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The German Socio-Economic Panel after Ten Years

by Richard V. Burkhauser and Gert G. Wagner

The **German Socio-Economic Panel** (GSOEP) is a longitudinal micro-database containing socio-economic information on private households in the United Federal Republic of Germany. The questionnaires were developed and pre-tested in 1983 and the first wave of data was collected in 1984. One decade later ten waves of yearly data are being used by about 200 researchers working in universities and research institutes on four continents.

The Sample

The first wave of GSOEP data, collected in 1984 in the old Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany) contained 5,921 households. All persons in a household aged 16 and over were surveyed. In addition to being a representative sample of the West German population, the GSOEP was also designed to allow separate analyses of Germany's five largest groups of foreign nationals. In wave one, 1,393 foreign headed households were interviewed. Hence, the GSOEP contained two randomly sampled sub-groups:

- *German Sub-Sample*. People in private households where the head of household was not of Turkish, Greek, Yugoslavian, Spanish, or Italian nationality. Other-foreign nationals are included in this sub-sample but they made up an insignificant portion of the West German population in 1984.
- *Foreign Sub-Sample*. People in private households where the head of household was of Turkish, Greek, Yugoslavian, Spanish, or Italian nationality.

The oversampling of foreigners is taken into account in the weighting scheme, to yield a representative sample of the entire population living in West Germany in 1984. In 1994 a new sub-sample has been started ("immigrant sample"). It contains immigrants who came to West Germany since 1984.

In each year since 1984, the GSOEP has attempted to re-interview original sample members unless they left the country. Since those aged 16 or older are interviewed in every household, a new generation of panel children is automatically brought into the sample. In addition, new people are surveyed when they join an original panel household.

A major expansion of the GSOEP was necessitated by the reunification of East and West Germany. In June 1990 the first wave of a new sample of the German Democratic Republic¹ was created to parallel the West German sample. The sample is defined as:

- *East German Sub-Sample*. Individuals in private households where the head of household was a citizen of the German Democratic Republic.

With events changing so rapidly in Germany, it is crucial to remember exactly when these data were collected. Interviews for the first wave of the East German sub-sample were conducted in June of 1990, after the March election of the first non-communist government but before the July introduction of the West German "Deutsche Mark" into East Germany and before reunification in October. In June of 1990 only the top political elite and a limited number of other senior appointees had been removed from their positions of power. Hence, the Communist occupation structure was still largely in place and its influence on income distribution is recorded in the survey.

The second wave of interviews mainly took place nine to ten months later in March and April of 1991. This second wave of data captures events after the first all-German elections in December of 1990 and after Western investment in the East was already underway. Thus, it represents the first real data after reunification. But these data were collected before the abolition of many job subsidies in July of 1991 and the dramatic increase in unemployment that followed,

¹ The official date of German reunification is October 3, 1990. But one year before, in November 1989, the Berlin Wall fell and that set in motion a series of events leading up to reunification. In a real sense, economic reunification started on July 1, 1990, with the monetary union that introduced the West German Deutsche Mark to East Germany. Most authors of this volume speak about the German Democratic Republic (GDR) when they address East Germany before (economic) reunification. For the time after reunification the terms "East Germany" or "New States" (Neue Bundesländer) are used. Likewise, the term "Old States" (Alte Bundesländer) can be used instead of West Germany. For West Germany the legal name is the same before and after reunification (Federal Republic of Germany, FRG), because it was the GDR that joined the FRG. In order to distinguish between the time before and after, some authors use the term "old FRG."

as well as before the large rent increases that took place in October of 1991. Interviews for the third and fourth waves of East German data were conducted in March and April of 1992 and 1993.

Survey Instruments

In addition to the address protocol (cover sheet), which the interviewer fills in, the GSOEP also contains household and individual questionnaires. The head of household answers the household questionnaire, which concentrates on housing quality, income, savings, and transfer payments at the household level. All respondents aged 16 and over answer the individual questionnaire, which covers individual characteristics and especially subjective judgments.

The majority of interviews are done face to face. Only in exceptional cases are people interviewed by phone or mail. For households in the Foreign Sub-Sample, the survey instruments are both in German and the respondent's native language.

In addition to standard demographic information, the GSOEP questionnaire also contains objective measures — use of time, use of earnings, income, benefit payments, etc. — and subjective measures — level of satisfaction with various aspects of life, hopes and fears, political involvement, etc. — of the German population.

In addition to a core set of socio-economic and demographic questions that are asked each year, each wave of the GSOEP contains a topical module. These modules for the first ten GSOEP waves contain: biographical information, in particular labour-force participation; marital and family history; family background, including age, education, and occupation of parents; social security and retirement; continuing education and occupational qualifications; detailed questions regarding time use; family, social services, and social networks.

