

Wagner, Joachim

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Data Observer – A guide to data that can help to inform
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by
Joachim Wagner

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Data Observer – A guide to data that can help to inform evidence-based policymaking

Joachim Wagner

Leuphana University Lüneburg and Kiel Centre for Globalization

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Abstract

For many attempts to inform evidence-based policymaking (or policy-makers in general) researchers have to rely on already available (instead of newly collected) data. These data have to be reliable, accessible (at best, without high hurdles, and with low or no fees to be paid) and findable. One way that helps to find suitable data that are easily accessible (and hopefully reliable) is to look at the contributions published in the *Data Observer* series described in this paper.

JEL classification: C81

Keywords: Data Observer, micro data, evidence-based policymaking

Professor Dr. Joachim Wagner
Leuphana University Lüneburg
D-21314 Lüneburg
Germany
e-mail: joachim.wagner@leuphana.de

1. Motivation

Evidence-based policy needs sound evidence that is generated by the application of suitable econometric methods (that are able to identify causal effects) to reliable data. Usually, these data have to be micro-data on persons (individuals or households), or firms (establishments or enterprises), or both (like linked employer-employee data). Furthermore, usually they have to be longitudinal (panel) data that cover several periods before and after a policy intervention (or treatment) for both entities that were treated and that were not treated. Given that many modern methods for the identification of causal effects are “data hungry” the data sets have to be large in the dimensions of number of entities and number of characteristics of these entities included.

Any researcher who is planning to investigate the effects of a policy intervention with the aim to contribute to inform policy-makers (or the public), and who is aware of the requirements sketched above, knows that it is (nearly) never possible to build an ideal data set for this research project from scratch. Data collection has to start long before the intervention and has to cover periods after the intervention hit some of the entities sampled, so results can be expected after a long delay only – often too late to revise a policy. The only way out is to use available observational data that come as close as possible to the “ideal” data, and to try to learn from these data as much as you can.

Given these restrictions, for many attempts to inform evidence-based policymaking (or policy-makers) researchers who aim to contribute the evidence have to rely on available data. These data have to be reliable, accessible (at best, without high hurdles, and with low or no fees to be paid) and findable. One way that helps to find suitable data that are easily accessible (and hopefully reliable) is to look at the contributions published in the *Data Observer* series described in this paper.

2. Data Observer – A service for empirical social scientists

Starting in issue 1 of volume 236 (2016), the *Jahrbücher für Nationalökonomie und Statistik / Journal of Economics and Statistics* publish a special section entitled *Data*

Observer.¹ Contributions to this series describe data that can be used in empirical research in economics, and in the social sciences in general. In general, access to these data is free or available at a nominal fee. While most of these data sets are micro data at the level of individuals, households, or firms (including linked employer-employee data sets), cross section and time series data at an aggregate level are covered as well. The purpose of the contributions to this section is to describe the information that is available in the data sets, to give examples of topics investigated with the data, and to inform readers how to access these data for their own research. The contributions are written by experts who often were in charge of collecting or building the data sets. Furthermore, papers in the series portray the research data centers and data service centers of data producing institutions that allow academic researchers to work with (mostly confidential) micro data for individuals and firms.

This note gives a short tabular overview of the contributions to the Data Observer series that were published between 2016 and 2024.² Table 1 lists all contributions by the broad categories.

[Table 1 near here]

Several of these data can serve as a basis for the estimation of causal effects that can inform policy-makers in an evidence-based way. While a comprehensive review of many contributions to the Data Observer series is far beyond the scope of this short note, a quick glance on four papers from different areas might help to stimulate the appetite:

Data from the German National Educational Panel Study (NEPS) might be used to investigate the effects of various differences in policies in this area over space and time (see Fuß et al. 2016).

The Establishment History Panel (BHP) covers the population of establishments with at least one employee subject to social security and can be used to investigate the consequences of many policy measures for different groups of firms (see Eberle and Schmucker 2017).

¹ This section continues the *European Data Watch* series that was published in *Schmollers Jahrbuch / Journal of Applied Social Science Studies* from 2000 to 2015. For a survey of the 111 contributions to this series see Wagner (2015).

² For an overview (in German) of the contributions published during the first five years see Wagner (2020b), for a survey of the first 50 contributions see Wagner (2022).

BeCovid is a high-frequency survey of establishments in the Covid-19 crisis that started in 2020 and cover data that can be used to look at the consequences of policy measures during this crisis (see Bellmann et al. 2022).

CITID has micro data on international trade and investment activities of German firms that can be used to investigate the consequences of trade policy measures (like sanctions against a country), among others (see Boddin et al. 2024).

Note that while some of the data sets described in the Data Observer papers are somewhat dated, in some cases there are updates available that cover more recent periods – see the webpages that cover information on the data (or contact the authors of the papers directly). In general, however, finding microdata that cover most recent periods turns out to be extremely difficult. Often this is due to the fact that preparation and cleaning of data tends to take time. For example, micro data from official statistics are usually available with a considerable time lag only. And often micro data that were collected in a research project are made publicly available after an embargo period only during which the data can be used by the owners only for their own research. These constraints to access micro data from the most recent past can form a serious obstacle for empirical analysis that can help to inform evidence-based policymaking.

