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Public confidence in official statistics - 2021

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Contents

Executive summary

Awareness of ONS has increased since 2018 as has the proportion of people using statistics produced by ONS.

- 75% of people who gave a response had heard of ONS in 2021, up from 70% in 2018.
- 36% of people who gave a response reported using ONS statistics, up from 24% in 2018. The actual proportion who have used ONS statistics may be even higher than this; people may not necessarily be aware that statistics they have used were produced by ONS.

Trust in ONS and the statistics it produces remains high and at a similar level to 2018.

- In 2021 89% of those able to express a view said they trust ONS and 87% said they trust ONS statistics.
- The equivalent figures in 2018 were 88% and 85%.
- Trust is higher among people who have used ONS statistics compared with those who have not, though still high amongst non-users.

Most people also trust ONS with data they might provide to them.

- 90% of people agreed that personal information provided to ONS would be kept confidential.
- People who had taken part in surveys were more likely to agree with this (92%) compared with those who had not (87%). However, even among those who had not taken part in an ONS survey most still agreed that their data would be kept confidential.

People continue to think that statistics are important to understand the country and that official statistics are accurate.

- In 2021 91% of people able to express an opinion agreed that statistics produced by ONS are important to understand our country.
- 82% of people able to express an opinion agreed that official statistics are generally accurate, up from 78% in 2018.

A majority of the public believe statistics are produced free from interference. However, the proportion of people who agree that the government and newspapers present statistics honestly remains low.

- 74% of people able to express a view in 2021 agreed statistics are produced free from political interference. This is similar to 2018 (73%).
- Only 35% of people able to express a view agreed that the government presents official statistics honestly, though this has increased (from 31%) since 2018.
- Only 24% of those able to express a view agreed that newspapers present official statistics honestly.

More than two in five people have used COVID-19 statistics produced by ONS.

- 44% of people who gave a response said they had used ONS' COVID-19 statistics. Use of COVID-19 statistics was higher than all other data series asked about except for the census.
- 79% of people able to express a view thought that the COVID-19 statistics were accurate whilst 92% of data users said they were useful. This is similar to views on other data series asked about.
- People held more mixed views on whether the COVID-19 statistics were free from political interference. 53% of those able to express a view agreed this was the case, the joint lowest level of agreement for any data series asked about.

Awareness of the UK Statistics Authority has increased since 2018 and there is strong support for an independent body such as the Authority to oversee the production and use of statistics.

- 48% of people who gave a response had at least heard of the Authority.
- Awareness of the Authority has increased from 2018 when only 33% had some knowledge of, or had heard of them.
- 96% of people able to express a view agreed that it is important for there to be a body such as the Authority to speak out against the misuse of statistics and 94% agreed about the importance of there being a body to ensure that official statistics are produced without political interference.

1 Introduction

1.1 Background

This report presents findings on public attitudes to official statistics in Britain in 2021, based on results from a web-postal survey of adults aged 18 and over, conducted by the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen). The report explores levels of awareness, use of, and trust in official statistics in Britain. It also explores changes in attitudes to official statistics over time and variation in attitudes by demographics.

The research was commissioned by the UK Statistics Authority (the Authority), an independent body at arm's length from Government with the statutory objective of promoting and safeguarding the production and publication of official statistics.[1] Its executive office, the Office for National Statistics (ONS), is the UK's National Statistical Institute and largest producer of official statistics. The Authority also has an independent regulatory function (Office for Statistics Regulation or OSR), which ensures that statistics are produced and disseminated in the public interest and acts as a watchdog against misuse of statistics.

The Public Confidence in Official Statistics survey (PCOS) has been run at regular intervals since 2004, most recently (in 2014, 2016 and 2018) as part of NatCen's face-to-face British Social Attitudes survey (BSA).[2] In 2021 the research was conducted as a stand-alone web survey, with a paper follow-up.

The full list of questions can be found in Appendix A of the accompanying technical report.

1.2 Methods

The survey was designed to yield a representative sample of adults aged 18 or over in England, Wales and Scotland, using a sample of addresses drawn from the Postcode Address File (PAF).

Although previously fielded as a face-to-face survey, in 2021 PCOS was run as a stand-alone push-to-web survey. Participants were encouraged to complete the 10 to 15-minute survey online, but paper self-completion surveys were offered to all non-responding households to maximise response and sample quality. Fieldwork took place between 15th October and 20th December 2021. Up to two adults per sampled address could complete the survey. Interviews were achieved with a representative sample of 3,398 adults aged 18 and over in Britain from 2,379 households. This represents an adjusted household response rate of 24%. The majority of participants, 2,386, completed the survey online.

1 https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/

2 https://natcen.ac.uk/our-research/research/public-confidence-in-official-statistics/

More information on the survey methodology and response rates can be found in the accompanying technical report.

When a difference between the 2018 and 2021 data has been found to be statistically significant (at the 95% level), this has been stated explicitly. Where differences by age, sex, education, or employment are commented on in the text these differences are statistically significant at the 95% level. When testing for statistical significance, including between years, as in previous years 'don't know' responses were excluded from the analysis (see below for more on the reasons for this).

Data relating to individual questions does not always add up to 100% due to rounding.

1.3 Measuring change over time

One of the aims of this report is to compare how people's awareness of and attitudes towards official statistics have changed since data was last collected in 2018. There are reasons to expect that awareness may be higher in 2021 compared with 2018. The decennial census, which is run in England and Wales by ONS and which all households are required to complete, was conducted in 2021.[3] In addition the COVID-19 pandemic, which began in early 2020 and continued throughout 2021, gave additional prominence to official statistics and their role in public policy making with COVID-19 statistics being quoted daily in the media.

There is a need for caution when making comparisons between 2021 and earlier years of the study given the change in survey methodology and the move from a face-to-face to a web-first survey. Changing how a survey is conducted brings a risk both that the profile of people who complete a survey may be different and that the way those that do respond answer the questions may vary. PCOS 2021 has been designed to minimise as far as possible the impact of the change in the mode of data collection on the comparability of the data over time. Weighting has been used to ensure that the final sample in 2021 is similarly representative of the population on key characteristics such as age, sex, education, region, tenure and ethnicity as previous years.[4]

The impact of methodological change on findings is expected to be relatively small but it is not possible to say for certain the extent to which any changes in attitudes (or lack thereof) observed across time are down to real-world change or methodological change. Where it is thought particularly likely that methodological change may explain all or part of the trend observed over time this is flagged in the report.

3 In Scotland data collection, which is run by National Records of Scotland, was delayed to 2022 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

4 More details are given in the accompanying technical report

One consistent difference that was observed between 2018 and 2021 was that the proportion of people with 'don't know' /'not answered' responses was significantly lower in 2021 compared to 2018. This could be a genuine increase in awareness brought about, for example, by the increased prominence of statistics during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is not, however, possible to know for certain what the 'don't know' rate would have been had the 2021 survey been administered in the same way as previous years. For this reason, the analysis in the report, including any comparisons over time, focuses on comparing responses among those able to express an opinion, excluding any 'don't know' or other missing responses unless otherwise stated.[5] Further information on the reasons for and implications of this are discussed in the Methodological Note which can be found at the end of this report. Further details of the proportion of 'don't knows' given at each question can be found in the accompanying technical report.

5 This was also the approach used for most of the findings reported in the 2018 report. However, there were some questions where the figures reported on in 2018 included don't know responses and which means that figures for 2014-2018 presented here may differ slightly from those previously published


CHARTS
MARKET INFO
Order Book
Market History
Margin Data
Buy
Sell

"Most people - whether or not they had previously taken part in an ONS survey - trust ONS to keep their data secure"

2 Awareness and use of ONS

Key findings:

- Awareness of ONS and the statistics it produces has increased since 2018. In 2021, three-quarters of people had heard of ONS compared with 70% in 2018.
- Just over a third of people (36%) reported that they had used ONS statistics. This is higher than in 2018 (24%).
- Over three-quarters (78%) of the public recalled taking part in an ONS survey including 73% who recalled taking part in the census (up from 55% in 2018) and 11% who had taken part in the Coronavirus Infection Survey
- 92% of people who had taken part in an ONS survey agreed that personal information provided to ONS would be kept confidential.

