

SOEP Group

**Article**

## The German Socio-Economic Panel (GSOEP) after More than 15 Years: Overview

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## The German Socio-Economic Panel (GSOEP) after more than 15 Years — Overview

By the SOEP Group\*

### Summary

*The German Socio-Economic Panel (GSOEP) is an interdisciplinary longitudinal study of private households for the representative analysis and interpretation of social and economic behavior in the Federal Republic of Germany. As a longitudinal survey, the GSOEP primarily aims to collect information on stability and changes over time at the micro level of individuals, households and families. Because the survey period is sufficiently long, due to the design of the GSOEP, the data can also be used for analyzing intergenerational relationships. The GSOEP is an element of the statistical infrastructure born by the scientific community in compliance with international standards.*

### 1. Goals and Purpose

The GSOEP is one of the main tools for social science and economic research in Germany. It was established in the 1980s (cf. Wissenschaftsrat 1994). The GSOEP facilitates pure academic research in the areas of micro analytical social and economic research as well as micro econometrics.

The data, which have been collected since 1984, are rooted in the tradition of research on social indicators and provide information about change in the objective conditions of life and the subjectively perceived quality of life. This collection of instruments is particularly suitable for observing and analyzing the social and economic reorganizations in East and West Germany. The GSOEP data are also used worldwide for comparative international analyses.

One characteristic of panel studies is that the statistical "power" of the data rises with each additional wave. Not only does the time range of the observation period increase, but also the number of analyzable events grows as well. Thus longitudinal studies are especially qualified to identify the extent and the consequences of social changes for multiple cohorts, whereby age effects and periodical effects can be isolated. For panel studies over long periods of time, another completely independent element of analysis is added: the representative investigation of intergenerational relationships between parents, children (and grand-children) and linked life courses of relatives.

Through the panel design of the GSOEP, regular, representative, longitudinal micro data for individuals,

households and families are made available for all of Germany. Special value is placed here on the survey's coverage of a wide spectrum of subjects, such that not only social and economic change can be investigated in individual, isolated spheres of life, but also so that the dependencies between changes in various spheres of life can be determined. Thus the GSOEP is a data set with which primarily sociological and economic issues can be addressed. Moreover, the GSOEP data are excellently suited to the study of interdisciplinary issues, allowing the analysis of demographic, epidemiological, geographic, health science, gerontological, political science, socio-psychological and even sport-science issues. The GSOEP is also suitable for a multitude of methodological studies on the fields of survey statistics.<sup>1</sup>

The anonymized GSOEP data are made available in user-friendly form to all independent researchers in the Federal Republic of Germany upon request and, in addition, worldwide to all independent research institutions, for the marginal cost of the transmission media and shipping.<sup>2</sup> Analysis of the data is supported by an extensive Internet and online service. Today the GSOEP is also widely used by international organizations like the OECD.

### 2. The Concept of the Survey

In principle, the population of the GSOEP includes the entire resident population of Germany. Because the GSOEP started before reunification, the first sub-sample of the GSOEP in 1984 was conducted only in West Germany. Households headed by a foreigner were also integrated into this random sample along with those headed by a German. Unfortunately, it was not possible to include institutionalized households in the survey.

Nevertheless, by following up on panel members, the survey does take into consideration those who left private households for institutionalized households, whereby over the course of time, the institutionalized population will be included in the GSOEP.

The main random sample "A" included around 4,500 households in 1984. In order to allow separate analyses of the five groups of labor migrants most strongly repre-

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\* The SOEP Group is part of the Department for Longitudinal Data and Micro Analysis (LDM) at *DIW Berlin*, Germany

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Burkhauser and Wagner (1994); Dunn and Schwarze (1997); Dunn et al. (1999); Holst et al. (2001); Schräpler and Wagner (2001).

<sup>2</sup> Variables sensitive to data-protection issues, such as highly localized geographic codes, are available at the *DIW Berlin* to all interested researchers in the framework of scholar-in-residence programs (some of which are funded by the *DIW Berlin*).

sented in the Federal Republic of Germany at that time, they were over-represented in the study with a total of 1,400 households in a disproportional random sample approach,<sup>3</sup> for each of which separate random samples were drawn (random sample “B”, which was itself subdivided into 5 sub-groups):

*Sample “A”:* Individuals in private households *not* headed by someone with Turkish, Greek, Yugoslavian, Spanish or Italian citizenship;

*Sample “B”:* Individuals in private households headed by someone with Turkish, Greek, Yugoslavian, Spanish or Italian citizenship.

