

# Self-reported retrospective housing biographies: A modified life history calendar approach

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## Background

Several attempts have been made to improve quality of self-reported retrospective data through life-history calendars. Calendars are often used as memory aids in face-to-face or telephone interviews. They are believed to improve retrospective data quality and thus avoid higher costs of continuing panel studies. Calendars have rarely been used in mailed questionnaires or validated with administrative records. A pioneer data collection in Sweden used a modified life-history calendar in mailed questionnaires to collect housing biographies. In this study, we present the results of that effort, including a comparison of reported housing moves with Swedish residential registers.

## Data

The Swedish Housing and Life Course Cohort Study (HOLK) is a unique combination of questionnaire and register data. The original sample consisted of randomly selected individuals born in Sweden in 1956, 1964 or 1974. The survey response rate was 62 percent (n=2,242). The data collection was carried out through postal questionnaires with one postal reminder and one telephone follow-up. Extensive register data for the period 1972-2005 have been linked to the survey responses.

Housing biographies in the survey cover up to 11 different residences. For each residence, questions were asked about number of rooms, type of housing and ownership. The survey also included partner biographies, i.e. month of cohabitation, marriage and separation for all partnerships lasting six months or more. Register data include reports of residential moves and births (month and year), annual reports of income (including various government transfers), education and civil status and annual reports of occupation from the 1990s. Register data are linked for the respondent and partner.

The questionnaire uses a modified LHC, of which the first part is a memory aid based on various significant international and national events at different biological ages. Table 1 shows an extract of the memory aid translated into English.

**Table 1** Extract of memory aid constructed for cohort 1956

<p><b>1976/20 years</b>          King Carl XVI Gustaf marries Silvia Sommerlath          Tennis player Björn Borg takes his first win in Wimbledon          Election year: The first conservative government in Sweden in 44 years          Private events: _____</p>
<p><b>1978/22 years</b>          The residential block Mullvaden in Stockholm is occupied          The hosting nation Argentina wins the world championship in soccer          The movies “The Deer Hunter” and “Grease” has Swedish premiers          Private events: _____</p> <p>(...)</p>
<p><b>1986/30 years</b>          Sweden’s prime minister Olof Palme is assassinated          A serious nuclear plant accident in Tjernobyl, Soviet Union          Private events: _____</p> <p>(...)</p>

Separate memory aids were constructed for the different cohorts. Each memory aid fits into one page, describes events at 20, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 28, 30 and 32 years, and leaves room for notes on personal events. The memory aids focus more on the younger adult years, since individuals are more likely to have more residential moves during this period in life. The international and national events cover e.g. politics, sports, popular culture, and significant events such as national disasters (e.g. the shipwreck of Estonia in 1994 in which over 850 persons died), and the two assassinations of Swedish politicians (Olof Palme in 1986 and Anna Lindh in 2003). In the questionnaires the memory aids were placed directly before the partner- and housing biographies, i.e. the second part of the LHC. Table 2 gives a schematic overview of the questions in the housing biography, the alternative answers excluded.

**Table 2.** Schematic overview of housing biography questions

<p>(1) Year of residential move          (2) Number of rooms          (3) Sweden or abroad          (4) Type of residence (e.g. apartment, detached)          (5) Tenure (e.g. owned, rented)          (6) Owner / tenure holder (e.g. respondent, partner)          (7) Number of persons in household at time of moving in / out</p>
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The introductory part of the housing biography is questions about the present residence. This is followed by questions on each residence with duration of at least six months or a semester since moving from the parental home up to 10 residences. The housing biography is concluded by short questions on how many residences the respondent has lived in divided in residences with duration up to six months or a semester and longer. It should be emphasized that the housing biography gives information that at present is impossible to acquire through register data, such as number of rooms and owner/tenure holder.

## Aim

The aim of the present study is to evaluate this novel method of data collection and also to consider potential biases in official registers, i.e. in the reporting of residence to the Swedish government. To date we find that 49,7 percent of residences are matched exactly (by year), in the register and the survey. With minor 'common sense' adjustments to be discussed in the paper, we were able to match about 80 percent of all self-reported residences to registered residences. Residences that cannot be matched exactly to register data are analyzed in terms of theoretical sources of error in self-report and/or register reporting. We use characteristics of individuals (e.g., education, gender) and residences (e.g., duration, location) and their combination (e.g., age at move, association of move with other life events) to test hypotheses about the quality of each type of report. Special attention will also be paid to effects of significant international and national events, and differences in accuracy between respondents who have used the space for private events in the memory aid and those who have not.