What are the biggest issues facing society?
How will our lives change? Will we be healthy, wealthy and happy? These are some of the questions to which research can give the answers. For the last 50 years the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) – the UK’s largest organisation for funding research on economic and social issues – has supported independent, high-quality research that can help politicians, businesses, the public sector and the third sector understand what is happening in society. ESRC research has helped change the world, providing deep insights into key social and economic questions. Research is often about new ways of looking at things, challenging the accepted and providing alternative perspectives. We’ve included a range of research findings from across the spectrum of the economic and social sciences and asked public commentators for their perspective on what the research can tell us.

The ESRC invests £213 million per year in research on issues that affect everyday life in Britain. Here are some of our key findings, along with reactions from leading opinion-formers.
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OBESITY

Can the UK tax its way to thinness? The idea of a double win – fighting obesity and raising money at the same time – is a tempting one for politicians. But ESRC-backed research suggests that things are not quite that simple. Work by Professor Richard Tiffin and colleagues at the University of Reading has shown that a ‘fat tax’ would make poor people poorer without making them any more slender. Taxes on fattening food and drink already exist in Hungary, Denmark, France and elsewhere. However, a model of the spending and eating habits of British people who already have poor diets suggests that they might simply end up making the impoverished even more so. Food choices have more to do with people’s overall social culture than with price, so putting up the price of fattening foods would have only a modest effect on their consumption. Deeper research is needed on food choices and ways of changing them.

I would say that fat taxes would have an effect on some people’s diet, but it’s not an easy or a fair solution. It depends how much more money is charged for ‘bad food’. It’s all very well saying people should buy free-range chickens but there’s an awful lot of people who can’t afford that. Something I’d be more interested in tackling is food myths, one of them being that sugar is worse than fat. You can’t really tackle the bad food debate until you get absolute clarity on what is and what isn’t bad food in the first place.

And if people don’t eat the bad food what are they going to buy instead?

Of course if you’ve got the inclination to cook you can go and buy things like pulses, barley, lentils… great vegetables like carrots, cheap cuts of meat. And although I don’t want to sound like the Harry Enfield ‘jumpers for goalposts sketch’, if kids went out to the park to play and exercise and get some connection with nature it would be good for them, and those habits would extend into how they want to eat as well, because health in food and health in exercise are inextricably linked. I think the best way to look at it, rather than ‘how many people do you meet in your life who have changed diet’, is to look at what’s in the shops. For example Itsu, the Japanese chain of healthy fast food places – the fact that it is doing well is a good sign.

HESTON BLUMENTHAL
OBE
CELEBRITY CHEF AND RESTAURANT OWNER

HOUSING

The Spatial Economics Research Centre at the London School of Economics is supported by the ESRC and other funders. In a recent research paper, its experts have looked at the effects on schoolchildren’s educational achievement of living in an unstable neighbourhood.

It turns out that local stability is important for educational success. The test scores for children who do not move house, but who live in areas of high household turnover, are detectably lower than for comparable but more stable settings. And in more deprived neighbourhoods, this effect is more pronounced.

The researchers point out that mobility is generally regarded as socially positive, partly because it suggests that labour markets are active and flexible. But it can also break down social capital, for the people who move and also for those who stay behind. They attribute the lower educational performance they observe to the breakdown of social ties and family friendships.

DEVOLUTION & ENERGY

2014’s big story about the future of the Union unfolded on 18 September, when the Scottish people decided to stick with the rest of the UK. But away from this high-profile politics, the devolved UK continues to pose questions.

