The first cohort study was started just a few months after the end of the Second World War, when scientists recorded the births of almost every child born in one cold week in March 1946. They have been following 5,362 of them ever since in an extraordinary feat that has now become the longest-running study of its type in the world. These people – who turned 70 in 2016 – are some of the best-studied people on the planet. The story of this birth cohort could easily fill a book on its own. Yet this was just the start. Buoyed by their success, researchers started to follow another 17,415 children, born in one week of March 1958, exactly twelve years after the start of the first study. Then, twelve years later, they started a third, which tracked 17,415 children, born in a week of April 1970. Scientists established a fourth study in 1991, and then a fifth as the millennium turned. This means that over 70,000 people, spread across successive generations and throughout the British Isles, have been the subject of intense scientific scrutiny.

These studies have amassed mountains of information – including rooms choked with paper questionnaires, terabytes of computer data, freezers full of DNA, and cardboard boxes stuffed with finger nails, baby teeth and slices of umbilical cords all carefully preserved. There is even a storage shed containing 9,000 placenta, pickled in plastic buckets. Together, these records chart the lives of ordinary British people in painstaking detail as they lived through the tumultuous decades after the Second World war.

The findings from these studies have been both prolific and far-reaching. In the 1940s they helped to shape the fledgling National Health Service, resulting in better care for pregnant women and helping to improve out-comes in all future births. Through the 1950s, 60s and 70s, they showed that bright children from working-class backgrounds were unnecessarily falling behind at school, and they exposed the lasting impact of divorce on children. They showed that our growth and development in the womb can affect our risks of disease decades down the line - and even how long we are likely to survive.

More than anything else, however, the birth cohorts have shown that the first few years of life deeply influence all the years that follow. Children who were born into wealthier or higher-class families have been more likely to do well in school and higher education, land good jobs, stay slim, healthy and mentally sharp. Those born into disadvantage, on the other hand, have been more likely to struggle on every score. In short, our parents’ circumstances have a lasting impact on ours, and this seems to be as true for the children born in 2000 as it was for those born in 1946. At the same time, the cohort studies have revealed that some routes to escape disadvantage do exist - as Doria Pilling’s study demonstrated. Things as simple as talking to children, reading to them and having ambitions for their future may help to ameliorate some - though not all – of the difficulties that come with a disadvantaged start. These discoveries are as relevant now as they have ever been, because disadvantage shows no sign of going away.

The foresight of scientists in starting these studies and the results that pour out of them, have made the British cohort studies the envy of scientists round the world. ‘Nothing comes close in value to the mighty British longitudinal surveys that track cohorts of babies, observing everything that happens from cradle to grave’ wrote journalist and social commentator Polly Toynbee in a 2008 report.

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