Sample “A” thus also includes households headed by a foreigner not belonging to the nationalities covered by sample “B” (e.g., Dutch, Swiss), albeit on a negligible scale.

In order to observe in East Germany the massive societal and economic changes, along with their respective impacts, the first wave of the East German sample was collected in June 1990, *before* the currency, economic, and social union in Germany happened. This sample covered 2,179 households and it was defined as follows:

*Sample “C”:* Individuals in private households of the GDR headed by someone with German citizenship (citizen of the GDR).

Since 1991, the GSOEP thus identifies all moves between West and East Germany in the context of following up on all relocated GSOEP households and using them accordingly in analyses.

Since the time the sample was drawn from the first wave collected in 1984, Central Europe, and especially Germany, have experienced immigration on a large scale. For the GSOEP as a longitudinal study, such a significant change in the population could be included in the sample only by increasing the number of households surveyed in the samples A through C. In order to correct for this selectivity, it made sense to explicitly supplement the data for immigrants. For this reason data were collected in 1994/95 for 522 households of immigrants who had arrived since 1984.

*Sample “D”:* Private households in West Germany in 1994/95 in which individuals live who immigrated in the years from 1984 through 1994/95.

In 1998 a “supplementary random sample” was begun as a test. This sample fulfilled a number of functions: (1) Stabilization of the number of cases in the GSOEP for cross-sectional and longitudinal data, (2) Potential for analysis of “panel effects” and (3) Potential for analysis of “representativeness”. The supplementary sample of 1,067 households is defined as:

*Sample “E”:* Individuals in private households in East and West Germany in 1998 (“Supplementary Random Sample”).

It became evident that the supplementary sample could be integrated in a user-friendly manner into the ongoing “old samples” (including the problems of weighting; see Spiess/Rendtel 2000). Thus the methodological basis was laid for significantly increasing the sample such that a further supplementary sample could be started in the year 2000, also serving to test additional innovations. The launch of this new supplementary sample implemented a recommendation of the GSOEP Council from 1998 to enlarge *significantly* the sample in order to increase the value of the GSOEP for policy analysis by allowing the changes for relatively small groups of the population to be analyzed on the basis of sufficient numbers of cases.

*Sample “F”:* Individuals in private households in East and West Germany in the year 2000 (“Supplementary and Innovative Random Sample”).

For sample “F”, which includes around 6,000 households, a number of innovations are planned (links to the labor office register, special sensitive questions, new techniques of questioning), which the old random samples of the GSOEP had dispensed with because of the increased risk of attrition and non-response.

All the surveyed persons participate in the GSOEP longitudinal study voluntarily and without direct monetary compensation. Because of this, the measures of “panel maintenance” in order to ensure the stability of the GSOEP sample are very elaborate and differentiated.

Every individual, 16 years of age or older, in the household is surveyed in all samples. For the first survey wave of the random samples “A” and “B”, information was collected on 12,245 respondents. A total of around 16,252 individuals lived in the nearly 6,000 households randomly sampled in 1984. Data on the 3,928 children living in the households who had yet to reach survey age were obtained by asking an older member of the household.

Sample “C”, for the first wave in 1990, included somewhat more than 2,000 private households with around 6,131 household members, 4,453 of which were 16 years or older and answered the survey questions themselves. Random sample “D” includes around 500 households with 1,084 individuals surveyed. Random sample E began in 1998 with around 1,000 households, in which 468 children were living and where 1,932 individuals were surveyed directly.

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<sup>3</sup> Moreover, higher rates of attrition during the course of the SOEP were expected for this population due to re-migration.

14,107 individuals participated in the GSOEP survey in 1999, who lived in 7,399 households with around 3,887 children under 16 years of age.

As far as the availability of individual events is concerned, for long-term panel studies the potential for information is cumulative. After 15 years, the GSOEP can identify about 1,400 deaths, 1,100 relocations abroad (predominantly re-migration of immigrants) and around 10,000 incidences of episodes of unemployment.

### 3. Survey Emphasis

#### 3.1. Topics

The topic areas of the GSOEP include changes in the composition of households, issues of demographic development (births, fertility, deaths, migrations) as well as the processes of starting and dissolving families. In addition, information is collected on education and qualifications, health, use of time, satisfaction and values. As a general rule, the goal is to obtain not only data on objective living conditions, but also on subjective perceptions (Schupp et al. 1996).

