

# Celebrating the social sciences

The impact of social science research



**“ Quite simply, the social sciences are essential to understanding human behaviour, the wellbeing of citizens and promoting sustainable growth. The UK has an internationally acclaimed social science research community, championed by ESRC. Social science research generates vital knowledge that informs policy, helping us navigate our way through the world as individuals and as a society. ”**

David Willetts MP  
Minister for Science and Universities

## Finding the evidence

Public spending cuts, low economic growth, rising unemployment and inflation make it clear that difficult times, for many in Britain, will endure for some time.

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 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.

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. The research we fund seeks explanations by looking at events which have happened to predict what is likely to happen in future. And our research can help hold politicians and policymakers to account by measuring the effects of their policies, and inform new policies, reforms and legislation.

By offering an alternative view which challenges the obvious, social science research helps us find solutions to many of society's problems.



Professor Paul Boyle  
Chief Executive  
Economic and Social Research Council

## Making life better

The Prime Minister says his goal in politics is to help make a better life for people. It seems self-evident that the job of government is to do what it can to encourage behaviours and build structures which will maintain or improve the well-being of the citizenry.

My job as a BBC journalist is, in part at least, to hold our executive to account. Are they making things better or worse? The trouble is it is often really hard to tell – not just for sceptical and ignorant hacks like me, but for the politicians themselves. We demand evidence-based policy but often the evidence just isn't there.

Analysis and enquiry are of 'diminishing interest' in Whitehall, according to Sir Michael Scholar of the UK Statistics Authority. Far more important is the persuasive press release with facts and numbers carefully selected for a pre-determined message, he says. Journalists and social scientists should both worry if this is true.

As the country tightens its belt, there are vital questions as to what strains are being put upon the fabric of the nation. We need hard science not political spin to provide the answers. The bewilderment and shock that people felt after the English riots this summer represented a failure of our governance. If we don't constantly monitor and measure and analyse our society we will get caught out again.

Social science isn't just a source of stories to me – it is a critical part of our democratic government. Making life better for people is almost impossible without it.

Mark Easton  
Home Editor  
BBC News





## **Changing lives with cohort studies**

Tracking people over time enables us to see which factors are involved in inequality, social mobility and outcomes across the lifespan. Data from the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) were used extensively by the Independent Review on Poverty and Life Chances, commissioned by the Government in 2010.

MCS data were analysed by the University of Bristol to identify 'Life Chances Indicators' predicting future outcomes. The review report emphasised that children's development during the first five years of life has the strongest impact on their life chances – strengthening the Government focus on 'Foundation Years' services.



## **Exploring finances, measuring wealth**

Research by the ESRC Centre for the Microeconomic Analysis of Public Policy at the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS), explaining how the financial crisis and recession caused a shock to the public finances, has informed politicians, government officials and the media. Examples include briefing notes on the outlook for government borrowing and debt, and on the options for fiscal tightening – presented at the main party conferences.

IFS researchers have pioneered methodological developments in measuring wealth and assets, leading to the Wealth and Assets Survey established by the Office for National Statistics. The survey will provide a detailed picture of the assets and debts of the British household population. IFS researchers also advised on the processing and analysing of early data waves. The survey data are being used by officials in government departments and were also heavily used in the recent report of the National Equality Panel.



**GRASS IS GREEN**  
**FIRE IS MEAN**

**GLASWELLT GLAS**  
**TÂN CAS**

[www.bernie.uk.com](http://www.bernie.uk.com)

## **The sheep that stopped grassland fires**

Working with the South Wales Fire & Rescue Service, the ESRC Centre for Business Relationships, Accountability, Sustainability and Society (BRASS) achieved a 46 per cent reduction in deliberate grassfires in the South Wales valleys.

Using social marketing techniques, Dr Sue Peattie at BRASS developed Project Bernie, where Bernie the Sheep fronted a campaign of activities designed in collaboration with young people in the community. The intervention period included activities such as the chance to 'be a fire fighter for a day'.

As well as reducing firesetting and changing attitudes, the project led to improvements in fire service working practices and community cohesion.

