



THE UK'S CHANGING ATTITUDES TO FOOD



ARE GENETIC DATABASES GOOD FOR US?



ATHEISM — ARE WE A NATION OF NON-BELIEVERS?

Britain in 2008



The state of the nation

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WELCOME TO *Britain in 2008*, the second of the Economic and Social Research Council's annual looks at the UK and its place in the world. In the ever more complex global society of which the UK is a part we need to be able to base decisions and understanding on the best available evidence. *Britain in 2008* provides the facts on contemporary concerns ranging from religion to the emergence of China as a world power.

The following pages draw upon the work of the UK's top social scientists, many supported by the ESRC. Working individually or as members of national or, increasingly, international teams they bring new insights to many of the critical issues facing the UK and beyond. These insights have an important role in helping to ensure that Britain is the country we want it to be in future years, with a successful economy, a healthy population, a sustainable environment and an education system that provides opportunities for all.

Some of the work we describe here illuminates very specific current concerns. One is the need to ensure that the 2012 Olympics provide continuing benefits to the people of East London. Another, in a very different field, is work designed to solve employers' worries about the poor mathematical skills of their staff.

But often the messages are of wider concern. For example, the fascinating question of why there is so little envy of the growing numbers of very wealthy people in British society.

An even broader issue for the UK, and other countries around the world, is ageing, a social, financial, commercial and medical issue on which health providers, government departments, and a wide range of industries from banks to house builders and appliance makers need evidence.

In addition, the social sciences look at important but less tangible concerns. One is the complex range of ways in which we think about who we are. The deceptively simple term 'identity' is often used to describe this complex social question. As we explain here, it encompasses and affects people's religious choices, their ethnicity, their tastes and their actions.

ESRC's research also casts a bright light on British politics and society. Research we explore here suggests that while people across the UK share common values, they are not likely to be satisfied with the amount of devolution accorded to them at present. The only certainty is that there will be pressure for more change and that it will come from England as well as the other nations of the UK.

Evidence from social science is also vital if we are to make sure Britain profits from today's vast growth in human knowledge. We are finding out how the UK's expanding medical databases can be used, in an ethical way and with public support, to advance health research, how advances in neuroscience can inform classroom teaching, and how findings in economics or management can lead to better-run governments and companies.

So the social sciences do more than provide a picture of the world we live in. They also point to ways of improving it.

We hope you enjoy *Britain in 2008* and we welcome your response via the editor at britain@esrc.ac.uk ■



PROFESSOR IAN DIAMOND FBA AcSS, Chief Executive, Economic and Social Research Council

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(Top) Farmers and producers are facing pressure to restore trust in the food they sell as well as to encourage healthier eating – page 9.
(Above) – China's phenomenal economic progress has been the big story of recent years – page 33.

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The recent flurry of books on atheism suggests a new militancy, yet the percentage of people identifying themselves as atheists in Britain remains low at around eight per cent.