2.1 Awareness of ONS

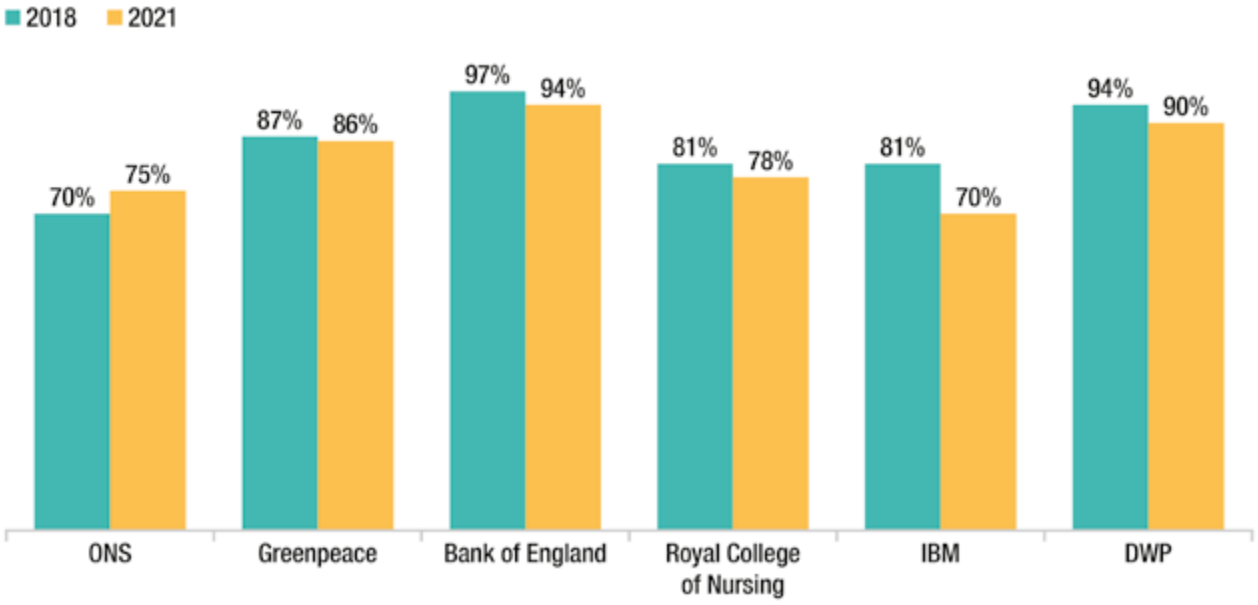
In 2021, three-quarters (75%) of people able to give a response had heard of the Office for National Statistics (ONS).[6] Awareness of the ONS remains lower than awareness of other public sector bodies such as the Bank of England (94%) and the Department for Work and Pensions (90%). However, awareness of ONS has increased since 2018 (up from 70%), whilst awareness of all of the other organisations asked about in the survey has remained stable or fallen over the same time period (Figure 2.1).

Although the proportion of people who said they had heard of ONS increased between 2018 and 2021, the proportion of this group who said they knew ONS 'well' decreased compared with 2018 (from 24% to 18%). There was a corresponding increase (from 44% to 50%) in those who said they knew ONS 'somewhat'. Around a third of people who had heard of ONS reported they had only heard the name (33%), a similar proportion to in 2018 (32%).

6 Less than one percent of people were unable to give a response to this question in 2021, similar to the level of non-response in 2018.

Figure 2.1 Proportion of people who had heard of ONS and comparator organisations

Base: All respondents who gave a response, excluding don't know and refusal



Source: British Social Attitudes 2018 and Public Confidence in Official Statistics 2021

2.2 Use of ONS statistics

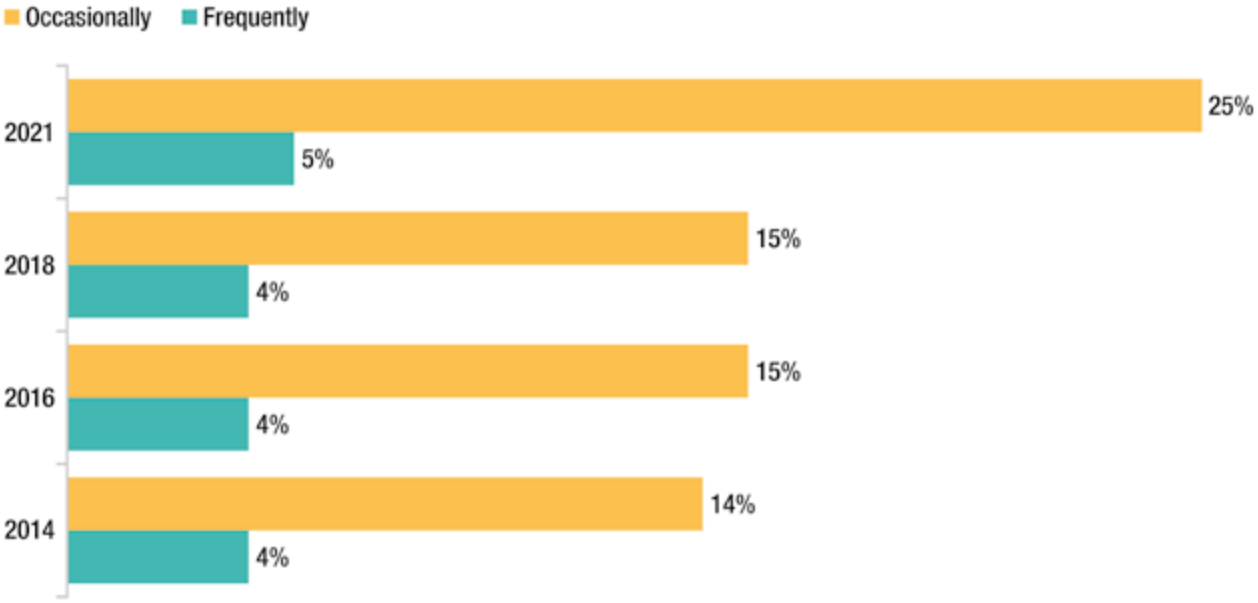
As well as measuring awareness, the survey also asked people whether they had had any engagement with ONS, either through using statistics ONS produced or by taking part in one of their surveys (see section 2.3).

The proportion of people who reported using ONS statistics increased between 2018 and 2021 from around a quarter (24%) to just over a third (36%). This was mainly due to a rise, from 15% to 25%, in the proportion of people who said they used statistics 'occasionally' whilst 5% reported they used statistics frequently (Figure 2.2). The increase in occasional use may reflect ONS' role in producing COVID-19 statistics which, with the exception of census statistics, were by far the most commonly reported type of statistics people had used (see section 5).

Among people who said they used statistics at least 'occasionally', just over half were relatively new users. Fifteen percent reported they had been using ONS statistics for less than a year, and a further 36% reported using them for two to five years. Nearly two in five (39%) of frequent or occasional users used ONS statistics at least a couple of times a month.

