Research Note

The Social Policy Indicators (SPIN) database

Nelson K., Fredriksson D., Korpi T., Korpi W., Palme J., Sjöberg O. The Social Policy Indicators (SPIN) database

The Social Policy Indicators (SPIN) database provides the foundations for new comparative and longitudinal research on the causes behind, and the consequences of, welfare states and social citizenship rights. The SPIN database is oriented towards analyses of institutions as manifested in social policy legislation. To date, SPIN covers 40 countries, of which several have data on core social policy programmes from 1930. There are currently six data modules in SPIN, covering different social policy areas. The following research note describes the theoretical and conceptual basis of the SPIN project, as well as the data it contains.

Kenneth Nelson[1] iD **, Daniel Fredriksson**[1] iD **,**
Tomas Korpi[1] iD **, Walter Korpi**[1]**,**
Joakim Palme[2] iD **, Ola Sjöberg**[1]

[1] Swedish Institute for Social Research, Stockholm University, Stockholm, Sweden
[2] Department of Government, Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden

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Kenneth Nelson, Swedish Institute for Social Research, Stockholm University, Stockholm, SE106 91 Sweden
E-mail: kennethn@sofi.su.se

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Introduction

Scholars in the social sciences have long recognised the need to move from descriptive to causal analyses. Due to the problems of setting up randomised control trials, social scientists are using comparisons between countries and over time as fruitful strategies (or natural experiments) to improve causal analysis of central processes in modern societies. However, lack of relevant and reliable data has hitherto constrained comparative research, not least in social policy.

The purpose of this research note is to introduce the Social Policy Indicator (SPIN) database to the wider research community. SPIN is an ongoing research infrastructure at Stockholm University. The aim of the database is to improve the possibilities to conduct institutionally informed comparative and longitudinal analyses of social policy and welfare state institutional structures. The current version of the SPIN database includes detailed information about the institutional structure of social policies and cash benefit programmes in 40 countries, for some countries and programmes dating back to the 1930s. Examples of indicators are coverage and replacement rates of old-age pension benefits, unemployment benefits, sickness benefits and work-accident insurance. The database also includes information on the generosity of parental leave benefits, social assistance and various types of child benefits.

SPIN data have not only figured in previous issues of *International Journal of Social Welfare*, but also in other top academic journals such as *American Political Science Review, Annual Review of Sociology, American Sociological Review, British Journal of Sociology, European Sociological Review, Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health, Journal of European Public Policy, Journal of European Social Policy, Journal of Marriage and Family, Lancet, Public Administration, Social Forces, Journal of Social Policy, Social Science & Medicine* and *World Politics*. Our data are also frequently used by many PhD students, thus contributing further to new breakthroughs in research. International organisations are also recurrent users of SPIN data, including the European Commission (EC), the United Nations International Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD), the World Health Organization (WHO) and the World Bank. SPIN data have also been used in various Swedish governmental investigations (Ferrarini, Nelson, Palme, & Sjöberg, 2012). With this re-launch of the SPIN database, we hope that it will continue to pioneer research in the social sciences long into the future.

The research note is structured as follows. In the next section, we situate the SPIN database in relation to other types of social policy data and present the theoretical and conceptual rationale of our approach. Six different SPIN data modules are thereafter presented, followed by a short overview of scheduled extensions of SPIN data. In the last section, we provide information on how to access the database.

Data types for policy analysis

The difficulties involved in the conceptualisation and measurement of social policy are well-known (Clasen

& Siegel, 2007). At least five different types of data are commonly used in comparative welfare state and social policy research, namely expenditures, case-load statistics, income surveys, regime classifications and institutional indicators (Doctrinal, Fredriksson, Nelson, & Sirén, 2017). Without any ambition to be exhaustive, we review below each source of data, before explaining in more detail the unique character of the SPIN database.

The chief advantage of social expenditure data is availability. Comparative social expenditures data are indeed regularly updated and often made readily available for research by several international organisations and public institutions, such as the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the World Bank, the World Health Organization (WHO) and the European Commission. Despite its popularity in comparative research, data on social expenditures is problematic for a number of reasons (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Gilbert, 2009; Goodin, Headey, Muffels, & Dirven, 1999; Korpi, 1989). Perhaps the most obvious drawback is that social expenditures are affected by several factors besides policy design, including changes in business cycles and demographic trends. Moreover, as expenditure is commonly measured at the aggregated level, the distributional impact of social spending is often difficult to assess.

