

# Britain in 2012

Annual magazine of the Economic and Social Research Council

## The state of the nation

Your guide to the biggest issues  
in Britain's Olympic year

### Parliamentary power in decline

Focus on financial  
services

### Becoming energy-efficient citizens

Measuring  
social mobility

**At a glance: 13 pages of  
Britain in facts and figures**

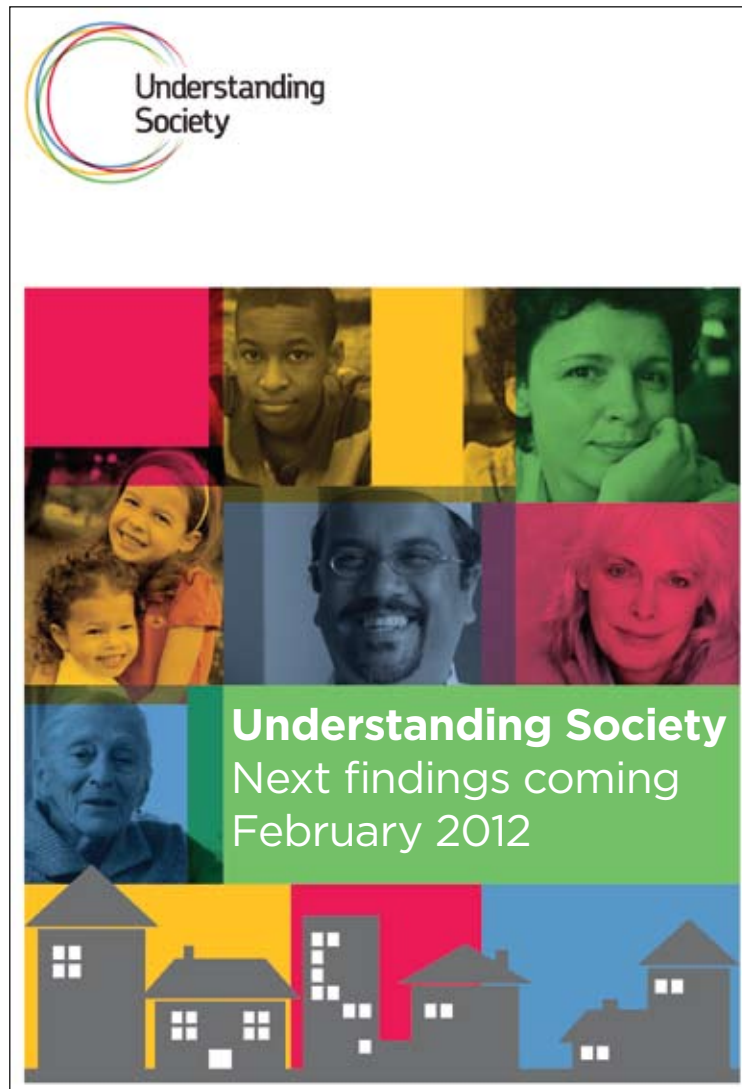
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# A living laboratory of life in the UK



*Understanding Society* is a major research study providing valuable insights into the lives of people in the UK, their experiences, behaviours and beliefs. The study follows 100,000 people in 40,000 households year by year and asks them questions about a wide spectrum of areas relating to their working and personal lives.

The first findings are already available at [www.understandingsociety.org.uk](http://www.understandingsociety.org.uk)





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# Welcome to Britain in 2012

**THE GLOBAL RECESSION** and instability of countries in the eurozone are sapping optimism of a British economic recovery. Public spending cuts, low economic growth, rising unemployment and inflation make it clear that difficult times, for many in Britain, will endure for sometime.

Across society there seem to be growing concerns with various aspects of modern life. There is a widening gap between the richest sector of the population, whose wealth grows despite the economic circumstances, and poorer citizens whose living costs rise while their incomes fall. Young people are finding it harder to find jobs after leaving school. The introduction of higher university fees leads to fears that many may be deterred from going on to higher education in the future. The middle-aged are seeing the future value of their pensions drop, while the return on the savings of retired people falls. And those who need the help of the state the most – the old and the sick – are uncertain of care in an era of cuts.

Faced with these problems, politicians from across the political spectrum search for solutions, and while 'growth' appears to be central to the various strategies that are proposed, achieving this is challenging.

Alongside these domestic problems, there are other, global issues affecting our lives. Global warming and depletion of natural resources make the development of alternative sources of energy an increasingly urgent priority; conflict, poverty, famine and injustice persist throughout the world despite international efforts to tackle them.

The ESRC funds research across this wide range of issues and contributes to greater knowledge and understanding of the many challenges our society faces. Many examples of these contributions feature in *Britain in 2012*. For example, economists examine the possible strategies for increasing economic growth and how government reforms could affect provision of public services. Sociologists consider whether true social mobility can be achieved, particularly in a time of recession. Experts on politics investigate whether the British electorate has lost trust in politicians and the British political system. And experts on the environment and climate explain why people are sceptical of climate change despite all the evidence to the contrary, and how we might influence behaviour change.

Social science researchers seek explanations by looking at events that have happened to predict what is likely to happen in the future. And while social scientists hold politicians and policymakers to account by measuring the effects of their policies, they also help inform new policies, reforms and legislation.

By examining the reasons for our economic and social difficulties – and by offering an alternative view that challenges the obvious – social science helps us find solutions to many of society's problems.

We hope you enjoy reading *Britain in 2012* and we welcome your comments or suggestions – [britain@esrc.ac.uk](mailto:britain@esrc.ac.uk)



**Professor Paul Boyle**  
Chief Executive  
Economic and Social Research Council

# Britain in 2012

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