Figure 2.2 Proportion of people who have used ONS statistics

Base: All respondents who gave a response, excluding don't know and refusal



Source: British Social Attitudes 2014, 2016, 2018 and Public Confidence in Official Statistics 2021

2.3 Participation in ONS surveys

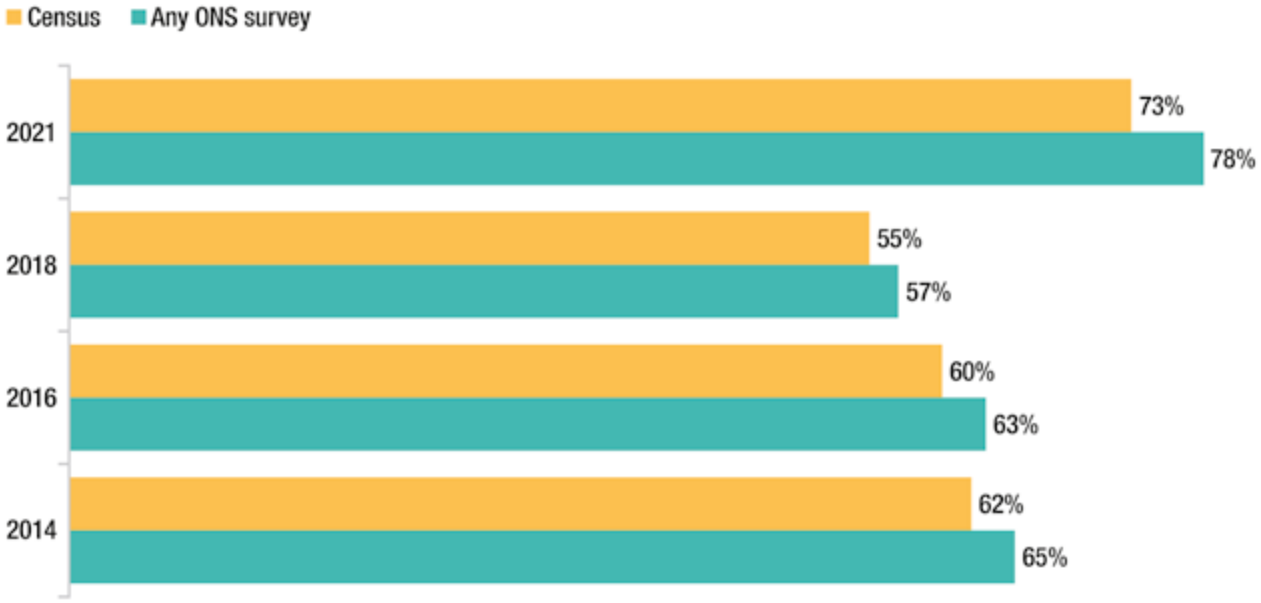
In 2021, over three-quarters of respondents (78%) reported having ever taken part in an ONS survey. The proportion of people who reported taking part in an ONS survey was slightly higher than the proportion of people who said they had heard of ONS (75%). Some people who took part in the census, for example, did not immediately associate this with ONS with only 80% of people who reported they had taken part in the census saying they had heard of ONS.

The proportion who reported taking part in the census is higher than any previous survey since 2014 and probably reflects the fact that the decennial census took place in England and Wales in 2021. The further away the survey is from a census year, the more people are likely to forget having taken part or to have been too young to take part; in 2021 73% of all respondents reported taking part in the census compared with 55% in 2018. A smaller proportion of people reported taking part in an ONS survey in Scotland (52%), where the census is run by National Records of Scotland, not ONS, and was postponed to 2022 due to the impact of COVID-19, compared with England (80%) or Wales (85%).

Whilst people most commonly reported having taken part in the census, around one in ten (11%) people in 2021 reported taking part in the Coronavirus Infection Survey.

Figure 2.3 Proportion of people who had participated in an ONS survey

Base: All respondents who gave a response, excluding don't know and refusal



Source: British Social Attitudes 2014, 2016, 2018 and Public Confidence in Official Statistics 2021

It is important that people taking part in data collection trust that their personal information will be kept confidential. When asked if they thought that personal information provided to ONS would be kept confidential, 90% agreed (with 42% strongly agreeing). People who had taken part in surveys were more likely to agree compared with those who had not (92% compared with 87%), although even among those who had not taken part in an ONS survey most still agreed that their data would be kept confidential.

2.4 Differences by demographic characteristics

Awareness of ONS and use of ONS statistics varied significantly by education and by socio-economic status.[7] People with a degree were most likely to have heard of ONS (87%) and those with no qualification the least likely (55%). Similarly, over half of people with a degree (58%) had used ONS statistics compared with nine percent of people with no qualifications. 84% of people in managerial or professional occupations had heard of ONS whilst 49% had used ONS statistics. The equivalent figures for people in routine or semi-routine occupations were 56% and 13%.

Men were more likely to have heard of ONS than women (78% compared with 72%) and were also more likely to have ever used ONS statistics (34% compared with 26%). Awareness of ONS also varied by age with only 55% of people aged 18-24 having heard of ONS. Despite being among the most likely to have heard of ONS, people aged 65 and over were less likely than other age groups to have used ONS statistics (31%).

7 As measured using a collapsed version of National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC). https://www.ons.gov.uk/methodology/classificationsandstandards/otherclassifications/thenationalstatisticssocioeconomicclassificationnssecrebasedonsoc2010


Budget
Actual
Difference
700.00
175.00
0.00
175.00
Hotel
Apartment
Cafe
Shop
Other
11%
Budget
Actual
Difference
37%
700.00
525.00
350.00
175.00
0.00
175.00
Hotel
Apartment
Cafe
Shop
Other

"Most people trust the Office for National Statistics and the statistics it produces. Levels of trust are similar to in 2018."

3 Trust in ONS and official statistics

Key findings:

- Trust in ONS remains high; 89% of respondents said that they tend to trust it or trust it a great deal.
- The public generally also trust ONS statistics; 87% of respondents said that they trust statistics produced by ONS.
- Trust in ONS is higher among people who frequently use ONS statistics (97%) but still high among non-users (84%).
- The main reason people gave for trusting ONS was that ONS did not have a vested interest in or manipulate the results.
- The main reasons people gave for not trusting ONS relate to how statistics were used by the media and politicians.

3.1 Trust in ONS overall

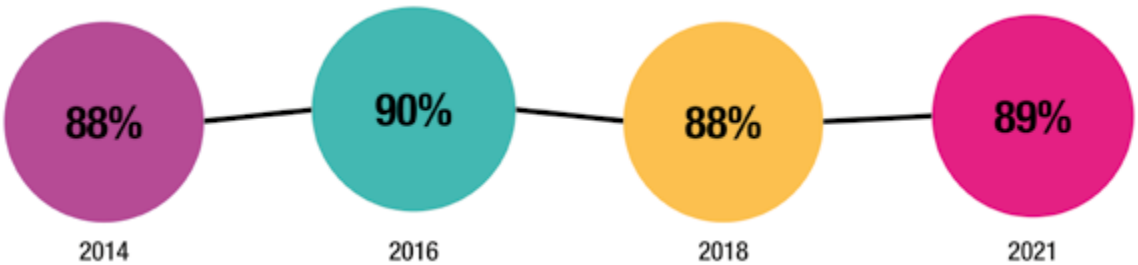
Trust in the Office for National Statistics (ONS) remains high; 89% of respondents who gave an opinion indicated that they tend to trust it (71%) or trust it a great deal (18%). This is comparable with previous years (Figure 3.1). Trust is high regardless of whether people were previously aware of ONS or not. However, trust is higher among those who had heard of ONS (93%) compared with those who had not (73%).

Those who have used official statistics are more likely to trust ONS than those who have not used them. However, trust in ONS is high even among non-users. 84% percent of non-users said they trusted ONS compared with 97% of frequent users of ONS statistics.

As in previous years, PCOS 2021 asked about the level of trust in ONS compared to other institutions in British public life (Figure 3.2). ONS has the highest level of trust of all institutions, similar to levels of trust in the Bank of England or the courts. Trust was lowest in the British media, the Government, and UK Parliament, a finding which is consistent with previous years.