A central topic includes participation in the labor market and professional mobility and income development along

with the housing situation and regional mobility. In addition to status, issues of professional change, transitions between employment and unemployment also have their place in the standard program of the survey. An “activity calendar” opens up analysis potential in terms of events on a monthly basis. Another significant amount of data is dedicated to income indicators as well. These include not only all forms of labor income, but also transfer-related types of income. Capital gains are, however, surveyed only to a limited degree in the GSOEP, because this kind of income is difficult to measure.

With the exception of purchases of consumer durables for household furnishings, the only other area for which the GSOEP determines expenditures comprehensively is that of housing.

Besides the core set of socio-economic and demographic questions that are asked each year about five to ten minutes of the entire interview are dedicated to wave-specific question themes (see table 1).

First time respondents also answer special questionnaires on biographical issues. Adults are asked about employment history, marital history, social origin, immigration history etc. Teenagers are given a special questionnaire about their school performance and their job expectations.

Table 1

**Topic Areas of GSOEP**

The standard components include	The topical modules for GSOEP contain the following information
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demography and Population</li> <li>• Labor Force Participation and Occupation</li> <li>• Income, Taxes, and Social Security</li> <li>• Housing</li> <li>• Health and Care</li> <li>• Education, Training, and Qualification</li> <li>• Basis Orientation (preferences and values), Participation, and Integration, Well-Being (Satisfaction), Political Interests and Party-Preferences</li> </ul>	<p>1987: social security and early retirement</p> <p>1988: assets (due to German data protection law not distributed in the international scientific use file!)</p> <p>1989: further education and occupational qualification</p> <p>1990: time use and preferences</p> <p>1991: family and social networks</p> <p>1992: social security and care of children (repetition of topical module in 1987)</p> <p>1993: further education and occupational qualification (repetition of topical module in 1989)</p> <p>1994: expectations, future orientations, preferences</p> <p>1995: time use and preferences (repetition of topical module in 1990)</p> <p>1996: family and social networks (repetition of topical module 1991)</p> <p>1997: social security and poverty (repetition of topical modules in 1987 and 1992)</p> <p>1998: environmental behavior and transportation</p> <p>1999: expectations, future orientations, preferences (repetition of topical module 1994)</p> <p>2000: further education and occupational qualification (repetition of topical modules in 1989 and 1993)</p> <p>2001: family and social networks (repetition of topical modules 1991 and 1996)</p> <p>2002: social security, wealth (repetition of topical modules in 1987, 1988 and 1992).</p>

### 3.2. Survey method and instruments

As a rule, data are collected in face-to-face interviews using completely standardized survey instruments, with the interviewer conducting an oral interview or the respondents filling out the questionnaires themselves. In households with “old friends”, which have participated in the GSOEP for a long time, centrally administrated surveys without an interviewer are performed on a limited scale. This mix of methods is necessary in Germany to ensure that respondents remain willing to participate over the long term. Since 1998, “Computer Assisted Personal Interview” (CAPI) methods have been introduced gradually to complement the conventional “paper and pencil” questioning technique.

In order to ensure the success of the long-term aim of GSOEP, high value is placed on the quality of field work in terms of methodology and surveying techniques. The efforts put into designing the survey instruments and following up on the respondents ensure a high rate of longitudinal continuity, in contrast to ordinary cross-sectional studies.

Questioning is performed using three different versions of the questionnaire, each of which was designed flexibly enough to be appropriate for a mix of methods specific to the GSOEP and its peculiarities.

*Household questionnaire:* The “reference person” (head of household) provides information about the household as a whole (e.g., housing situation, receipt of transfers, information about household members needing long-term care and about children under 16 years. The duration of the interview is approximately 15 min.

*Personal Questionnaire:* Each person 16 or older completes an individual personal questionnaire each year: duration approximately 35-40 min.

*Biography Questionnaires:* Central biographical information about the respondents is collected once in the first year when the person is interviewed: duration approximately 15 min.

In the interest of keeping the data as user-friendly as possible, the data are presented as annual data where possible (depending on the survey wave). Many retrospectively determined biographical background variables (concerning earnings and family history, education; for immigrants, about the history of migration and information about social origins) are made available in specially prepared files compiled from several waves of annual data, called *biography files*.

## 4. Data Protection and Data Access

Along with the survey questionnaires, respondents of GSOEP receive a data-protection statement on the part of the survey institute and the *DIW Berlin* in which the con-

fidentiality of the data given in interviews is guaranteed in writing.

