

Using statistics to improve your grades!

The right statistic can go a long way to support your studies. Accurate data can provide the basis for your argument as well as the vital evidence for your conclusions. It's essential though, to use a reliable source. Did you know that the national census produces a fantastic range of up to date information on topics including health, education, transport, housing, ethnicity, nationality and age that you can use in your academic studies?

A census of the UK population takes place every ten years. The last one was in March 2011 when the Office for National Statistics (ONS) sent questionnaires to around 26m addresses in England and Wales (Scotland and Northern Ireland carried out their own censuses at the same time).

Whether you filled in a census questionnaire yourself, either at your term-time address or at home, or were included on one completed by your family or landlord, information about you forms part of the vast range of data held by ONS.

But what is a census for and who uses the data?

The answer to the first part of this question is that the census tells us who we are, how we live and what we do. As to who uses the data; well depending on your area of study, you do.

While census statistics are widely used by public and private sector organisations to help plan services, (for example, knowing the number of pre-school children tells us how many school places are likely to be needed in the future), the huge data resource is available to everyone.

Public policies and private sector business decisions need to be supported by sound evidence and this is exactly what the census provides. And you can use the same evidence when you are preparing your own essays or dissertations.

So if you are studying human geography you can find out about population shifts over time, social historians can research characteristics such as health or religious affiliation, business and marketing students might look at consumer segmentation, and town planners can forecast the future needs of urban areas.

The first modern census in England and Wales took place in 1801 and (apart from 1941 when World War II intervened) a national census has taken place every ten years since. As a result, census statistics represent a rich source of information about the population. No other exercise tracks the number and characteristics of people in such a comprehensive fashion or provides information down to very local areas.

The first data from the 2011 Census was published in July 2012. Since then, more information has been released and further tables will be published throughout 2013. As well as the number, sex and ages of the population, the census also tells us about our living conditions, health, occupations, whether we have more than one address, how we travel to work, educational qualifications, faith and ethnicity.

So how do you access this resource?

A good starting point is ONS.gov.uk/census. As well as statistical tables much of the information can be viewed as interactive maps and graphics that really help to bring the census to life. In addition, a range of statistical bulletins and short stories focus on different aspects of the data. And unless you have some very specific and complex requirements, census data is free.

If you can't find what you are looking for, a call to Census Customer Services (01329 444972 or CensusCustomerServices@ons.gov.uk) should point you in the right direction.