For a few policy programmes, notably old-age pensions and unemployment benefits, expenditure data are sometimes improved by standardising government outlays to welfare needs. However, for most policy programmes, the benefit clientele is not that easy to define and observe in official statistics, thus making this option of improving validity of our measurements less realistic. Another problem is that expenditure data often neglect the fiscal welfare state (Ferrarini & Nelson, 2003; Ferrarini, Nelson, & Höög, 2012; Howard, 1997). Although changes in income taxation are generally not captured in analyses of social expenditures, both the OECD (Adema, 2001; Adema & Ladaique, 2005) and the European Statistical Agency (Eurostat) have comparative data on net social expenditure, but only for a few years.

Case-load statistics from administrative records or social surveys have gained popularity in comparative social policy research (Arents, Cluitmans, & van der Ende, 2002; De Deken & Clasen, 2011; Erlinghagen & Knuth, 2010; Gallie & Paugam, 2000; Immervoll, Marianna, & D'Ercole, 2004). However, data availability is not as good as for social expenditures. Although case-load statistics are valuable for some research purposes (Van Oorschot, 2013), data generally suffer from programme overlaps and inconsistencies in administrative categories between countries and over time (De Deken & Clasen, 2013). Data from income distribution surveys, such as the

European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC), as well as the harmonised national income surveys published by the Luxembourg Income Study (LIS), are also increasingly used in comparative social policy research. However, also here inconsistencies in administrative categories exist. Typically, we also lack information on benefit duration (e.g., whether benefits are received for one month or a whole year). In addition, household income from benefit programmes is often misreported in social surveys, at least in comparison with expenditure data from national accounts (Behrendt, 2002).

Due to the problems involved in comparative research to conceptualise and measure social policy, it is common in academia to use a regime-based approach where social policies are interpreted along the lines of broader system types. By necessity, welfare state regime-based analyses are performed at very high levels of theoretical and empirical abstraction. Although the categorisation of countries into different welfare state regimes has provided valuable insights into the basic principles of social policy (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Fenger, 2007; Ferrera, 1996), the analytical grid is often too coarse for causal analysis. Nor is there any agreement about the exact number or nature of separate regimes or the categorisation of countries into different social policy model types (Arts & Gelissen, 2002). Another obstacle is that differences between countries that are grouped together often are obscured. Regime classifications also seldom change over time. Although social policies in most instances change relatively slowly (Pierson, 1996) and system shifts modifying earlier classifications seldom occur (Korpi, 2006), social policies are far from being frozen in time and space (Palier, 2000). We simply need more refined measures that capture changes to welfare states that indeed occur, although they are often gradual rather than fundamental in nature. Instead of regime-based analyses, one alternative is to use institutional data as collected, processed and made available to research by the establishment of the SPIN database.

SPIN institutional data

The SPIN database is a continuation and expansion of the advancements made possible by the path-breaking Social Citizenship Indicator Program (SCIP) at Stockholm University. The SCIP database, discontinued in 2005, provided considerable momentum towards better understanding of the ways in which countries had organised their welfare states (Korpi, 2010). SCIP was initiated in the early 1980s to study the role of distributional conflict in capitalist societies (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Korpi, 1989). A number of different organisational aspects of social insurance were identified and their interrelationships analysed.

The SPIN database provides the foundations for new comparative and longitudinal research on welfare states and social policy. Building on Marshall's (1950) ideas about social citizenship, SPIN makes available comparative data on the social rights and duties of citizens, thereby moving cross-national welfare state and social policy research beyond analyses of expenditures, case-loads, income surveys and regimes. The SPIN database is thus oriented towards analyses of institutions as manifested in social policy legislation.

The chief advantage of institutional data is the close resemblance to the actual content of social policies, which fruitfully can be assessed alongside other dimensions of policy, such as government spending and the actual use of benefits and services. Using institutional data, we gain a more thorough understanding of what welfare states actually do for their citizens and the amount of support people should receive according to legislative frameworks. With institutional data, we get closer to what policymakers had in mind when they introduced the programmes in the first place.

The major obstacle in performing an institutionally informed analysis of social policy spanning many countries and years is data availability. Quantitative indicators on the institutional design of social policy are not ready-made out there and immediately available for download. Instead, a considerable amount of basic infrastructure research is required to collect, process and codify legislative frameworks.

SPIN is the first attempt to implement a broader and more comprehensive analytical grid of the institutional structures of welfare states and to integrate a number of specific policy areas into a single framework for quantitative and comparative research. This framework for policy analysis includes three core dimensions: financing, eligibility and provision. Financing refers to the distribution of costs for social policy between the state, the employer and the individual; eligibility concerns issues related to programme coverage; provision relates to levels of support. Together, our indicators on these three dimensions make it possible to analyse who pays for social policy, who gets access to social policy and how much money or other kinds of support people receive.

