

WISCONSIN LONGITUDINAL STUDY

PARTICIPANT REPORT | WINTER 2023







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A NOTE FROM THE RESEARCHERS

Dear Friends of the WLS,

Wisconsin's high school class of 1957 graduated about 66 years ago. The many survey questions that graduates, their siblings, and spouses have answered over the years have produced a unique and invaluable data resource. The Wisconsin Longitudinal Study (WLS) is remarkable in both its breadth and depth: it has approximately 16,000 measures, spanning topics including aging, childhood, cognition, employment and occupation, family relationships, gender, genetics, health behaviors, mental health, parenting, personality, physical health, retirement, religion, resilience, social relationships, volunteering, and many more. The data have informed over 5,000 scientific conference presentations, peer-reviewed journal articles, and book chapters by researchers in the social sciences (e.g. sociology, psychology, and economics), health sciences (e.g. medicine, public health, genomics, microbiology), and in fields including public policy and social work.

In this report, we've collected a sampling of recent findings to share with you. More examples of research featuring data from the WLS are available on our newly updated website: <https://participants.wls.wisc.edu/>



Pamela Herd, PhD

Co-Principal Investigator, WLS Cognition Study

Professor of Public Policy

Georgetown University

Part of what makes the WLS so exciting and valuable for researchers is the ability to ask and answer questions about the relationships between experiences in early life and middle age with health and well-being at older ages. WLS Principal Investigator, Dr. Michal Engelman, is collaborating with Dr. Pamela Herd and Dr. Sanjay Asthana to lead a project that explores memory and the way our minds process information. Some of you may have participated in recent interviews related to this cognition project in recent years: we started contacting participants for phone interviews during the pandemic, and will be continuing



Sanjay Asthana, MD

Co-Principal Investigator, WLS Cognition Study

Professor and Head, Division of Geriatrics & Gerontology

University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health

these efforts via phone and in person over the next five years. The data being collected are allowing researchers to answer many questions about how our education (in high school and beyond), our job experiences, our family and community ties, and our social



relationships influence cognitive health as we age.

Dr. Engelman has also launched a project that interviews Hmong refugees who were resettled in Wisconsin after the Vietnam war. They're sharing stories about migrating and building new lives in Wisconsin, and answering questions about their work, family, and health. The information they share has both striking differences and important commonalities with that shared by our long-time WLS participants, providing a rich comparative perspective about the life and times of people with strong ties to Wisconsin.



Michal Engelman, PhD

**Principal Investigator,
WLS**

Professor of Sociology

**Training Director, Center
for Demography of
Health and Aging**

**University of Wisconsin-
Madison**

In other news, our Study Manager, Dr. Carol Roan, recently received UW-Madison's Chancellor's Award for Excellence in Research. The award recognizes Carol's critical work in supporting the operations and scientific vitality of the WLS over her 18 years of service. Some of you may remember seeing Carol at a high school reunion or receiving an email from her answering your questions about the study. Carol's contributions are truly emblematic of the Wisconsin Idea: they continue to make possible the advancement of knowledge and the service to humankind that result from the Wisconsin Longitudinal Study.



Carol Roan, PhD

Study Manager, WLS

**Distinguished
Scientist**

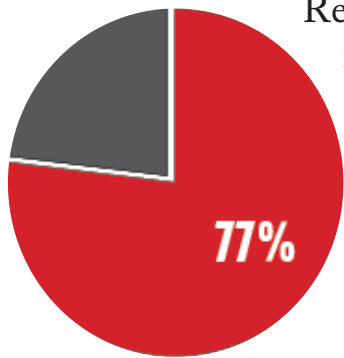
**University of
Wisconsin-Madison**

We are extremely grateful for all the time you've spent in interviews, and truly appreciate your continued dedication to this extraordinary scientific study. As you reflect back on your many decades of participating in the study, we would love to hear from you!