Figure 3.1 Proportion of people that trust ONS

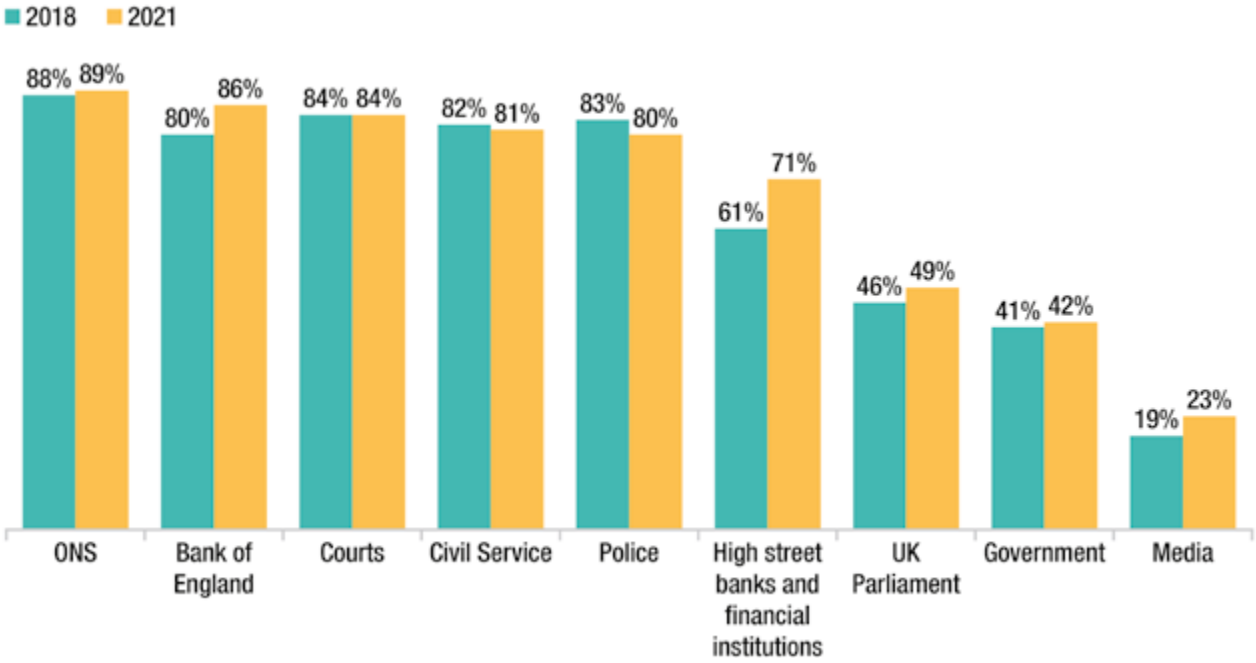
Base: All respondents who gave a response, excluding don't know and refusal



Source: British Social Attitudes 2014, 2016, 2018 and Public Confidence in Official Statistics 2021

Figure 3.2 Proportion of people that trust different institutions in British public life

Base: All respondents who gave a response, excluding don't know and refusal



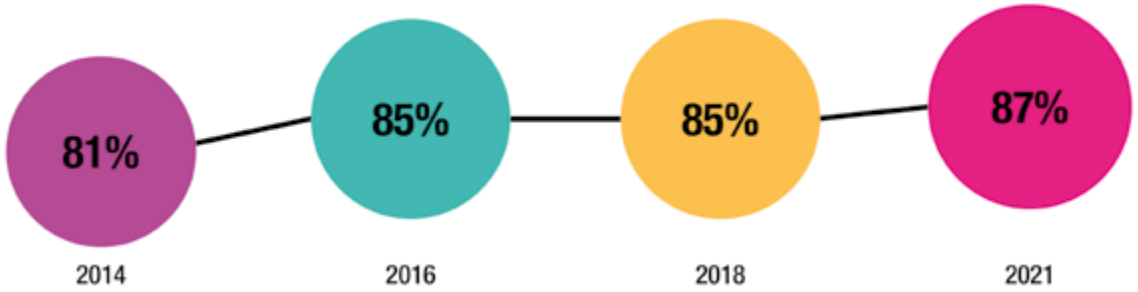
Source: Public Confidence in Official Statistics 2021

3.2 Trust in ONS statistics

As well as trust in institutions, people were asked whether they trust statistics produced by ONS (Figure 3.3). As in previous years, people generally trust ONS statistics. In 2021, 87% of people said they trusted statistics (with 19% saying they trusted them a great deal and 68% saying they tended to trust them). The level of trust is similar to 2018. As with overall trust in ONS, trust in ONS statistics was higher among people who had used ONS statistics (94% of those who used ONS statistics frequently trusted them) but still high among non-users (83%).

Figure 3.3 Proportion of people who trust statistics produced by ONS

Base: All respondents who gave a response, excluding don't know and refusal



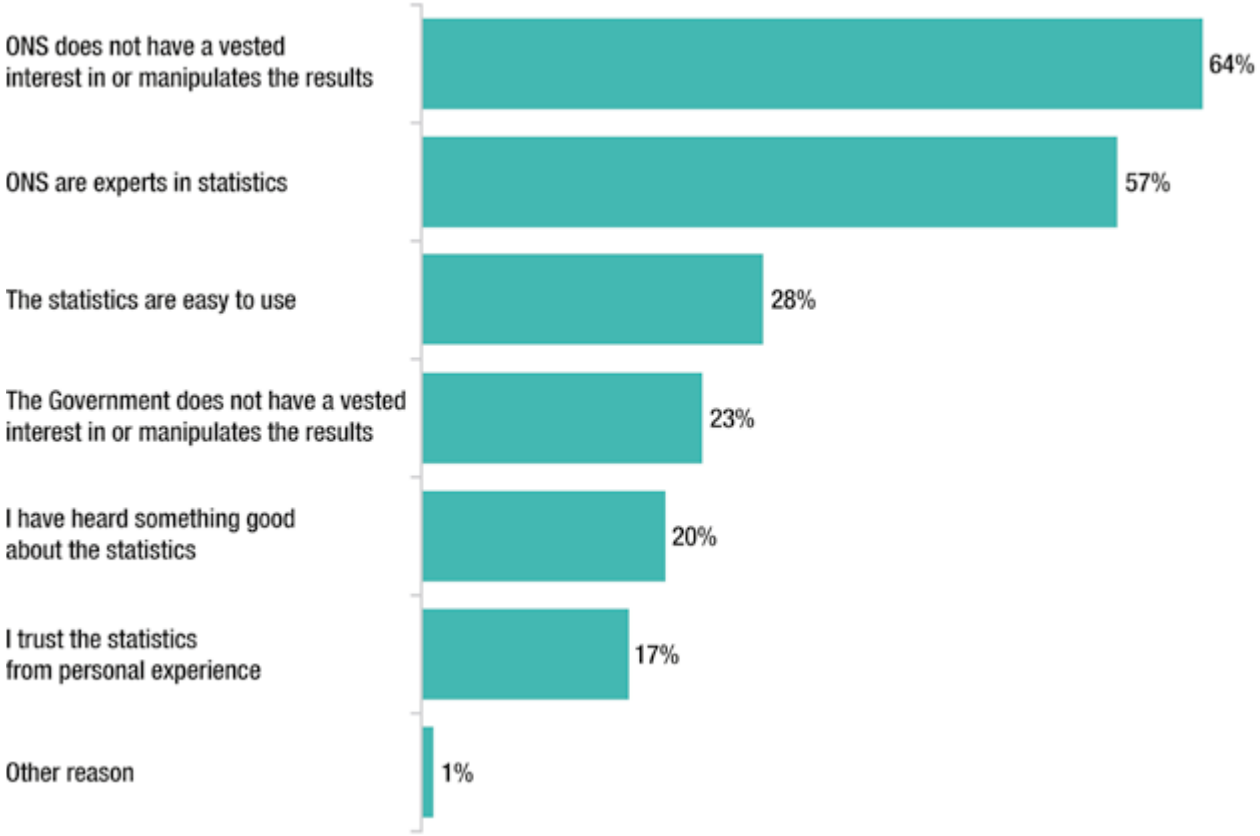
Source: British Social Attitudes 2014, 2016, 2018 and Public Confidence in Official Statistics 2021

Respondents who indicated that they trust ONS statistics were asked their reasons for doing so and could select up to three reasons from a predetermined list (Figure 3.4). The reason most frequently chosen by respondents was that ONS did not have a vested interest in or manipulate the results (64%). The next most common reason given was that ONS were experts in statistics (57%).

