



‘Average’ Briton highlighted on UN World Statistics Day

Statistics shape society and help save lives. They also paint pictures of our ‘average’ daily lives, from monthly earnings and house prices to the contents of our weekly shopping basket.

To mark United Nations World Statistics Day (20 October 2010), the National Statistician Jil Matheson is highlighting the importance of official statistics to UK society:

- statistics helped doctors treat people most at risk during the recent ‘bird flu’ pandemic. Figures on those suffering the most severe effects helped GPs vaccinate ‘at risk’ groups, and the Department of Health data gathered will help plan for any future pandemics
- statistics are also being used to tackle fuel poverty. By comparing fuel poverty and benefit data, money is being effectively targeted at the most vulnerable people. The project was led by the Department for Energy and Climate Change
- the Ministry of Defence (MoD) is using data to aid the recovery of injured armed forces personnel and improve treatment of future casualties. Statistics on casualties are linked across MoD health systems to better understand treatment for injured personnel.

Jil Matheson said: ‘Statistics form the backbone of democratic debate. It is impossible to open a daily newspaper or watch a news broadcast without seeing references to statistics on the economy, health, education or crime. Every day in the UK, decisions are made and money invested based on official statistics.’

Numbers have never been so important. In just under six months’ time, on 27 March 2011, the Census 2011 takes place. Taking a snapshot across the nation, on one day once a decade, helps plan services across the whole of the UK. See: <http://2011.census.gov.uk/>

The 'Average' Briton

As part of the United Nations celebrations, ONS has painted a portrait of the 'average' Briton.

- The 'average' British woman is 40 years and seven months old and has 42 years left to live. If she works full time, she works 34 hours a week, earns £22,151 a year, and is educated up to GCSE A*-C level. If she lives in England or Wales, she will have 1.96 children during her lifetime. If she lives in England, she is 161.6cm tall and weighs 70.2kg.
- The 'average' British man is 38 years and 4 months old and has 41 years left to live. If he works full time, he works 39 hours per week and earns £28,270 a year. He is educated up to A-Level standard. If he lives in England, he is 175.3cm tall and weighs 83.6kg.
- When a British family goes shopping, the five items most likely to be put in the typical weekly grocery shopping basket are a two-pint carton of semi-skimmed milk, pre-packed sliced ham, unsweetened breakfast cereal, bacon and a bar of milk chocolate.
- The 'average' household size in Great Britain in Q2 2009 was 2.4 people per household compared with 2.9 people per household in 1971.

The United Nations will lead today's worldwide celebrations of the first World Statistics Day to raise awareness of the importance of official statistics.

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon said: 'Let us make this historic World Statistics Day a success by acknowledging and celebrating the role of statistics in the social and economic development of our societies and by dedicating further efforts and resources to strengthening national statistical capacity.'

Background Notes

The Office for National Statistics produces a wide range of statistics and analysis that cover almost every aspect of life in the UK, from agricultural and fishing to transport and tourism. The ONS 'virtual bookshelf' of statistics can be found at: <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/onlineproducts/>

The Royal Statistical Society (RSS) has chosen World Statistics Day to launch its 10-year statistical literacy campaign. More details can be found at: <http://www.rss.org.uk/>

Statistics that changed society

The Domesday Book was commissioned in December 1085 by William the Conqueror, who invaded England in 1066. The first draft was completed in August 1086 and contained records for 13,418 settlements in the English counties south of the rivers Ribble and Tees (the border with Scotland at the time). The Domesday Book has recently been issued online. It can be found at: <http://www.domesdaybook.co.uk/>

Statisticians who changed the world

Florence Nightingale died 100 years ago. She is best remembered for founding modern nursing, but she was also an accomplished statistician. Nightingale grasped the importance of bringing figures to life. The 'lady with the lamp' used statistics and graphics to argue for medical changes that saved hundreds of lives during the Crimean War, and helped revolutionise nursing care across the world. She developed the visual presentation of information, including the pie chart, first developed by William Playfair in 1801. Nightingale also used statistical graphics in reports to Parliament, realising this was the most effective way of bringing data to life. Florence Nightingale became the first woman to be elected a fellow of the Royal Statistical Society in 1860.

William Farr, a Shropshire-born doctor, qualified as a doctor in the 1830s. He quickly realised medical statistics held the key to combatting disease. Famously, he used data to prove a link between water quality and cholera in mid-19th Century London. Farr, an early member of the (now Royal) Statistical Society, collected details of where the city's water companies drew their water, and generated statistics on deaths per water company. He discovered that people were most likely to suffer when supplied with water from two water companies, which drew their water directly from the Thames. Farr's work helped contribute to public health measures, including projects to collect and treat sewage, which helped eliminate cholera in industrialised countries.

Thomas Henry Lister was Britain's first Registrar General, from 1836 to 1842. He was appointed to head the newly formed General Register Office (GRO) at the age of 36. Lister set up the system of Civil Registration of Births, Marriages and Deaths, and went on to organise the 1841 Census. Although a census had been taken every 10 years since 1801, the 1841 survey was the first to count and name every individual. He also established a central office to administer the distribution and collection of forms, their collection, and the extraction and tabulation of information.

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