Center for the Demography of Health and Aging  
University of Wisconsin-Madison  
with support from the National Institute on Aging since 1991
Why the WLS is So Special

- The longest running cohort longitudinal study in the United States.
- The breadth and depth of the data
- SAMPLE RETENTION!!!!!!
- It’s more generalizable than you’d think.
- A select sample can be a ‘good’ sample.
- ANY truly longitudinal study (from birth to death) will face these issues.
The “Happy Days” cohort
The “Happy Days” Cohort
Sample Selection

- One Out of Three

- Original Sample Size
  \[ = 10,317 \]
high school friends

1957 graduate

parents

siblings

wife or husband

children

relational structure of data in the WLS
Surveys

- 1957 (10,317)
- 1964 (short mail survey of parents, 87%)
- 1975 (telephone, 89% response rate)
- 1977 (2000 randomly selected siblings, telephone, 80%)
- 1992-4 (telephone/mail; 85%/80% response rates for graduates/siblings)
- 2004-6 (telephone/mail; 86%/89%)
- 2010 (in person and mail)
Data Domains: Education

- Complete Educational Attainment History (1957-2010)
- Classes in high school, perception of parents and teachers, aspirations, aspirations of friends (1957)
- Administrative data: Henmon Nelson IQ scores, Class rank, elementary through high school resources
Data Domains: Employment

- Employment aspirations (1957-1992)
- Jobs and job characteristics (1957-2010)
- Earnings (1975-2010)
Data Domains: Social

- Attractiveness, school activities (1957)
- Involvement with organizations (1975-2010)
- Time spent with family/friends and quality of relationships (1975-2010)
- Religious affiliation and participation (1975-2010)
- Caregiving (1992-2010)
Data Domains: Family

- Parental background (1957)
- Marriage plans (1957)
- Full marital history, marital quality, many details about spouse, including interviews in 2003 (1975-2010)
- Time spent with family (1975-2010)
- Children (1975-2010)
- Siblings (1975-2010)
Data Domains: Nonnormative

- Parents who lost a child early to death, have a child with a significant mental illness or a child with a developmental disability
- Special interviews 2004-2010
Data Domains: Income and Wealth

- Parent’s occupations, income, and education (1957)
- Earnings, household and individual (1975-2010)
- Total income, household and individual (1992-2010)
- Full Assets (1992-2010)
- Intertransfers (1992-2010)
- Financial Literacy measure and Economic Games of which a subset of cases play for real-stakes (2010)
- Social Security records are coming
Data Domains: Cognition

- Henmon Nelson, grad and sibling (1957)
- Cognition (1992-2010)
- Subset given additional cognition measures
  - E-Prime ACASI
    - Single word reading
    - Word recognition
    - Picture naming
    - Category verification
  - Cookie Theft
Data Domains: Mental Health

- Personality (1992-2010)
- Psychological well-being (1992-2010)
- CESD (1992-2010)
- We know if child has significant mental health issues
Data Domains: Physical Health

- General health, Chronic conditions (1992-2010)
- Health Utilities Index (2004-2010)
- Health insurance (1992-2010)
- Medical use/costs (1992-2010)
- Retrospective childhood health (2004)
- Medicare Records/Tumor Registry
How heavy is this person? ----->

Click the point on the scale that best represents how heavy you think she is.

- Physical Functioning
  - Grip Strength, Timed Gait test, Chair Rise, Peak Flow measure
- Anthropometric measures
  - Height, Weight, Waist and Hip circumference
  - Photograph
- Health Literacy
  - STOFHLA
  - Newest Vital Sign (NVS)
- Visions Screeners
- Medication Inventory
Data Domains: Physical Health

- DNA from spit samples
Volunteer, it’s good for your health! But do it for the ‘right’ reasons.

Why men don’t go to the doctor.

Who’s prepared for end of life.
Other Endeavors

- Networks
- Survivors of Deceased
Genetics: WLS Basics

- 5500 samples
- Will have another 3500 samples.
- What we have currently genotyped.
  - 96 SNPs
- Quality Control
  - Sibling gene frequencies in line
  - 2 labs did some of the assaying (K Bioscience in the UK and Atwood Lab at Wisconsin)
Genetics: WLS Advantages

- Large sample
- Sibling sample
- Homogenous sample
- Full commitment to data sharing
- Rich contextual data
  - Full life course data
  - Unique measures of cognition
  - Rich contextual data
  - Unique mix of psychological and social measures
Genetics: WLS Empirical Work and Plans

- Studies looking at cognition, obesity, depression, Fragile X (FMR1), (Taq1a) partisanship, smoking, and alcohol use.
- Potential for GxE Analyses
- Potential for GWAS analyses
How heavy is this person? ---->

Click the point on the scale that best represents how heavy you think he is.
Why Longitudinal Data Matters

- We can better understand what shapes peoples’ lives (their employment, their families, their health) all the way across the life course.
- In short, things that happen when we’re children can have profound impacts on the rest of our lives.
- “What are the things you need to do early on to give people happy, healthy, and long lives?”
Data Domains

- social/family
- educational history
- employment history
- job characteristics
- marital history
- children (non-normative)
- physical/mental health
- mortality
- income and wealth
- retirement and pensions
- cognitive performance