

JAGDEV SINGH VIRDEE – STATISTICS

Statistics are a powerful tool for communities to shape their local environment and help understand behaviour, spending patterns, and needs. Jagdev Singh Virdee, a distinguished statistician and General Secretary at the Guru Nanak Darbar Gurdwara in Gravesend, emphasises that data is not just for government or big tech. Communities can use freely available statistics to lobby policymakers and drive meaningful improvements in their local areas.

COMMUNITY STATISTICS

The media often highlights data misuse by large corporations when discussing AI and big data. While such concerns are often valid, there are also significant opportunities for communities to utilise freely available statistics to influence policymakers at a very local level.

Breaking national data down to local areas or sub-populations, and developing sub-indices, allows a clearer understanding of different needs and demands. For instance, pensioners' spending patterns differ from younger people, which may impact the effect of overall inflation on each group. Spending patterns also have implications for the type of businesses an area can support.

JAGDEV SINGH VIRDEE

Jagdev Singh Virdee's career included over 32 years in the Government Statistical Service, starting with the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) in 1978 and finishing in the Office for National Statistics (ONS). He eventually became Deputy Head of the ONS Centre for Regional & Local Statistics, a position he held until 2010. Since then, he has been undertaking many short statistical projects and assignments in several countries across the world, as well as serving in some voluntary roles as a Fellow of the Royal Statistical Society (RSS), and leading the annual production of the British Sikh Report, based on a survey of Sikhs living in Britain.

As Chair of the Forum of Statistics User Groups and a member of the National Statistics Advisory Group, Jagdev remains deeply involved in promoting the use of statistics. He stresses that "poor data leads to poor decisions" while emphasising that "Trustworthiness, Quality and Value (TQV) are essential principles that underpin statistical outputs, as required by the UK Code of Practice for Statistics."

Jagdev played a key role in modernising data usage for local policymaking. Under the 1997 UK Blair government, he helped develop Neighbourhood Statistics to support the government's Neighbourhood Renewal programme, enabling granular data at a very local level, aggregated from individual households. This innovation allowed policymakers to identify local needs and direct resources accordingly, particularly through improving the Indices of Multiple Deprivation, which still guides funding to the most deprived areas.



LOCAL DATA

"My passion for statistics dates back to childhood, and maths was always my favourite subject at school," Jagdev says with a smile. Early in his career, statistical work was largely manual. His first task was compiling statistics on UK strategic raw materials, all recorded by hand. When working on monthly trade statistics in the early 1980s, trends were calculated on Texas Instruments programmable calculators and then plotted manually on graph paper. "Today, technology has streamlined these processes, but the core principles of accuracy and relevance remain unchanged," he notes.

ADVANCES

One of the most significant advancements in modern statistics is the ability to link large datasets at the very individual level. Jagdev points to the COVID-19 pandemic as an example. The ONS linked census data with death records to identify the different impacts on individual ethnic and faith groups. "Such analyses, impossible in previous decades, now provide critical insights that shape policy," Jagdev explains. "It is also now easy to visualise statistics at a local level in interactive charts. An excellent example is the 2021 Census data, showing a lot of information about your area for districts and much smaller areas. Just go to www.ons.gov.uk/census/maps and see how your neighbourhood compares with others, in terms of housing, education, health, work and more."

CHAMPIONING COMMUNITY DATA

As Chair of the Champion Award for Excellence in Official Statistics, Jagdev continues to advocate for the role of data in improving lives. He says "It is very satisfying to, at least once a year, celebrate the best of the excellent work undertaken by those who produce official statistics". He aims to raise awareness of how statistics can be actively used in everyday decision-making, seeing technology as a key enabler of broader engagement and more efficient analysis. He remains committed to helping policymakers make informed, evidence-based decisions grounded in the independence and reliability of official statistics.

EVOLVING METHODS

Looking ahead, Jagdev sees even greater potential for local groups to harness official statistics to achieve their goals. With initiatives like ONS Local and advancements in technology, producing and analysing detailed data will become increasingly accessible, leading to better-informed decisions at both local and national levels. ■

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