Similarly, the (smaller proportion of) respondents who indicated they do not trust ONS statistics were asked their reasons for not doing so (Figure 3.5). The most frequently chosen reasons were the statistics being misinterpreted by the media (48%), the statistics being misrepresented by politicians (47%), and the government having a vested interest in or manipulating the results (45%). This is consistent with the low levels of trust reported in the British media, UK Parliament, and the Government (Figure 3.1) and concerns about how the government and the media use statistics (see section 4). Another frequently chosen reason for not trusting ONS statistics was that statistics alone do not tell the whole story (43%). This was the most common response (given by 23%) when people were asked their most important reason for not trusting ONS statistics.

Figure 3.4 Reasons for trusting ONS statistics

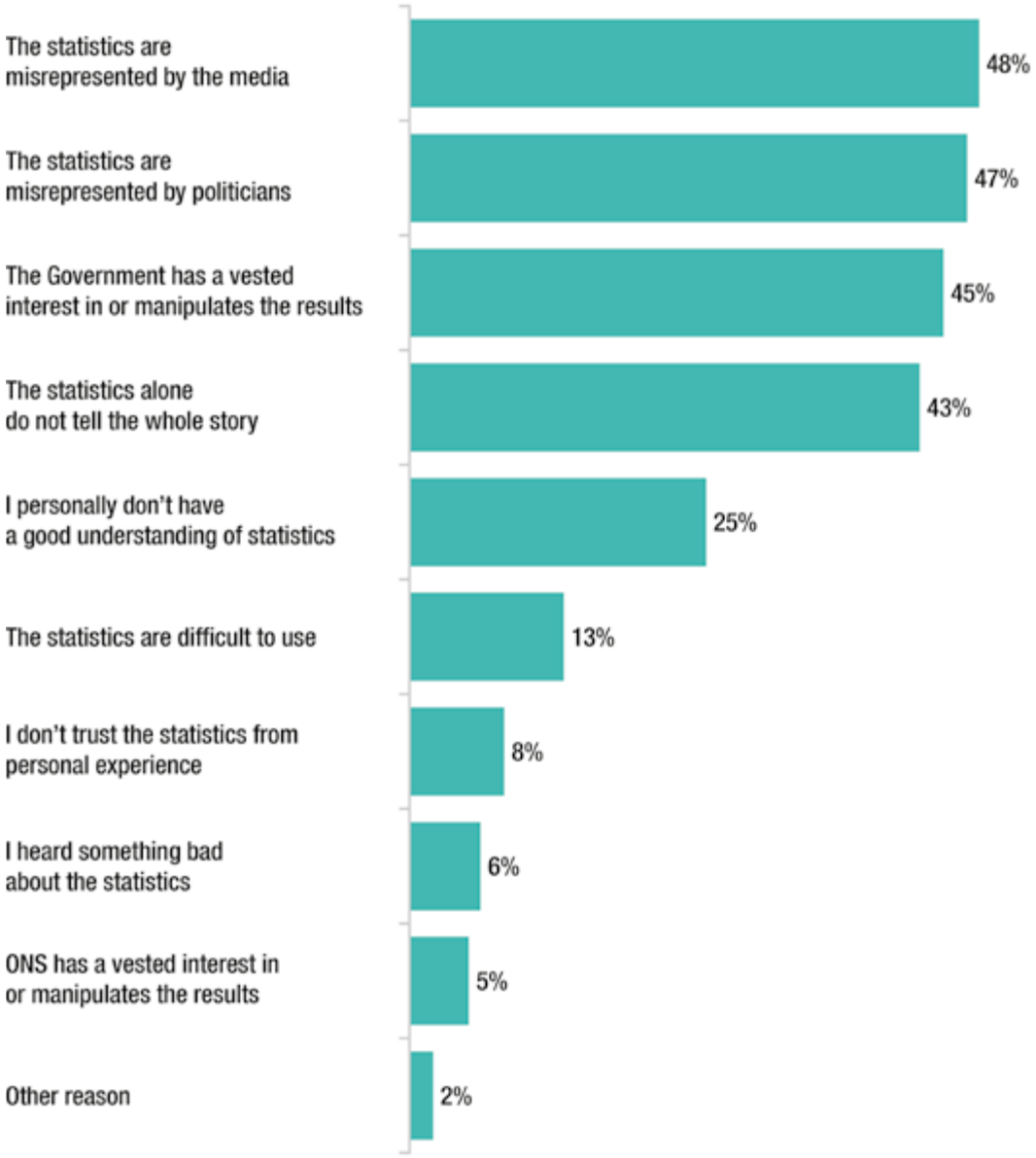
Base: All respondents who trust ONS statistics, excluding don't know and refusal



Source: Public Confidence in Official Statistics 2021

Figure 3.5 Reasons for not trusting ONS statistics

Base: All respondents who do not trust ONS statistics, excluding don't know and refusal



Source: Public Confidence in Official Statistics 2021

3.3 Differences by demographic characteristics

Trust in ONS and the statistics it produces increases with education. People educated to degree level or above were most likely to trust ONS and the statistics they produce (both 95%) whilst those with no qualifications were least likely to trust ONS (76%) or the statistics they produce (74%). Similar patterns of trust by education were also found for the Civil Service, the Government, the media, the courts, the Bank of England, and high street banks and institutions.

People in managerial and professional occupations or intermediate occupations were more likely to trust ONS (92%) compared with those in technical or semi-routine or routine occupations (81%). Similar patterns of trust by occupation were also found in trust in the Civil Service, the courts, the police, and the Bank of England.

Trust in ONS also varied by age. Trust in ONS was lowest among 18 to 24-year-olds (84% of whom trusted ONS) – who were also the least likely to have heard of ONS (see section 2). The relationship between trust and age varied depending on the institution asked about; the youngest age group were not always the least trusting and there was no difference by age in trust in the government or the media.

"There is strong support for the idea that statistics produced by the Office for National Statistics are important to understand our country"

4 General attitudes to statistics

Key findings:

- Nearly three-quarters (73%) of the public reported seeing statistics on the news at least several times a week.
- Most people agree that statistics produced by ONS are important to understand our country (91%) and that official statistics are accurate (82%).
- Most people agree that statistics produced by ONS are free from political interference (74%). However, they are less positive about the government and the media's presentation of statistics. 65% of people disagree that the government presents statistics honestly whilst 76% disagree that the media presents statistics honestly.
- Users of statistics generally hold more positive attitudes towards statistics than non-users. However, both users and non-users are sceptical about government and media presentation of statistics.