[www.brass.cf.ac.uk](http://www.brass.cf.ac.uk)

Bernie image printed with permission from South Wales Fire & Rescue Service



## Finding the DNA flaw

The extensive storing of DNA samples for the national crime database has proved controversial, and research has showed how sample storage was based on flawed evidence. A review carried out by the ESRC National Centre for Research Methods/Lancaster-Warwick-Stirling node led to a new policy report and a major revision of the scientific evidence underpinning the DNA database policy.

The review concluded that a proposed six-year DNA retention period for people arrested for crime was built on flawed statistical evidence. The period was calculated from the 'first official process' instead of the most recent arrest, where DNA retention would be restarted. In addition, rapid re-offending by persistent criminals was not taken into account. The findings were presented to the Home Office, leading to a change in policy on retention periods.

[www.ncrm.ac.uk](http://www.ncrm.ac.uk)  
[socialstatistics.org](http://socialstatistics.org)





## Calculating carbon footprints

Over three quarters of the UK's greenhouse gas emissions come from households, making it crucial to change people's lifestyle practices. An innovative carbon calculator from the ESRC Research Group on Lifestyles, Values and the Environment has helped develop a product carbon-footprinting standard, PAS 2050, ensuring that it included greenhouse gas emissions from products across their whole life cycle – from raw material extraction to product disposal.

Most carbon footprint measures in the UK focus on domestic production rather than consumption, but the researchers developed the Surrey Environmental Lifestyle Mapping Framework to quantify how UK consumers' purchase decisions impact on greenhouse gas emissions.

[www.resolve.sustainablelifestyles.ac.uk](http://www.resolve.sustainablelifestyles.ac.uk)

## Why rape cases disappear

Why are 65 per cent of rape cases lost in early stages of the justice process, without ever getting to court? Research by Dr Lesley McMillan has influenced Sussex Police's investigation of rape, was included in their Strategic Assessment of Rape and Sexual Offences, and incorporated into the 2010 Stern Review into how rape complaints are handled by public authorities in England and Wales.

The research shows that most withdrawals of rape cases happen at the earliest stages of the justice process (ie, the policing stage), and that 'no further action' and victim withdrawal are the most significant reasons for case loss. Findings about support for Sexual Offence Liaison Officers have also been taken on board by Sussex Police and Scottish police forces.

[www.esrc.ac.uk/my-esrc/grants/RES-061-23-0138-A](http://www.esrc.ac.uk/my-esrc/grants/RES-061-23-0138-A)



## Getting creative with Ketso

The creative toolkit Ketso, a spin-off from research under an ESRC-funded CASE studentship and ESRC Postdoctoral fellowship, has been used since its launch in 2009 in the UK, Peru, Bangladesh, Rwanda, Southern Africa, Australia, USA, the Netherlands, Finland, Malta, Germany and Portugal.

Dr Joanne Tippett developed the creative toolkit to stimulate discussion and creative thinking, encouraging diverse groups to work together. Ketso consists of colourful branches, leaves and other materials which can be placed and moved around on a felt workspace, in order to encourage creative and effective engagement.

The toolkit was shortlisted for the UK Sustainable Development Commission's Breakthrough Ideas for the 21st Century.

[www.ketso.com](http://www.ketso.com)





## Understanding the nature of poverty

Without understanding the nature of poverty we cannot develop effective measures against it. The Research Centre on Micro-Social Change used data from the British Household Panel Study to examine how poverty and low pay persist, influencing the way living standards are measured and monitored in the UK.

The findings informed policies for combating child poverty, the reform of the UK tax system, and annual assessments of the Labour Government's Opportunity for All programme. Analyses show that individuals tend to move into and out of poverty over time. Although the fraction of the population that is persistently poor is relatively small, the numbers of people 'touched' by poverty over a period of several years are relatively high.

[www.iser.essex.ac.uk/misoc](http://www.iser.essex.ac.uk/misoc)



# Boosting resilience for young people

How can we offer the best help for children going through hard times? Resilient Therapy (RT), a successful resilience-boosting practice developed through ESRC-funded research by Professor Angie Hart, has been embedded in two community organisations. The RT method offers a framework to help disadvantaged children and young people 'bounce back' in tough times.