Similar institutional data are provided in other infrastructure projects, albeit covering a minor set of policies and institutional dimensions than in SPIN. These complementary databases are also more restricted in time (years of data) and space (number of countries). Few notable examples are the OECD Benefits and Wages project, the Comparative Welfare State Entitlements Dataset, CWED (Scruggs, Jahn, & Kuitto, 2014) and the CSB Minimum Income Protection Indicators database (Van Mechelen, Marchal, Goedemé, & Cantillon, 2011). For a comparison of SPIN and CWED income replacement data, see Ferrarini, Nelson, Korpi, and Palme (2013).

Modules

The SPIN database has around 600 variables. About 250,000 data points are included, distributed across 40 countries for the years 1930–2018. All EU countries and longstanding OECD countries are included. The database is composed of different data modules, focusing on particular benefit programmes or countries. In the current version, the SPIN database consists of the following data modules: the Social Citizenship Indicators Program (SCIP), the Social Insurance Entitlements Dataset (SIED), the Social Assistance and Minimum Income Protection Dataset (SAMIP), the Child Benefit Dataset (CBD), the Parental Leave Benefit Dataset (PLB) and the Out-of-Work Benefits Dataset (OUTWB). Below are short descriptions of each data module.

The Social Citizenship Indicator Program

SCIP includes detailed information on social citizenship rights and duties in 18 OECD countries for every fifth year, 1930–2005, based on legislation related to four major programmes (old age pensions, sickness insurance, unemployment insurance, work accident insurance). The data include information on income replacement, coverage, benefit duration, eligibility criteria, financing, taxation, etc. The SCIP dataset has been discontinued (see SIED below).

The Social Insurance Entitlements Dataset

SIED extends SCIP data to all EU Member States and includes data for the years 2010 and 2015. Updates and corrections to SCIP data are published in SIED.

The Social Assistance and Minimum Income Protection Dataset

SAMIP includes detailed information on the benefit position of low-income households in 34 industrialised welfare democracies on a yearly basis (1990–2018). Besides social assistance, the dataset includes information on various forms of housing allowances, child benefits and tax credits available to low-income families.

The Child Benefit Dataset

CBD covers various forms of child benefit programmes, including detailed information on the generosity of child benefits in 18 OECD countries for every fifth year, 1960–2015. The focus is on benefits paid throughout childhood and early adolescence. The dataset distinguishes among universal child benefits, employment-based child benefits, income-tested child benefits, child tax allowances, child tax credits and child tax rebates.

The Parental Leave Benefit Dataset

PLB includes indicators on maternity, paternity and parental leave insurance programmes in 18 OECD countries for every fifth year between 1950 and 2010. The data include information on the duration of parental leave as well as levels of income replacement. Data for 2015 will soon be publicly available.

The Out-of-Work Benefits Dataset

OUTWB includes net replacement rates across a great number of earnings-levels, including indicators capturing the progressivity of income replacement across the earnings distribution. Besides unemployment insurance, the various benefit packages in the dataset include information on unemployment assistance, social assistance, child benefits, fiscal benefits and housing allowances. The module includes 39 countries and data for each year between 2001 and 2011. Updates will soon be published.

Work in progress

Most SPIN data modules are updated every fifth year (although efforts are made to provide more yearly data in the future). It takes up to five years to collect a new wave of data and make it publicly available. For some variables, we rely on input data from national sources, which need to be accessible before we can begin to code data. It also takes time to validate our data before it becomes public. Although we always try to provide as timely data as possible, it is difficult to substantially speed up the cumbersome task of collecting new institutional data on social policy.

We are constantly carrying out exploratory analyses facilitating an expansion of data to new areas of social policy where quantitative information is missing or inadequate. Some of these pilot projects will eventually form the basis for new SPIN data modules. We are currently running data pilots on child and elder care, global social citizenship, housing support, crisis packages, immigrants' social rights, generational structures of social citizenship, student finance and support and yearly social insurance estimates. These are in various stages of completion. We are also in the process of improving the SPIN webpage by developing more timely procedures for the updating and dissemination of data.

Data Availability Statement

SPIN data are easy to access online, through our webpage at Stockholm University, www.sofi.su.se/spin. Registration is needed before downloading the data and associated documentation. The reasons are twofold. First, we need to be able to contact users for important updates to our data. Second, to obtain funding for continuing our updates and data extensions, we need to be able to show that our data are being used, both in Sweden and internationally.

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