

# Survey paints a portrait of the UK

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A complex and fascinating portrait of a society suffering the effects of the deepest recession since the early 1990s and in which young people appear to have been hardest hit is revealed by new findings from the UK's largest longitudinal household survey Understanding Society. The research published also shows that efforts to get more students from poorer backgrounds to go to university have not been successful and that more needs to be done to get teenagers to live a healthier life in order to assure their future happiness.

The research which makes use of data from Understanding Society, a long term study of 40,000 UK households which began surveying people across the UK in 2009, is published as a series of articles in Understanding Society: Findings 2012. Most articles draw on information gathered from the first two years of the study, which is managed by the Institute for Social and Economic Research (ISER) at the University of Essex.

A range of interesting findings include the fact that people, particularly men, rely heavily on their partners or wives for social support; that the UK is much more diverse in its population make-up than was previously believed, yet conversely half of White British people have no family ties outside of England; that young people, despite the bad press they receive are, on the whole, well-behaved and happy; that policies to widen access to [higher education](#) appear to have failed; that perceived employment discrimination among ethnic minorities is extremely low; and women, once they earn 65 percent or more of the [household income](#) pick up a greater share of the housework chores than their economically

underperforming spouse.

## **New findings include:**

### **Middle classes benefit most from higher education expansion:**

- Policies to expand access to people from less advantaged homes have not been successful: an analysis of the social backgrounds of almost 34,000 [adults](#) between the ages of 22 to 49 reveal that it is the children of the middle classes, not the working classes, that have benefited the most from the expansion of higher education in the last 15 years.
- Since 1992, there has been an 11 per cent increase in first degree holders among the children of white collar workers. While among children of manual workers this increase is less than half at just five per cent.

### **A healthy teenager is a happy teenager:**

[Teenagers](#) who turn their backs on a healthy lifestyle and turn to drink, cigarettes and junk food are significantly unhappier than their healthier peers.

- Young people who never drank any alcohol were between four and six times more likely to have high [happiness](#) than those who reported any alcohol consumption.
- Youths who smoked were about five times less likely to have high happiness scores compared to those who never smoked.
- Higher consumption of fruit and vegetables and lower consumption of crisps, sweets and fizzy drinks were both associated with high happiness.

- The more hours of sport young people participated in per week the happier they were.

### **Do you know where your child is?**

Only a minority of 15 year olds say they have been out after 9.00pm without their parents knowing where they were in the last month, but for those that did, it is associated with problematic behaviour:

- 14 per cent of boys and 11 per cent of girls who have frequently stayed out late without their parents knowing in the last month (3 or more times) were visiting pubs or bars once a week or more.
- 25 per cent of girls who stayed out once in the last month without parents knowing admitted to consuming alcohol more than once in the last month. Alcohol consumption rises to 64per cent for girls who stayed out past 9.00pm without telling their parents where they are more than three times in the last month.
- However, family income has little effect on whether a child stays out late without telling their parents
- Living in social housing or with a single mother increases the probability, but living in a stepfamily does not

### **Defining White British**

The UK population remains predominately White British, but if one considers parentage going back just two generations, then the White British majority becomes much less homogenous:

- Of those who define themselves as White British, 17.2 per cent have some connection with another country
- 17 per cent of those not UK born call themselves White British

- 35 per cent of those who have parents of different ethnic groups call themselves White British
- However, 57 per cent of White British people, or 48 per cent of the UK population, are only associated with England. This means that nearly half of the UK population does not have connections to the smaller countries of the UK over the last two generations and for this period had only family links within England.

### **Why are so many young people unemployed?**

An analysis using Understanding Society together with its predecessor the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) of what is driving the extremely high unemployment amongst young people finds that they suffer from a 'double-penalty' in their attempts to find and keep a job. The two surveys looked at young people and employment over many years, so research making use of them together is able to demonstrate precisely how young people are more adversely affected in the recession and why their numbers in the dole queue continue to swell:

- Before the latest recession, about 50 per cent of 16-24 year olds who were not in work in 2006 had found a job in 2007. This halved during the recession, with only 27 per cent of young people who were out of work in 2009 making the transition into employment by 2010.
- In contrast, the proportion of 25-44 year olds entering employment between 2009 and 2010 fell by just three percentage points compared to 2006-07, while year-on-year transition rates into employment among people aged 45 or above actually increased.
- Young people were also more likely to be laid off than older people, and this increased during the recession with 11 per cent of employed [young people](#) in 2009 became 'Not in Education or

Training' (NEETs) in 2010. In contrast, the proportion of people aged 25 to 44 in employment who found themselves out of work increased from three per cent in 2006-07 to 4.5 per cent in 2009-10.

Professor Nick Buck, Director of Understanding Society, said: "The findings provide a fascinating insight into UK society and predicted that some of the research would be influential in helping policy and decision makers to address some of the key issues facing a society battling to emerge from the depths of [recession](#). The large number of people and households involved in this excellent survey means that this research really does paint an accurate picture of our society. As we continue to talk to these people in the coming years, that portrait will become even clearer and even more useful in helping us to address many of the crucial issues that affect us all."

Minister for Universities and Science David Willetts said: "Longitudinal studies like Understanding Society are invaluable for researchers, decision-makers and society as a whole. They provide important evidence on how social and economic factors influence people's lives, which in turn informs Government policy on a wide range of issues, from education to public health."

**More information:** The publication is free to download from the Understanding Society website at [research.understandingsociety....ndings/findings-2012](https://research.understandingsociety.ac.uk/ndings/findings-2012)

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