The *DIW Berlin* and the survey institute “Infratest Burke Sozialforschung” are jointly responsible for data collection in compliance with the German federal data-protection law (*Bundesdatenschutzgesetz*, BDSG). The address file of respondents (with name, address and telephone number and, since 2000, also personal email addresses) is managed by the survey institute alone and is not stored at the *DIW Berlin*.<sup>4</sup>

The results of the survey are depicted only in anonymous and “depersonalized” form, i.e., without name and address, and always summarized along with the data of other respondents as results of a particular analysis. The portrayal of results for individual observations (of individuals and households) is not allowed.

The release of GSOEP micro data to third parties requires a data release contract with the *DIW Berlin*. Such a contract is contingent on an inspection by the data-protection officer of the *DIW Berlin*, and explicitly defines the user’s data privileges, which are limited to the purpose of scientific research.

Although the data are anonymous and “depersonalized” and thus not subject to the German data protection law, as a precaution, the use of the GSOEP data is only permitted in the context of the project specified in the data release contract, it is theoretically possible, with great effort, to identify a respondent from anonymous and depersonalized data. The contract makes such attempts of re-identification punishable by law and thus implements an effective deterrent against any attempts to breach confidentiality of the data.

The data user guarantees that the data-protection regulations will be observed for all its employees. To reduce the remaining risk of any re-identification attempts contrary to the terms of the contract, the region of households is coded only by location indicators into the large regional units of the federal states (*Bundesländer*).<sup>5</sup>

Because it is now quite technically possible for *respondents* to process the data *themselves*, and because they

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<sup>4</sup> In principle, this material can also be stored at the *DIW Berlin*. Project group staff has unrestricted access at all times, both to the original questionnaires and to the address materials. The address material must be handed over to the *DIW Berlin* when Infratest no longer wishes to conduct the survey or when the contract is withdrawn from Infratest.

<sup>5</sup> More regional data can be granted upon special request in which regional indicators are also provided (This request must be co-signed by the local data-protection officer and must outline and guarantee special technical and organizational measures to protect the GSOEP data). The maximum disaggregation of the data supplied by the *DIW Berlin* is on the level of the *Raumordnungsregion* (about 100 “counties” in the entire Federal Republic), which is only available within Germany. Even more detailed geo-code data is accessible within *DIW Berlin* only.

can attempt to find themselves in the data (which would prove that the data security claim does not seem to be true),<sup>6</sup> data are released only to scientific and academic institutions (and under *no circumstances* over the Internet). Only a data release contract which is signed before data are supplied can maintain the standards of professional ethics by excluding the possibility of identification attempts.

For reasons of data protection, a special "Scientific Use File" is made available to users, not located in Germany, i.e. not in the jurisdiction of the BDSG data protection laws. Thus a 95%-random sample of the total data has been created along with supporting documentation in English and German. A long-term collaboration with Richard Burkhauser at Cornell University was established to meet these needs.

At present, there are approximately 250 active domestic and over 100 foreign data users under contract. In many cases, however, for each data release contract signed, a considerably larger number of scientists work with the GSOEP data, e.g. several PhD students working together with a professor.

The procedure for supplying foreign researchers with the scientific-use version of the GSOEP is as follows: After the data release contract has been made with the *DIW Berlin* (also required for contractors inside Germany), researchers contact the *DIW Berlin* partner in the USA and receive the data set and documentation from this office. When possible, questions from users abroad are answered by the cooperation partner in the USA.

Since 1997, the standard release of the GSOEP data on CD-ROM consists of data in the most common software-analysis formats: SAS, SPSS, STATA and TDA/RZOO. These CD-ROMs also contain a user-friendly SETUP program and extensive information material, including an English language comprehensive documentation called the "DeskTop Companion" (see Haisken-DeNew/Frick 2000).

Data are distributed by the SOEP group itself,<sup>7</sup> because only this group can provide a sufficient level of assistance and effective support for the evaluation of the data. In addition to working out the relevant data release contract with the objective of restricting use, the shipping of data and the required documentation and training materials are also the responsibility of the *DIW Berlin*. Beyond this, the project group conducts regular user training sessions in German and English language in order to acquaint new users with the GSOEP data quickly.

Because GSOEP data operation is publicly financed, the data are released to users at "media" cost (CD-ROM) plus delivery (currently DM 50 or 25). The prices of the other GSOEP products are also calculated according to the SOEP's own costs and incorporate basic

institutional support from the *DIW Berlin* (copying equipment, etc.).

