals from middle childhood to early adulthood (from age 6 to 21), and SHARE samples individuals aged 50 and over (and their spouses regardless of age). The cohort design of TREE and COCON dictate the individual as the unit from which data are collected. Both administer individual questionnaires and both interview one person per household. By contrast both SHARE and SHP are designed to collect information at the household *and* the individual level. In both surveys a reference person provides information for the household and then other household members provide information. The SHP requests that every household member complete a questionnaire if they are age 14 or older. SHARE also interviews the spouse or partner of the reference person. In these four surveys the sample sizes are smaller than the administratively driven surveys. Sample sizes range from 1,000 to more than 7,000 persons.

As a group these six panel studies represent a fresh chapter in the evolution of data generation for Swiss social science research. They collectively offer a rich resource that not only covers the spectrum of longitudinal studies but also opens up a wealth of research topics that social science researchers could not previously pursue with Swiss data. Most of these panel studies are also part of international collaborations (the Cross National Equivalent File CNEF for the SHP, SLFS) or cross-national surveys (SHARE, SILC) allowing for comparative research.

The goal of this issue is to showcase how social scientists are using these Swiss longitudinal data to pursue varied, interesting, and policy relevant research. In demonstrating the major scientific interest and the possibilities of current longitudinal research (using Swiss data), we hope to further develop and stimulate their interest in and a greater use of the national treasure that these Swiss longitudinal data represent.

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