If you would like to share your thoughts on what it's like to have been part of the WLS over the decades – and what motivates you to continue participating in this life-long study – please let us know. Both other study participants as well as members of the public are curious to learn more about this special study and the participants who've made it possible. See p.12 for information about getting in touch with us.



“LIVING APART, TOGETHER” IS A NEW FAMILY FORM AMONG OLDER ADULTS IN



Researchers look to the experiences of WLS participants to identify new social and demographic trends. For example, a recent study looked at the experience of “living apart, together,” that is, older adults being in romantic relationships without cohabiting or getting married. The researchers wondered if this arrangement was a stepping stone to cohabitation or marriage, or whether it was its own permanent living arrangement. **They found that most WLS participants in a living apart, together relationship did not expect to get married (77%), nor did they expect to live together in the future (76%).** They were also less likely than people in cohabiting relationships to expect to get married.

Wu, H., & Brown, S. L. (2022). Union formation expectations among older adults who live apart together in the USA. *Journal of Family Issues*, 43(10), 2577-2598.

MARRIAGES MAY FLOURISH IN EMPTY NESTS

The transition to an “empty nest,” when children leave the home, can be difficult, but findings from the WLS suggest that it may have positive effects on marriages and health.

Researchers used the unique data available in the WLS from both husbands and wives to study whether marital closeness was improved among empty nesters, compared with people who still had children living in the home. **They found that having an empty nest was associated with higher marital closeness, as reported by both husbands and wives.** They also found that wives reported better health if they lived in an empty nest.

The experiences of WLS participants may give parents reason to celebrate when their children leave home: closer relationships and improved health.

Tracy, E. L., Putney, J. M., & Papp, L. M. (2022). Empty Nest Status, Marital Closeness, and Perceived Health: Testing Couples’ Direct and Moderated Associations with an Actor–Partner Interdependence Model. *The Family Journal*, 30(1), 30-35.

EDUCATION IS GOOD FOR YOUR HEALTH (AND YOUR SPOUSE'S , TOO)

Education is a form of “social capital” that can affect health by improving access to higher-paying jobs and exposure to health information and other resources. A recently published study using information on WLS participants and their siblings found that both a person’s own level of education and their spouse’s education independently contributed to higher levels of self-rated health.

The inclusion of siblings in the WLS allows researchers to do better causal research, since they can compare siblings who have different experiences, but are similar in many respects that are hard to measure.

Halpern-Manners, A., Hernandez, E. M., & Wilbur, T. G. (2022). Crossover effects of education on health within married couples. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 63(2), 301-318.

PEOPLE WITH A SENSE OF PURPOSE REPORT LESS LONELINESS

In a recent study using data from 36 cohorts, including the WLS, researchers found that people who felt a strong sense of purpose were less likely to report feeling lonely. They also found that feeling a strong sense of purpose protected against feeling lonely in the future.

Sutin, A. R., Luchetti, M., Aschwanden, D., Lee, J. H., Sesker, A. A., Stephan, Y., & Terracciano, A. (2022). Sense of purpose in life and concurrent loneliness and risk of incident loneliness: An individual-participant meta-analysis of 135,227 individuals from 36 cohorts. *Journal of affective disorders*, 309, 211-220.



VOTED MOST CHARITABLE: HEALTH BENEFITS OF CHARITABLE GIVING AND VOLUNTEERING

Charitable giving and volunteering may not only benefit the recipients, but also the givers.

Recent research using the WLS examined whether giving behaviors and traits were associated with lower mortality. The authors find that spending time in the service of others was associated with a lower risk of death. Some of the behaviors included in this finding were giving advice or emotional support to friends, volunteering, and caregiving for a family member or friend (not including a spouse).

This research suggests that time spent in service to communities, friends, and family is good for everyone involved.

Qu, H., Konrath, S., & Poulin, M. (2020). Which types of giving are associated with reduced mortality risk among older adults?. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 154, 109668.