The SOEP group also supplies selected GSOEP data (with an "income" emphasis) together with other panel data for international comparative analyses. In the Cross-National Equivalent Data File (CNEF), GSOEP data are provided along with data from the US Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID), the British Household Panel Study (BHPS) and the Canadian Survey of Labour and Income Dynamics (SLID).

GSOEP data are also converted into the common format of the ECHP (European Community Household Panel), in cooperation with the *Statistisches Bundesamt* (Federal Statistics Office). This pan-European initiative is coordinated by Eurostat in Luxembourg and the European Panel Analysis Group (EPAG).<sup>8</sup>

Further, there exists a third European conversion format namely the "CHER" (Consortium of Household Panels for European Socio-Economic Research) format (formerly PACO), which approximates the ECHP format for comparative international panel studies. This format is coordinated and maintained at CEPS/INSEAD, Luxembourg.<sup>9</sup>

To communicate information about the data quickly, the GSOEP distributes information *about* the data [*not* the data *itself* (GSOEP meta-data)] via the Internet.<sup>10</sup> The GSOEP homepage, on the web since 1994, is maintained by the group itself, at <http://www.diw.de/soep> and includes the quarterly GSOEP NEWSLETTER as well as current news from or about the project. Moreover, special Internet-based information services on the *DIW Berlin* server are made available for specific inquiries. These include

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<sup>6</sup> Although the "test" of identification through a respondent would not actually prove that data are insufficiently protected (because respondents' own knowledge of themselves is, strictly speaking, not even a violation of the BDSG, as re-identification reveals nothing that they themselves did not already know), it would jeopardize the study (and far beyond the GSOEP, all future data collection).

<sup>7</sup> In other words: the data are not deposited in a centralized data archive.

<sup>8</sup> EPAG is a consortium of ISER (Institute of Social and Economic Research at University of Essex), *DIW Berlin*, CLS (Centre for Labour Market and Social Research at University of Aarhus), ESRI (Economic and Social Research Institute, Dublin), TISSER (Tilburg Institute for Social Security Research) and WORC (Work and Organization Research Centre, both Tilburg, Netherlands) and DSSR (Department of Sociology and Social Research at University of Milano-Bicocca, Italy).

<sup>9</sup> Finally, the GSOEP data are also a component of the purely cross-sectional Luxembourg Income Study (LIS).

<sup>10</sup> The importance of the Internet for the process of GSOEP data release is growing constantly. For reasons of data protection, however, all GSOEP data are released *only on encrypted, password-protected CD-ROMs*.

- SOEPINFO* An interactive information system on the structure and content of the GSOEP and for assistance in automatically generating retrieval command files in SAS, SPSS, Stata and TDA
- SOEPLIT* Literature database with bibliographical information on all publications based at the GSOEP
- Listserver* a list server <soep-l@krupp.diw-berlin.de> as a discussion forum for the exchange of information relevant to the GSOEP

In addition to these resources, the SOEP group offers a central e-mail address (hotline) for questions from data users (*soepmail@diw.de*). Questions are either answered directly or forwarded to the relevant specialized project staff. In addition to the Internet, a telephone hotline is available to assist in resolving user problems.

Information provided by the SOEP group is supplemented by regularly organized national and international workshops to train new users how to work with the GSOEP data. Lectures and direct hands-on training on the PC also play an important role.

## 5. Governance

The GSOEP was originally conducted as a project of the Special Research Unit "SfB3: Micro-analytical Foundations of Social Policy", which was financed by the German Science Foundation (DFG) at the universities in Frankfurt, Mannheim and Berlin, including *DIW Berlin*. When the activities of the Special Research Unit came to their scheduled conclusion in 1990, the entire responsibility for the GSOEP project was transferred to the *DIW Berlin*. The *DIW Berlin* is an independent, non-partisan, and non-profit research institute.

Since 1990 the GSOEP has been supported at the *DIW Berlin* by material assistance from the DFG. The DFG was granted the technical, organizational and financial control of the project by a resolution of the Federal-State Commission for Education Planning and Research Support (BLK).

The financing intended for the GSOEP is made available to the DFG as a special grant from the federal government and the *Länder* governments. The financing ratio for the federation and the *Länder* is 50-50, whereby 25% of the *Länder* share is borne by Berlin, which is the host state. The High German Scientific Council (*Wissenschaftsrat*) recommended that the SOEP group be financed in the future as an independent department with the function of a service institution within the *DIW Berlin* (*Wissenschaftsrat* 1994, p. 24).