A group at Cardiff University is looking at the possible clash between two UK priorities – devolution and the expansion of renewable energy. Meeting renewables targets requires collaboration between organisations at a UK, EU and devolved levels. This can turn the UK government into what the researchers term a ‘supplicant’ to the devolved governments as it tries to get them to deliver European targets for renewable energy. In practice, national price-setting systems mean that Scottish wind power is made financially viable by English electricity consumers. So Westminster retains influence over parts of the UK energy system that are in principle devolved.
THE BIG ISSUES

BRITAIN IN 2015

The British mainstream politicians worrying about the UK Independence Party may find it hard to believe, but people in Britain really do regard themselves as European. Work supported by the ESRC at the London School of Economics shows that if you ask people across Europe how European they feel, they register a score of over seven out of a possible ten. Even in comparatively Eurosceptic Britain, 55 per cent respond with a score of five or more, rising to 58 per cent in Northern Ireland. The research also suggests that some people may have a stronger overall sense of political identity than others. People who say they feel a strong national or subnational identity are also likely to feel more European. So it is wrong to suppose that European and more local identities are opposed to each other. The research also shows that older people tend to be more negative about Europe, and that they expect their children and grandchildren to be more European than they were.

EUROPE

The researchers point out that, for instance, the gains in child health due to EU spending in the UK are considerable: if you look at the 10 per cent of the population in the UK with the lowest household incomes, the extent of underweight and stunting among children is 58 per cent in Northern Ireland and 63 per cent in England and Wales, compared to 29 per cent in the UK as a whole. These disparities are much lower when the EU is at work.

SIR RANULPH FIENNES

EXPLORER AND FUNDRAISER

Sir Ranulph Fiennes is a world-renowned explorer, now engaged in activities intended to raise £10 million for Marie Curie Cancer Care. He has long been an active political supporter of the continuation of the United Kingdom within a limited European Union.

COST OF LIVING

Fancy starting a family? You probably work in the public sector. At least that is the implication of ESRC-supported research carried out at the University of Oxford.

Fertility is falling across the developed world, but research in the UK and Italy shows that the job stability and family-friendliness of the public sector can encourage people to become parents. Tiziana Nazio says that the guarantee of a job to come back to after childbirth is one important benefit of public-sector employment, plus other family-friendly employment policies, and the fact that stepping off the career ladder for a few years may be less damaging than in the private sector.

She says that as both members of a couple are more likely than in the past to have similar education and employment prospects, small differences in fertility decisions can have a big effect on population growth, the age structure of the population and even society’s ability to sustain welfare systems.

I believe there is wide support for the UK remaining in an EU that is intended to fulfil its original role of promoting trade. I think that is what [prime minister] David Cameron wants. But it is made far more difficult by Nigel Farage and Ed Miliband [leaders respectively of UKIP and the Labour Party]. The UK should renegotiate its EU membership at the same time as giving substantial new powers to Scotland, but I think that Miliband has already reneged on this promise.

The EU has forced us into a lot of agreements, for instance on crime, that are against our interests. People are deluded if they think voting for UKIP is the way ahead. In fact it makes it more difficult for David Cameron to negotiate on these issues and get allies elsewhere in Europe. The EU is a mare’s nest of different interests and you need a leader who is also a good chess player. It’s very unhelpful if people like Farage and Miliband make the hand we have to play more difficult.

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IMMIGRATION

The British cannot make up their minds about immigration. A survey released in 2012 shows that 51 per cent of the population want immigration to ‘reduce a lot’. But they also like immigrants whom they regard as socially beneficial. Anti-immigrant opinion has been hardening in the UK in recent decades. But research at the ESRC Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) shows that these views are complex. It found that while 69 per cent of people want fewer immigrants, most people are mainly concerned with illegal immigration and only a minority favour cutting legal immigration. People are also happier to see students, skilled workers and close relatives of existing immigrants arrive in the UK than asylum seekers, less skilled workers or less close family. The researchers suggest that no UK politician is going to win votes by supporting more immigration. Even highly-skilled immigrants are favoured by only 32 per cent of the COMPAS sample.

The British debate on immigration is both complex and emotional. And it doesn’t always take place in a fair way. Some tabloids scream daily headlines akin to ‘immigrants killed my cat’ that distort the real debate happening across the country. And anti-immigration rhetoric causes real damage to people like me – even though I was born in South London. This is one issue on which the media do not accurately reflect the view of the British people.