Combining research evidence and practice-based experience, RT provides a selection of ideas or remedies to draw on when working with a child or young person. Hastings and Rother Primary Care Trust and East Sussex County Council Children's Services has commissioned the East Sussex RT Community of Practice, to help practitioners develop a Resilient Therapy approach in their work.

[www.boingboing.org.uk](http://www.boingboing.org.uk)





## Housing the homeless

Are there any good housing solutions for homeless people with alcohol, drug or mental health problems? A review by Dr Sarah Johnsen at the University of York and the charity Crisis on the effectiveness of housing models has directly shaped development of the first Housing First pilot project in the UK.

Unlike the prevailing Treatment First philosophy – where homeless people only are placed into ‘normal’ housing when they show they can live on their own – the Housing First model places them directly from the street into independent tenancies with tailored support. This model has also proved successful in the US. The review has informed the Mayor of London’s Delivery Board, and will likely feed into the Turning Point Scotland’s Housing First pilot evaluation.

[www.esrc.ac.uk/my-esrc/grants/RES-173-27-0191](http://www.esrc.ac.uk/my-esrc/grants/RES-173-27-0191)



## Secular education in a traditional setting

Social science has been used to integrate secular and traditional Islamic education in northern Nigeria. Global Uncertainties Fellow Dr Masooda Bano built on her research of Islamic madrasa education to design two interventions for the Islamic and Quranic school component, as part of a UKAid support programme. Her innovative approach combined analysis with dialogue and growing mutual trust, so suspicions of 'westernised' education are being reconsidered. Twenty-eight schools with nearly 1,000 pupils have been set up to offer part-time modern basic education to children from five local primary schools.

[www.globaluncertainties.org.uk](http://www.globaluncertainties.org.uk)

Dr Masooda Bano holds an ESRC/AHRC Ideas and Beliefs Fellowship, under the RCUK Global Uncertainties Programme





## Reaching out to cancer patients

How do we ensure that all people in need of care actually receive help? A Knowledge Transfer Partnership enabled the charity Breast Cancer Care to plan services for groups of people with breast cancer who have traditionally been under-served.

Breast Cancer Care worked with The Florence Nightingale School of Nursing and Midwifery at King's College London to identify barriers to its services and to develop a strategy for improving the uptake of services by people affected by breast cancer, especially from hard-to-reach groups. As a direct result of the KTP, Breast Cancer Care has been able to invest their limited resources more cost-effectively, reaching more clients.

[www.kcl.ac.uk/innovation](http://www.kcl.ac.uk/innovation)





## Turning into an extremist

What turns people into violent extremists, and how can the process be prevented? Research by Professor Per-Olof Wikström has been cited in two Government initiatives – the anti-terrorism strategy CONTEST and the Prevent Strategy, aimed at preventing violent extremism.

Professor Wikström's report on Al Qa'ida-influenced radicalisation is one of three Rapid Evidence Assessments commissioned by the Office for Security Counter-Terrorism to improve understanding of research in this field. The study has been expanded to encompass cults and terrorists, and has been influential in the Home Office.

Professor Wikström developed the Situational Action Study, which predicts criminal behaviour by looking at the interaction between a person's crime propensity and the exposure to specific environments.

# Helping businesses go green

How much would you be willing to pay to reduce a company's carbon footprint? Research by the ESRC Centre for Business Relationships, Accountability, Sustainability and Society, and the Future Foundation, has informed some of Britain's biggest business brands on consumer attitudes to climate change. Findings revealed that Royal Mail customers would pay to recycle items such as batteries through the post, and Thomson travellers would respond positively to initiatives to reduce their carbon footprint. The success of the research collaboration encouraged the Future Foundation consultancy to roll out similar projects across Europe.

[www.brass.cf.ac.uk](http://www.brass.cf.ac.uk)



# How our prisons perform

With the UK prison population reaching a record high of over 95,700 prisoners, the quality and effectiveness of prisons are becoming increasingly important. A study of public and private sector prisons by Professor Alison Lieblich and Dr Ben Crewe found that public sector prisons generally outperformed the private sector ones, and showed huge variations in the quality of private prisons.