Note further that in some cases it might be possible to link various data sets directly using an identifier that is available in each data set, or via a matching approach. This can lead to linked (panel) data with a much larger potential for causal analysis (see Wagner 2024). The easiest way to link micro data from various sources is offered to users of the Austrian Micro Data Center (AMDC) where all microdata can be linked deterministically to each other via unique pseudonymized identifiers among data sets of Statistics Austria, administrative registers, and also to microdata brought in by the researchers themselves (see Fuchs et al. 2024). This, however, is not yet (and might, unfortunately, never be) possible in Germany which forms another serious obstacle that hinders empirical analysis to inform evidence-based policymaking.

3. Concluding remarks

All contributions to the *Data Observer* section are available free of charge from the website of the *Jahrbücher für Nationalökonomie und Statistik / Journal of Economics*

and Statistics: <https://www.degruyter.com/journal/key/jbnst/html?lang=en>. Newly accepted papers that are available “ahead of print” can be found at <https://www.degruyter.com/journal/key/jbnst/0/0/html>.

Those who are interested in contributing to this series are encouraged to contact the editor-in-charge, Joachim Wagner, by sending a mail to joachim.wagner@leuphana.de.

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Table 1: Contributions to the *Data Observer* Series in the *Journal of Economics and Statistics*

Research Data Centers and Data Service Centers

The Research Data Center PIAAC at GESIS	Perry and Ramstedt (2016)
The Research Data Centre of the Halle Institute for Economic Research (FDZ-IWH)	Lang and Kuttig (2017)
German Record Linkage Center (GRLC)	Antoni and Schnell (2019)
Austrian Micro Data Center (AMDC)	Fuchs et al (aop)

Data on Individuals and Households

National Education Panel Study (NEPS)	Fuß et al. (2016)
Register Data on Voluntary Unemployment Insurance	Hofmann et al. (2016)
German Doctoral Candidates and Doctoral Holders Study (ProFile)	Lange et al. (2017)
Panel Data on Training Activities – Voucher Recipients and Eligible Employees of the Program Bildungsprämie	Görlitz und Tamm (2017)
Financial Incentives on Weight Loss (RWI-Obesity)	Eilers and Pilny (2018)
The Administrative Wage and Labor Market Flow Panel	Stüber and Seth (2019)
The German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP)	Goebel et al. (2019)
PASS-ADIAB – Linked Survey and Administrative Data for Research on Unemployment and Poverty	Antoni and Bethmann (2019)
Early Childhood Education and Care Quality in the Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) – the K ² ID-SOEP Study	Spieß et al. (2020)
SHARE-RV: Linked Data to Study Aging in Germany	Börsch-Supan et al. (2020)
Statutory Pension Insurance Accounts and Divorce: A New Scientific Use File	Keck et al. (2020)
The German Twin Family Panel (TwinLife)	Lang et al. (2020)
HILDA: Australian Household Panel Data	Watson and Wooden (2021)

BAuA Working Time Survey
 Green-SÖP: The Socio-ecological Panel Survey: 2012-2016
 Data for Migration Research from the German Socio-Economic Panel
 SOEP-RV: Linking German SOEP Data to Pension Records
 The Swiss Household Panel (SHP)
 The Social Sustainability Barometer 2007 – 2019
 Data on Digital Transformation in the German SOEP
 The DeZIM panel on migrants in Germany
 Supervisory and Managerial Status in German Administrative Records
 Corona Monitoring Nationwide (RKI-SOEP-2)
 Ifo Education Survey 2014-2021
 Green SOEP Extended 2020 and 2022
 The Occupational Panel for Germany
 IABSE-ADIAB – IAB Job Vacancy Survey Data
 Data for Reduced Earnings Capacity-Pensioners in Germany
 IAB-SMART Mobility Module
 CILS4NEPS – Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Survey

Wöhrmann et al. (2021)
 Klick et al. (2021)
 Jacobsen et al. (2021)
 Lüthen et al. (2022)
 Tillmann et al. (aop)
 Matjeko and Sommer (2022)
 Fedorets et al. (2022)
 Dollmann et al. (2023)
 Collischon (2023)
 Bartig et al. (2023)
 Freundl et al. (2023)
 Frondel et al. (2023)
 Grienberger, Janser, Lehmer (2023)
 Lochner (2024)
 Werhan (2023)
 Zimmermann et al (aop)
 Dollmann, Arnold and Horr (aop)

Data on Firms (Establishments and Enterprises)

The Establishment History Panel
 The ZEW ICT Survey
 The German Management and Organizational Practices (GMOP) Survey

Eberle and Schmucker (2017)
 Bertschek (2018)
 Laible and Görg (2019)

The Micro Data Linking-Panel: A Combined Firm Dataset
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Leuphana Universität Lüneburg

Institut für Volkswirtschaftslehre

Postfach 2440

D-21314 Lüneburg

Tel.: ++49 4131 677 2321

email: christina.korf@leuphana.de

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