Development of the Sample

The attrition rate has been relatively low in the GSOEP. In 1984, the West German sample contained 5,921 private households. Each of the 12,245 respondents aged 16 or over in these households was interviewed. Information on the 3,915 children was collected from household heads². Through ten panel waves, 63 percent of the original panel members (including children) have longitudinal records without missing years.

While attrition has reduced the number of original adult panel members, the number of individuals interviewed in subsequent cross-sectional samples has been stable due to the entry of panel children who become aged 16 as well as new members of panel households. There were 9,206 respondents in 1993 (wave 10) in the West German sample.

The first wave of the East German Sub-Sample in 1990 contained 2,179 private households with 4,453 respondents aged 16 and over and 1,591 children. The fourth wave of this

sample contains 89 percent of the original sample size, which is 3,973 respondents.

Analysts therefore have a German database at their disposal, for the first year of reunification (1990), with information on 6,819 private households containing 13,972 respondents. However, design weights must be used to aggregate the unified data containing all three sub-samples. In addition, cumulative panel mortality is large enough to make it advisable to use weighting factors to cover the combined effect of sample design and panel mortality (see Rendtel 1991 for more details).

Data Protection and Access to Data

In order to make the GSOEP available to the academic community it was necessary to guarantee the privacy of individuals in the sample. This is especially important with respect to the GSOEP because it includes a wide range of complex, longitudinal data, so the risk of identification is considerable. In addition, privacy must also be guaranteed to insure the long-term cooperation of respondents.

Data protection legislation in many countries is less strict than in the Federal Republic of Germany. The German Institute for Economic Research has therefore developed a special version of the GSOEP, which can be used by researchers outside of Germany. This version, called the "GSOEP Public Use File," is available to any researcher or group of researchers who request the data for academic research and who agree to respect the German data protection rules.

With funds from the National Institute on Aging — Program Project # 1-P01 AG09743-01, "The Well-Being of the Elderly in a Comparative Context" — the All-University Gerontological Center of the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University in cooperation with the German Institute for Economic Research in Berlin, has prepared an English language version of the Public Use File of the German Socio Economic Panel (GSOEP).

The GSOEP Public Use File omits a few variables contained in the original data. These variables were excluded to reduce the risk of re-identification. These variables are not essential for most analytical purposes. For example, one excluded variable denotes the exact nationality of the foreigners in the sample — only an indication that they are not German is retained — others denote the location of the sample household and exact details of assets only broad categories remain. In addition, only a 95 percent sample of the full GSOEP is made available in the Public Use File³.

² There were 45 adults in the first wave who were not available to answer questions.

³ One cannot simply take 95 percent of the cases in each wave and use this as a sub-sample of the panel. This would destroy the longitudinal aspect of the information. The Public Use Sample is therefore based on a selection of households from the first wave. The data for these households (and all "split-offs" arising from them) are contained in all subsequent waves in the Public Use File.

Removing these cases makes it more difficult to know if a given individual is present in the sub-sample, resulting in a smaller risk of re-identification⁴. The full GSOEP sample is available for researchers who use the data in Germany.

The full GSOEP data set is disseminated in two formats which support the handling of the data with several data base management systems (DBMS), as well as with statistical packages. Because the GSOEP is handled at the German Institute for Economic Research within a SIR-DBMS it is available as SIR-Export-Files. However, most users will neither have access to SIR nor experience with this DBMS, GSOEP data is also available as standardized raw data files, together with data description files which make it easy to handle the data within a wide range of software packages (Taylor et al. 1993). For those who wish to use the Syracuse University GSOEP Public Use File special support is given for SPSS and SAS (Daly, et al. 1993)⁵.

How to Obtain the Data

German users will receive the full sample of the GSOEP from the German Institute for Economic Research at Berlin. All users outside of Germany must get the Syracuse University Public Use Version of the GSOEP from Syracuse. The dissemination of the Syracuse University GSOEP Public Use File is a two step process. First it is

necessary to sign a contract with the original producer of the data, the German Institute of Economic Research. After the contract is signed, the data is sent out. The charge for processing orders for the full GSOEP data is around 200 DM. The charge for processing the Syracuse University Public Use Version of the data is \$125.

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⁴ For a more detailed description of the data in the German Socio-Economic Panel and its development, see Wagner, Schupp, and Rendtel (1991).

⁵ Most users will not need a DBMS to use the data. Moreover, Heike et al. (in this volume) provide a method of carrying out simulations with the GSOEP using DBMS. But for most analytical projects SPSS or SAS are sufficient.

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