The research has influenced public and private sector bids for the prisons that are currently being market tested, changed management practices in the prisons included in the study, and fed into staff development work in HMP Forest Bank. The researchers' revised version of the Measuring the Quality of Prison Life survey has been taken on by the National Offender Management Service's Standards Audit Unit.

[www.esrc.ac.uk/my-esrc/grants/RES-062-23-0212](http://www.esrc.ac.uk/my-esrc/grants/RES-062-23-0212)





Professor Theo Farrell (left) with the British district political officer in Forward Operating Base Shawqat, Nad-e-Ali District, Helmand Province, Afghanistan, June 2010

## Streamlining military operations

Modern military operations are dependent on flexible and efficient organisation. Global Uncertainties Fellow Professor Theo Farrell was seconded into a Stabilisation Unit in Afghanistan to conduct a performance review of the British-led Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) in Helmand. As a consequence of the review, programme management of PRT work themes has been strengthened and support to district stabilisation teams improved – particularly important in the context of the International Security Assistance Force’s district-centric strategy. Professor Farrell’s fellowship explores how the British, French and US armies have changed in line with the global IT revolution and through war experiences in Afghanistan and Iraq.

[www.globaluncertainties.org.uk](http://www.globaluncertainties.org.uk)

Professor Farrell is working on two research projects. Both projects are funded by a three year ESRC and Arts and Humanities Research Council Fellowship which were awarded under the Research Council’s UK Global Uncertainties Programme.





## Toothless drilling with touch technology

A new tooth drilling simulator helps dentist students practise on the same 'virtual tooth' multiple times. The HapTEL simulator, developed by the TLRP Technology Enhanced Learning Programme, has been incorporated as part of the Year 1 dental curriculum at King's College London and is being trialled with Year 2 and postgraduate students.

The students practise drilling with haptic 'touch' technology – enabling them to feel the difference between hard enamel and softer decayed tooth. Using 3D glasses they see the jaw on a computer screen, and a head-tracking camera makes it possible to examine the teeth from different angles. The next step in the research project will be to simulate other dental procedures, such as filling, cutting and needle-injections.

[www.tel.ac.uk](http://www.tel.ac.uk)

The TLRP Technology Enhanced Learning programme is funded by the ESRC and the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council



## Helping smokers and non-smokers

Smoking is estimated to cause more than a quarter of cancer deaths in the UK, making it vital to prevent uptake and support quitting. Research by Professor Peter Hajek at the UK Centre for Tobacco Control Studies (UKCTCS) was a key part of a US consultation on the allowed duration of Nicotine Replacement Therapy (NRT). His studies show that long-term support from NRT can be helpful to quit smoking, and that people were unlikely to become addicted to NRT instead. NRT will also be considered as part of UK consultations on tobacco use and harm.

Professor Marcus Munafò, also of UKCTCS, examined the effect of tobacco packaging, resulting in a consultation on plain packaging as part of the Department of Health's Tobacco Control Strategy. His findings were also used in support for packaging legislation in Australia. Using eye-tracking technology, the research found that plain packaging increases visual attention towards health warnings for non-smokers and light (weekly) smokers - but not for daily smokers. Plain packaging may therefore be particularly effective in discouraging uptake of smoking.

[www.ukctcs.org/ukctcs/index.aspx](http://www.ukctcs.org/ukctcs/index.aspx)

UKCTCS is part of a £20 million investment into public health research, funded by the UK Clinical Research Collaboration. The ESRC is one of the funding organisations.

## Crowd control without confrontation

Studying behaviour at football matches has increased understanding of why some situations spark aggression and riots. Research by Dr Clifford Stott has been included in a European Union handbook on controlling violence at international football matches, and is being implemented in a pan-European police training programme on match safety.

The research shows that avoiding the use of heavy-handed tactics, such as automatically sending out a riot squad for crowd control, can help maintain control in potentially hostile situations. A less confrontational atmosphere is created if the police wear normal uniforms, move in pairs and interact with the crowd. This approach makes people feel like the policing has been appropriate – even if arrests do need to be made.

[www.esrc.ac.uk/impacts-and-findings](http://www.esrc.ac.uk/impacts-and-findings)





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[www.esrc.ac.uk](http://www.esrc.ac.uk)

