

Understanding Society, the UK Household Longitudinal Study, University of Essex—written evidence (DCL0005)

House of Lords Communications and Digital Select Committee inquiry 'Digital exclusion and the cost of living'

Key points

- *Understanding Society, the UK Household Longitudinal Study*, is a world-leading survey of continuity and change in life in the UK, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, and supported by a number of government departments and devolved administrations.
- Research using our data is relevant to the Committee's question on the economic and social impact of digital exclusion in the UK.
- Our main findings are about the social impact, primarily on the relationship between digital connectivity, mental health and civic participation.

Research has shown:

- Internet use protects older people against the social exclusion which comes with poorer health.
- While more affordable connectivity has many benefits, there are also unintended consequences.
- Higher frequency internet use protects young women against social dysfunction, but is a risk factor for young men.
- A faster internet connection is linked to lower civic engagement, such as membership of political parties and trade unions.
- Faster internet connection also crowds out community activities which bring different social groups together.

1. Introduction

1.1. *Understanding Society, the UK Household Longitudinal Study*, is a world-leading longitudinal survey of continuity and change in UK life. From an initial sample of around 40,000 households, the same people are invited to participate in annual surveys. Together with its predecessor, the British Household Panel Survey, the data now span 28 years. *Understanding Society* is based at the Institute for Social and Economic Research at the University of Essex.

1.2. *Understanding Society* is primarily funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, part of UK Research and Innovation, and has received funding from a number of government departments, devolved administrations and agencies. Anonymised data from the surveys are made available to registered researchers to use in their own research projects.

2. Digital access and social dysfunction – younger adults

2.1 Research using data gathered during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic showed that high frequency internet use is a protective factor for social dysfunction in younger women, but a risk factor for psychological distress in younger men.

2.2 It may be that internet use allows women to be in touch with close friends, family and social networks, but that higher internet use (more than twice a day) is a risk factor for younger men, particularly those who feel lonelier.

2.3 Gender-targeted prevention and intervention strategies to instruct internet use and promote mental health may be useful.

3. Internet access and social exclusion in older people

3.1 Poor health in older people is shown to lead to greater social exclusion in subsequent years – but using the internet and technology lessened this effect and protected them from social exclusion.

3.2 Designing age-friendly hardware and software might support social inclusion in later life.

4. Broadband and social capital

4.1 Faster internet connection is linked to lower civic engagement, including membership of political parties, trade unions and professional and voluntary organisations. There was also some evidence of reduced cultural participation (such as going to the cinema).

4.2 Faster internet connection also crowded out 'bridging social capital' – community activities which bring different social groups together for the common good.

References

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