Coping with people who just won't stay put: The Use of Blaise in Longitudinal Panel Surveys

Colin Setchfield
ONS, UK

In 2005, the General Household Survey [GHS] – a continuous national survey conducted by the Office for National Statistics [ONS] – became longitudinal in design.

ONS has much previous experience of conducting longitudinal studies (particularly with its Labour Force Survey) and has developed a method within Blaise for transferring data from one wave to the next. GHS, however, presented fresh challenges.

- Persons moving out of the original household to new addresses were to be kept in sample but removed from the original case; a new case (with its own unique serial number) needed to be created for them, which would read data from the original case as appropriate only for those movers.
- Persons moving into the original household were to become part of the sample and to be added to the existing case.
- Arrays within the Blaise datamodel were required to take account of these changes within household with redundant elements removed for more effective database storage.

This seemed surmountable only by going against the ONS Blaise-programming mantra of "Keep it simple."

This paper will look at the key issues in designing this Blaise instrument, including solutions that were found to collapse/expand arrays to match the new number of household members, and to force interviewers to open up and automatically populate new households for movers before signing off the original household.

The GHS is one of the surveys to be incorporated into the new Integrated Household Survey. ONS has also developed a new longitudinal study – the Wealth and Assets Survey – with two-yearly waves between interviews. The GHS changes have therefore become part of our standard for programming longitudinal surveys.

The paper will conclude by considering the impact of the complicatedness of the code generated: in terms of control, maintenance, and the ONS model of researchers programming questionnaires.