The reality is that, like on most issues, the British people have a nuanced and reasonable view on immigration. They want lower immigration, but they are mostly concerned by illegal immigration – a problem that is vastly over-inflated by the media – and they support ‘socially beneficial’ immigration. Politicians must respond by directly addressing voters’ concerns. This involves tackling the side-effects of immigration that can lead to hostility by enforcing the minimum wage, prioritising the English language and cracking down on illegal immigration. But at the same time, we must be honest with the public and make a convincing case that properly regulated immigration is good for both our society and economy.

ROLE OF WOMEN

It is obvious that a mother’s full-time attention during a child’s first year of life is vital to its future prospects. It is also untrue. Data from a survey of 12,000 children born in 2000 and 2001 shows that children, both boys and girls, do best when both parents are at home and are in paid employment. There was no sign of poorer outcomes from childhood among children whose mothers work during their early lives.

The real issue is that children in single-mother households, or with two parents present who are both unemployed, are significantly more likely to be showing challenging behaviour by the age of five. In addition, boys in a household where the mother is the sole breadwinner are more likely to display problem behaviour.

Part of the reason why working mothers are an advantage to families is that working women are more likely than the general population of women to be well-paid and highly educated, and are less likely to be depressed.
UK INFRASTRUCTURE

Has the British railway system really been privatised? Professor Karel Williams of the ESRC Centre for Research on Socio-Cultural Change has his doubts. He says that because the government can vary the direct and indirect subsidies that it gives to the UK's train operating companies, it can make the train companies look profitable and keep the cost off the public sector balance sheet. He points out that in 1994, the train operators paid £3.19 billion to use the publicly-owned railway. By 2012 the figure was down to £1.59 billion. This saving is far larger than the direct annual subsidy to these companies. He adds that the state is now putting more than £4 billion a year into the railway system. Even with this subsidy, the UK still has higher fares than most large European countries.

The sale of the railways was the most controversial of the privatisations, and with good reason. As this report shows, there was little logic to the scheme and no consideration of the outcome. The aims of this experimental process were unclear and led, initially, to safety gaps that caused a series of accidents. Its enduring legacy, as this report shows, has been an expensive railway that has a complex and unaccountable structure. The report rightly highlights the unstable nature of the franchising process and suggests a re-integration of the railways, as well as ultimately the renationalisation that the British public has long sought.

CHRISTIAN WOLMAR, VETERAN WRITER AND CAMPAIGNER FOR BETTER RAILWAYS IN BRITAIN

PENSIONS

Research carried out at the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS), and supported by the ESRC and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, suggests that many UK pensioners have not suffered a fall in their standard of living upon retirement. Looking at people born in the 1940s, it found that 80 per cent of couples have a pension income of at least two-thirds of the level they reached during their working lives. Forty per cent have a gross pension income bigger than their average earnings during their working lives. The picture became even more cheerful when the researchers looked at other forms of savings wealth beyond pension income. Taking wealth other than housing into account, nearly 60 per cent of couples would have a higher income in retirement than they did at work. The figures are even higher if housing wealth is taken into account. It turns out that this group has saved enough on average to live comfortably in retirement. But IFS researchers add that future retirees may not be in such a strong financial position.

The baby boomer generation is likely to be considerably better off than future generations of retirees. Not only did many of them get the chance to participate in generous final salary pension schemes, but they also owned their homes during an unprecedented period of property price growth. The story for tomorrow’s pensioners will be very different. Final salary schemes are increasingly rare, and those that still exist are not as generous. So people will quite simply have to get used to saving more than their parents did.

Furthermore, we’re very unlikely to see a repeat of the house price inflation that has taken place over the past 20 years. Younger generations will have to save much longer to get on the housing ladder and are unlikely to cash out with the levels of equity that the baby boomers have walked away with.

If tomorrow’s pensioners want to enjoy the same quality of life as today’s baby boomers, they will need to save more and be prepared to work for longer. But the earlier you start, the easier it is.