The GSOEP's financing comes exclusively from the BLK: for the most part through its financing via the DFG,

to a lesser degree from the regular budget of the *DIW Berlin*.

For the *DIW Berlin*, the GSOEP is an externally-funded project and is identified as such in the project budget of the *DIW*. The GSOEP is integrated into the *DIW* as a service institution in the department "Longitudinal Data and Micro Analyses". The scientific director of the GSOEP Gert G. Wagner (Professor at European Viadrina University, Frankfurt/Oder) is also head of this department.

To support the scientific work of the GSOEP, the *DIW Berlin* appoints an advisory board comprised of up to 13 scientists, one representative of the federal government and one representative of the federal states (*Länder*). The objective of the board is to advise the SOEP group and *DIW Berlin* on all topical and methodological issues related to the GSOEP. The board also gives advice on administrative and financial decisions.

The GSOEP group designs the survey questionnaire, whereby suggestions from the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (German Science Foundation DFG), the SOEP advising board and SOEP users are considered systematically. The *DIW Berlin* and its council have no privileges whatsoever in designing the GSOEP survey. The *DIW Berlin*, as an institution, is just one of many users of the data.

The fieldwork of GSOEP is done by a survey institute from the private sector, as it would be not only inefficient, but also ineffective for the *DIW Berlin* to assemble its own staff of interviewers. *Infratest Burke Sozialforschung*, Munich, is not just a fieldwork organisation, but it is a high quality survey research institute and, as part of NFO Worldwide and Interpublic, a global provider of market research and consultancy. A survey like the GSOEP can not be performed by a mere fieldwork institute without sufficient research competence.

## 6. Outlook

The availability of panel data on the basis of micro data has become an indispensable component of the methodological infrastructure of empirically oriented social scientists and economists. This is also a consequence of the fact that, for a panel survey, the quality of both content and methodological analyses increases with each new wave. Not only the length of time during which certain "events" can be observed (e.g., employment, unemployment or composition of household) increases, but also the number of events which can be analyzed (e.g., social and regional mobility, life course transitions like changing employment, family events and even death).

The extent and consequences of secular changes, such as the changed employment behavior of women, can be measured with increasing accuracy the longer a panel

runs and thus the greater the extent to which age and period effects can be isolated for multiple cohorts. In panel surveys running for an extremely long time, another factor comes into play as a new element of analysis: the investigation of intergenerational relationships between parents and children (e.g., for the analysis of educational attainment, intra-familial transfer payments and support within the family network). The GSOEP reached an important milestone of intergenerational analysis in 2000, when the first children born during the survey, reached the age of 16 and thus became respondents themselves.

The GSOEP data set is unique in that the first wave of questioning for the east German sample "C" was performed before the GDR ceased to exist as an independent state. This provides the only opportunity of its kind anywhere in the world to follow in detail the transformation of a "socialist society" into a market-oriented society. Added to this are the changes associated with European integration as well as the planned currency union in the year 2002.

With the supplementary sample "E" in 1998, the ongoing samples were expanded for the first time. The new sample is primarily useful for methodological questions (analysis of possible panel effects, test of representativeness), as well as experimenting with the integration of new cross-sectional samples into an existing panel population.

In order to further increase the value of the GSOEP, especially for issues of political analysis, 6,000 additional households were added to the survey in 2000. The advantages of this "GSOEP Expansion and Innovation

Sample F", as for sample "E", does not only lie in the sustained enlargement of the sample size and the associated improvement of its statistical efficiency. In 2001 and beyond, the GSOEP sample size will stabilize at a level of about 12,500 interviewed households per year. This expansion and innovation sample also presents a number of forward-looking analytical improvements (better data on health and wealth, links with register data).

Altogether, international empirical social and economic research can simply no longer do without panel data. In the USA, the "Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID)" has been running since 1968. In many aspects it was the model study for the GSOEP. Surveys comparable to the GSOEP exist in France, Great Britain, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Belgium, Russia and Hungary, and since 2000 in Switzerland as well. Australia will follow in 2001. At present, the GSOEP data for six years (1994 through 1999) have been integrated into the data of the European Household Panel (EHP) managed by EUROSTAT or EPAG. Thus the GSOEP is also becoming a central component of the "European scientific infrastructure" for longitudinal analyses.

In this context, the SOEP group regards the task of securing the long-term character of the GSOEP as essential for its scientific objective and for analog national panel studies. The group's most important task in both the present and the future is to maintain the quantitative and the disciplinary expansion of the national and international user environment in the entire range of the social and economic sciences.

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