4.1 Exposure to statistics

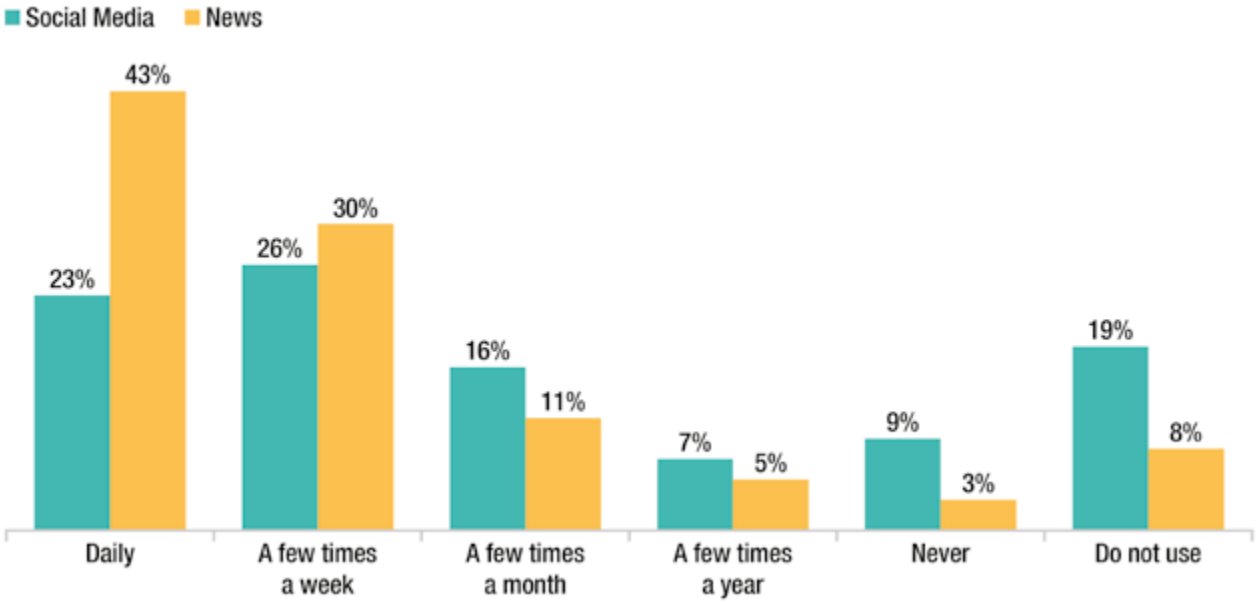
Nearly three-quarters (73%) of the public reported seeing statistics on the news at least several times a week, including around 43% who reported seeing statistics on the news daily. A smaller proportion reported seeing statistics on social media, with almost half (49%) reporting they saw statistics on social media at least several times a week (Figure 4.1).

There were significant differences by age in terms of whether people tended to see statistics on the news or social media. Respondents aged 55-64 and 65+ were the most likely to report seeing statistics daily on the news (both 51%), while 19% of respondents aged 18-34 reported never consuming news at all (about statistics or otherwise). Conversely, respondents aged 18-24 were the age group most likely to report seeing statistics daily on social media (35%), while respondents aged 65+ were least likely to report this (10%) and most likely to report not using social media at all (40%).

Respondents were also asked whether they agreed that statistics have helped them to make decisions about their life (Figure 4.2). There was a fairly even split between those who agreed and disagreed that this was the case (with 52% agreeing), though people were more likely to strongly disagree (17%) than strongly agree (10%) with the statement.

Figure 4.1 How often respondents see statistics on social media and the news

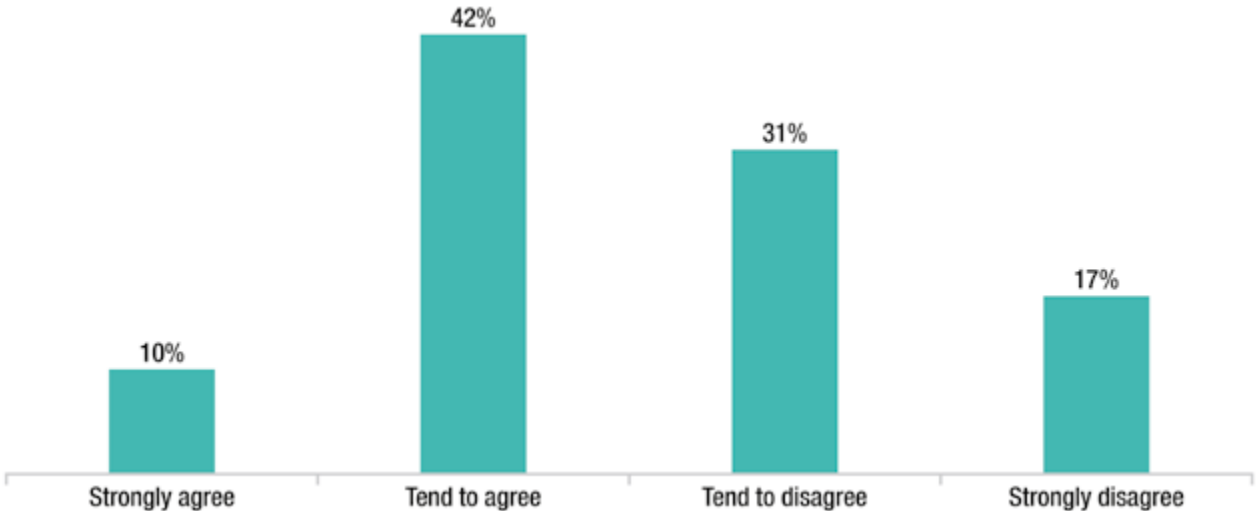
Base: All respondents who gave a response, excluding don't know and refusal



Source: Public Confidence in Official Statistics 2021

Figure 4.2 Proportion of respondents agreeing that statistics have helped them to make decisions about their life

Base: All respondents who gave a response, excluding don't know and refusal



Source: Public Confidence in Official Statistics 2021

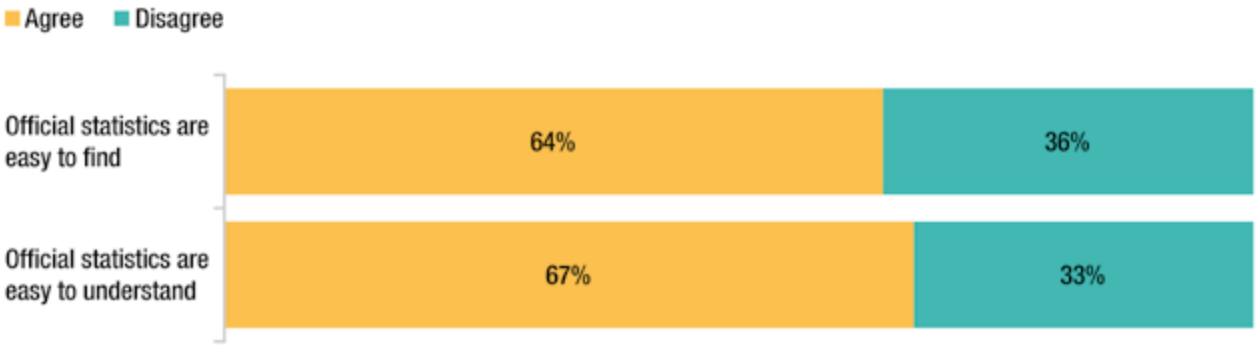
4.2 Importance and accessibility of official statistics

There is strong support for the idea that statistics produced by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) are important to understand our country. In 2021, 91% agreed this was the case, similar to in 2018 when levels of agreement with this statement were already very high (Figure 4.4).

For the first time in 2021, respondents were asked whether they thought official statistics were easy to find and easy to understand (Figure 4.3). A majority agreed that statistics were easy to find (64%) and to understand (67%).