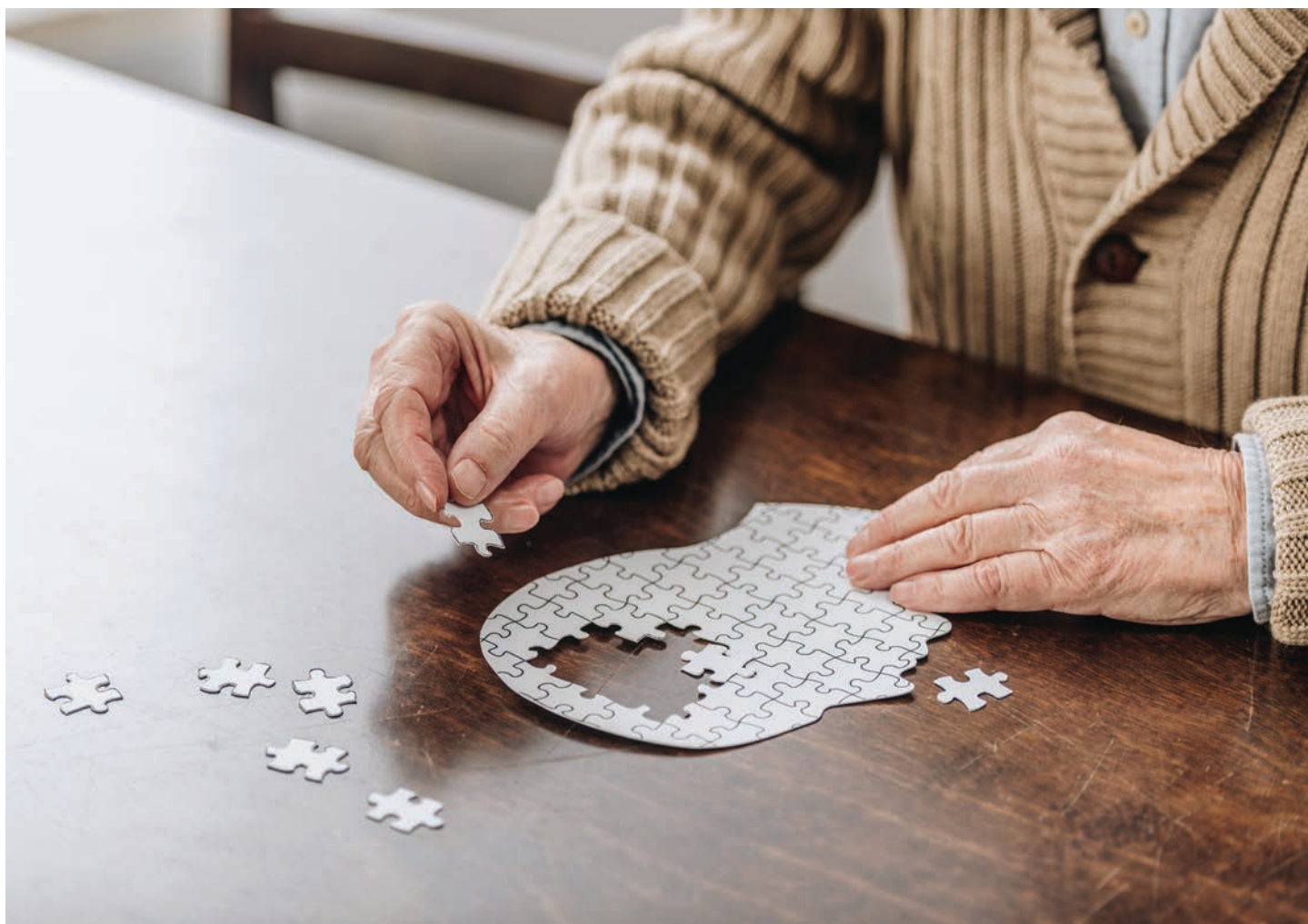
RELIGIOSITY LINKED TO PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING, BUT LESS THAN WE THOUGHT

Recent research using sibling pairs in the WLS and other similar longitudinal studies confirmed previous research that greater religiosity is associated with lower levels of depression. Religiosity was measured in different ways by the longitudinal studies, including attendance at religious services and the importance of religion in one's life. However, this recent analysis found that the size of the effect of religiosity on mental health was not as big as previous studies had indicated, when they used sibling comparisons to control for other factors.

Sibling comparisons improve researchers' ability to estimate the size of the effect of social factors on people's health.

Jokela, M. (2022). Religiosity, Psychological Distress, and Well-Being: Evaluating Familial Confounding With Multicohort Sibling Data. *American Journal of Epidemiology*, 191(4), 584-590.





RESEARCHERS USE WLS DATA TO DEVELOP A METHOD FOR EARLY DIAGNOSIS OF ALZHEIMER'S

Early diagnosis of Alzheimer's Disease can improve treatment options and quality of life; however, it can be difficult to do. In a recent study, researchers used information from a cohort of people living with Alzheimer's and information from healthy people in the WLS cohort to develop a method to detect Alzheimer's earlier. They used machine learning (training a computer to find patterns) to develop a new way to analyze patient data that may help doctors diagnosis Alzheimer's disease earlier than they could have on their own.

Results like these from WLS could directly impact disease diagnosis and improve people's long-term outcomes.

Hoang, T., Nguyen, T. T., & Nguyen, H. D. (2022). Unified tensor network for multimodal dementia detection. In *Multimodal AI in healthcare: A paradigm shift in health intelligence* (pp. 409-416). Cham: Springer International Publishing.



ENJOYING GREATER LONGEVITY

Many of you have asked our interviewers how many of the WLS participants are still alive. We're happy to report that as of December 2022, the majority of the 1957 Graduates — nearly 57% -- were still with us, including about 50% of men and nearly 64% of women. The WLS Siblings also are doing very well, with 64.5% alive. (This number is higher partially because we've got more younger siblings than older siblings in the study.) According to the Social Security Administration, the proportion of all Americans born in 1940 who survived to the same age is quite a bit lower — 32.5% of men and 46.7% of women. This means that WLS participants enjoy greater longevity (and better health) than the general American population born around the same time. We continue to study the reasons that contribute to this pattern!

AUTOGRAPHS

Thanks for sharing your time and stories over the years. It means so much to all of us who learn from this study.

Michael Engler

Sharing your life has made immeasurable contributions to science as a whole and to our future generations - so glad you are with us! It has been such a pleasure meeting and getting to know you. You have enriched my life more than you know.

-Vickie Bedard

Thank you so much for your time and dedication to the WLS.

Suraj Asthana

It has been an honor to meet with you and hear about your lives.

-John Quinette

It is always a pleasure to interview everyone in this study. You are amazing individuals! -Rita Stelpflug

Please know that you truly are an irreplaceable part of the WLS.

Karyn Di Loreto

I am so grateful for the contributions you have made to the Study, and to science more broadly, with your participation in WLS.

Barbara

Your participation in the WLS will have a long-lasting impact on the science of healthy aging. Thank You!

Carol L Roan





We'd like to hear from you if your telephone number, email address, or address has changed. Thank you so much!



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PLEASE NOTE:

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TO UPDATE YOUR
INFORMATION, BUT
WE ARE HAPPY TO
HEAR FROM YOU
HOWEVER IS MOST
CONVENIENT FOR
YOU!

The WLS will never ask you for a donation, but some of you have asked how you can make a gift to the WLS. We've looked into this, and learned that there are a couple of ways to give:

Online at www.supportuw.org/giveto/sociology

Click the box labeled "I'm making this gift "In Memory" or "In Honor" of a person or pet" and list the WLS

OR

Mail a check payable to University of Wisconsin Foundation

In the Note field, write: "Sociology Fund 112751500-WLS"

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