Figure 4.3 Proportion of respondents agreeing that official statistics are easy to find and understand

Base: All respondents who gave a response, excluding don't know and refusal



Source: Public Confidence in Official Statistics 2021

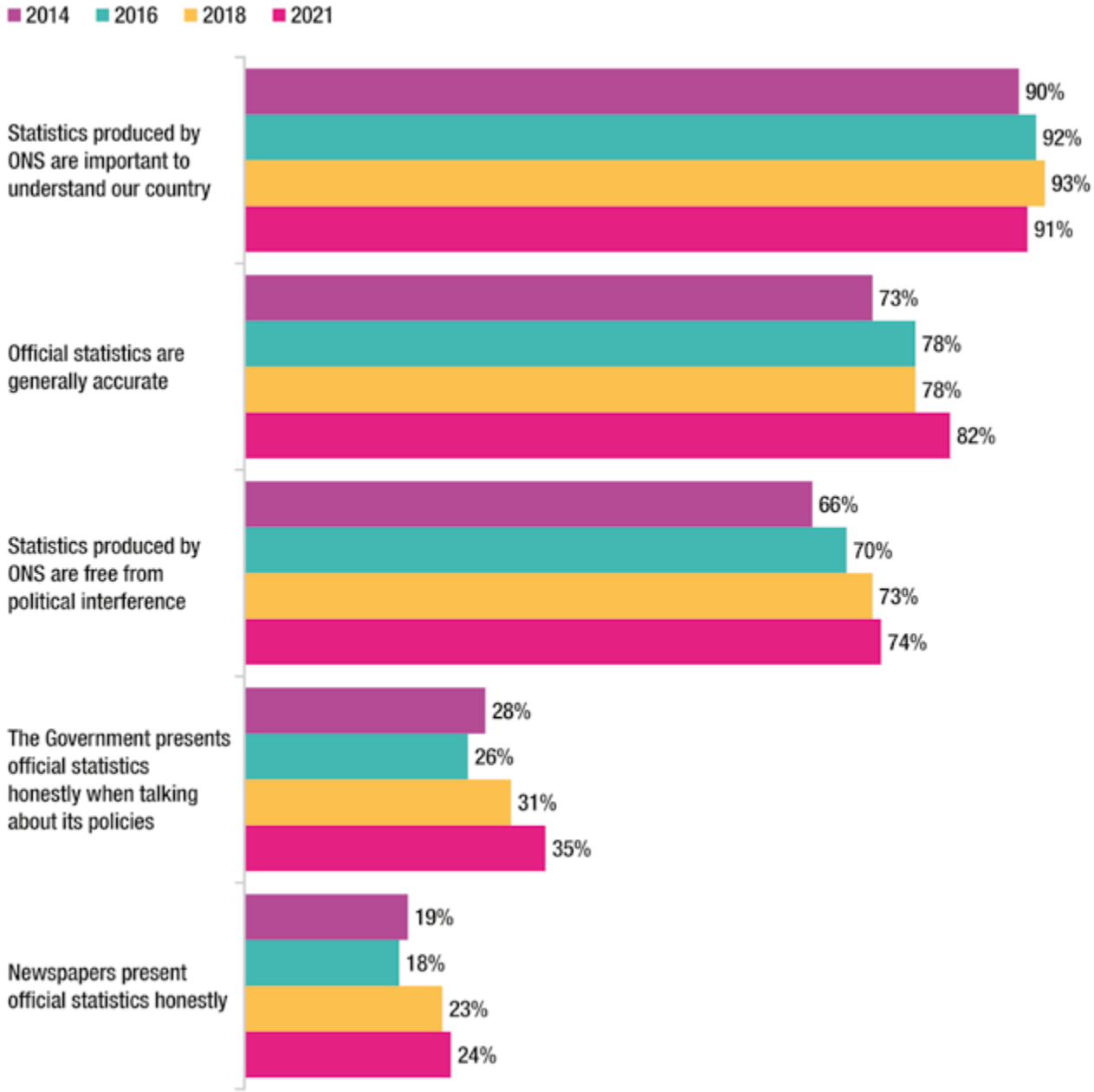
4.3 Perceived accuracy of official statistics

Most people agree that official statistics are accurate. The proportion agreeing that this is the case has increased since 2018, from 78% to 82% (Figure 4.4). Most people also agree that statistics produced by ONS are free from political interference; 74% agreed that this was the case in 2021, similar to 2018 (73%).

Despite agreeing that statistics are produced free from political interference, people are less positive about how the government and the media present statistics. Since 2018, the proportion of people who agree that the government presents official statistics honestly when talking about its policies has increased (from 31% to 35%). However, it remains the case that most people disagree that the government present statistics honestly. Even fewer people (24%) agree newspapers present official statistics honestly. This was the case both among people who did not consume news at all (20% of whom agreed that the media presents statistics honestly) and those who saw statistics in the news at least a couple of times a week (21%).

Figure 4.4 General attitudes to official statistics

Base: All respondents who gave a response, excluding don't know and refusal



Source: British Social Attitudes 2014, 2016, 2018 and Public Confidence in Official Statistics 2021

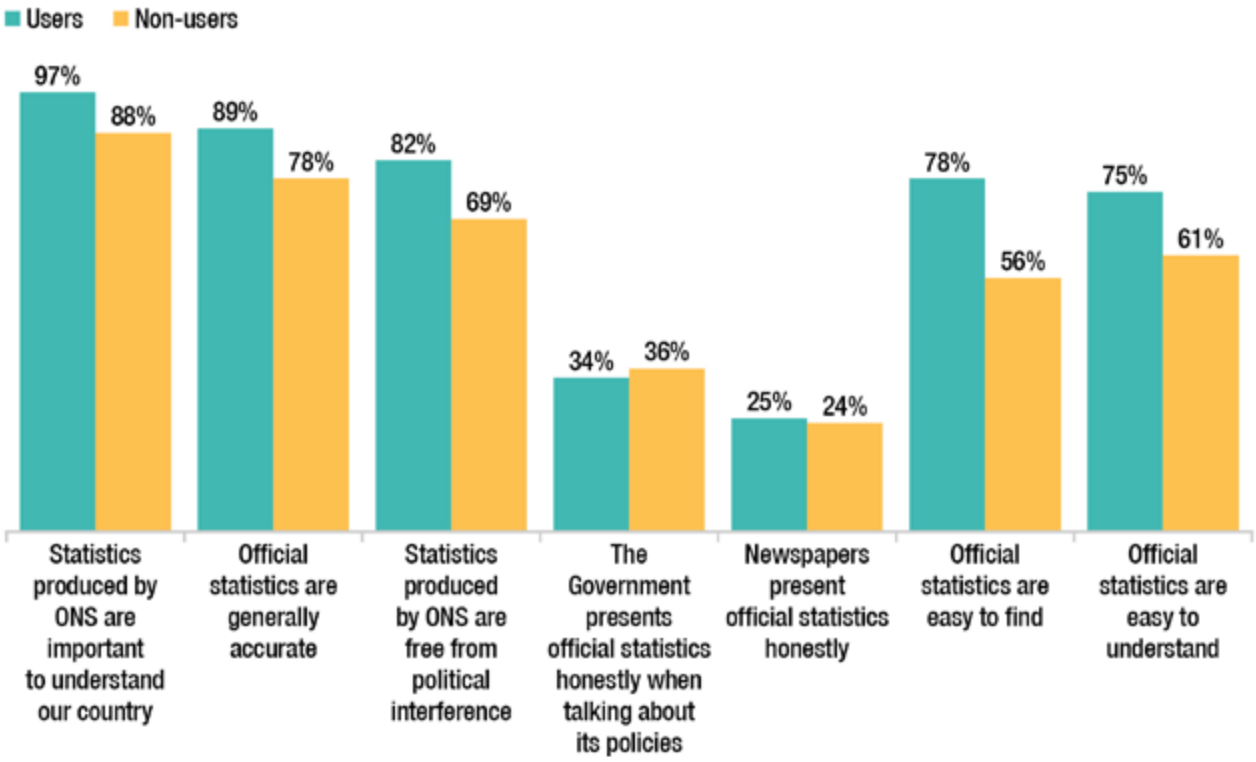
4.4 Do attitudes vary between statistics users and non-users?

People who use or refer to ONS statistics were generally more positive about official statistics than those who do not use statistics produced by ONS (Figure 4.5). Users of statistics were more likely to agree that statistics are important to understand our country (97% vs. 88% of non-users), that statistics produced by ONS are free from political interference (82% vs. 69%), and that official statistics are accurate (89% vs. 78%). Users of statistics were also more likely to agree that official statistics are easy to find (78% vs. 56%) and easy to understand (75% vs. 61%).[8]

However, there were no significant differences between users and non-users of statistics in terms of whether they thought the government presents official statistics honestly when talking about its policies or whether newspapers present official statistics honestly.

Figure 4.5 Proportion of users and non-users of ONS statistics agreeing with statements regarding attitudes towards statistics

Base: All respondents who gave a response, excluding don't know and refusal



Source: Public Confidence in Official Statistics 2021

8 Most non-users were still able to give an opinion when asked for their opinions about statistics. However, non-users were more likely than users to say they did not know. For example, when asked whether ONS statistics were free from political interference, nine percent of non-users said don't know compared with one percent of frequent and four percent of occasional users.

4.5 Differences by demographic characteristics

People's attitudes towards official statistics varied significantly by level of education, perhaps reflecting the fact that people with more education were more likely to have used statistics (see section 2). Among those able to an express an opinion, people educated to degree level or above were the most likely to agree that statistics were important to understand our country (96%), that statistics were free from political interference (83%) and that statistics were generally accurate (88%).[9] People with higher levels of education were also more likely to agree that official statistics were easy to find (71%) and to understand (73%). Conversely, those with no educational qualifications were the least likely to agree with these statements.

People aged 35-44 were the most likely to agree that statistics were easy to find and understand (73% and 74% respectively) whilst those aged 65 or older were least likely to agree (54% and 57% respectively). This may reflect lower use of ONS statistics among the oldest age group (see section 2) or, perhaps, the lower likelihood of older age groups being internet users, given that statistics are most readily available online.

Older age groups were more likely than younger age groups to disagree that the government presented statistics honestly, with 57% of 18 to 24-year-olds and 65% of 25 to 34-year-olds disagreeing compared with 69% of those aged 65 and over. However, there were no significant differences across age groups in people's attitudes towards how the media presented statistics.

9 Although a majority of the public across all groups gave an opinion, people with lower or no educational qualifications were more likely to say 'don't know' when asked for their views on statistics. For example, seven percent of those with no qualifications said they did not know if ONS statistics were accurate compared with three percent of those educated to degree level or above.

"Perceptions of accuracy continue to vary depending on the statistics in question. Whilst 77% agree census statistics are free from political interference, only 53% believe crime statistics are"

5 Attitudes towards specific statistics

Key findings:

- As in 2018, for all data series asked about, most people agree that the statistics are accurate and reflect changes in the UK. However, the exact level of agreement varies depending on the statistics.
- People have mixed views on whether specific statistics are free from political interference. Although 77% agree this is the case for the census, the figures for crime statistics (53%) and employment statistics (58%) are much lower.
- Attitudes towards the accuracy and independence of crime and employment statistics have become more positive since 2018.
- Most statistics users agree the statistics they have used are released quickly. The exception is the census, where nearly a third (31%) of users disagree it is released quickly.

5.1 Use of specific ONS statistics

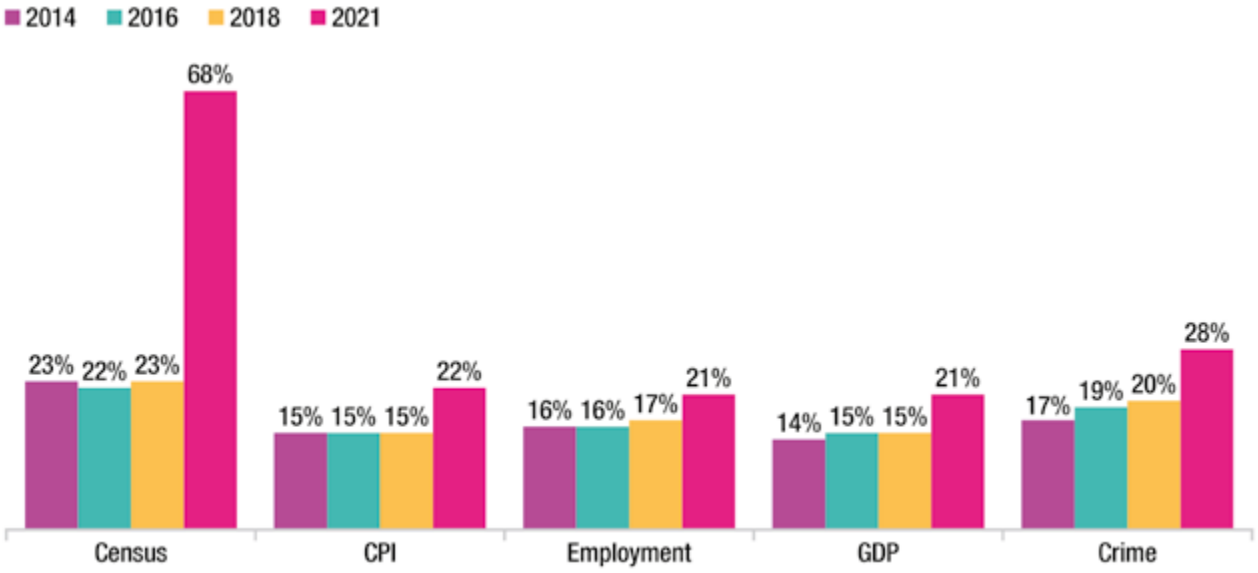
As in previous years, the 2021 survey contained an array of questions focusing on specific sets of statistics (data series) produced by the Office for National Statistics (ONS): the census, the Consumer Price Index (CPI), employment and unemployment statistics, Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and crime statistics. Respondents were asked whether they had used any of these statistics and whether this was within the last five years or not.

Public use of specific data series produced by ONS is relatively low (Figure 5.1). However, use of all statistics was higher in 2021 than in previous years. The most notable increase in use was for the census; in 2021 68% of respondents said they had used the census compared with 23% in 2018. This is almost certainly because 2021 was a census year. It may be that familiarity and interest in the data collected by the census increased because of its higher profile. However, it is also possible that this usage figure is artificially high with some respondents confusing participating in the census with using it. Any use of the census would have to have been data from 2011 or earlier as 2021 data were not published at the time of the survey.

For other data series, use remained much lower and closer to the level of previous years. Crime statistics were the next most used data series after the census, used by 28% in 2021.

Figure 5.1 Proportion of people that have used statistical series produced by ONS

Base: All respondents who gave a response, excluding don't know and refusals



Source: British Social Attitudes 2014, 2016, 2018 and Public Confidence in Official Statistics 2021

5.2 Which statistics reflect what is happening in the UK?

People were also asked for their opinions on different aspects of the data series discussed above. To begin with, people were asked whether they thought the series reflected changes in the UK, one measure of accuracy. As shown in section 4, the majority of the public agreed that, overall, statistics produced by ONS were accurate. There were also high levels of agreement regarding the accuracy of specific data series, although the exact level of agreement varied by data series (Figure 5.2). The public were most likely to believe the census reflected changes in the UK (86%) and least likely to agree that the crime statistics did so (77%). However, even for crime statistics, agreement was still high and had increased by seven percentage points compared with 2018 (from 70% to 77%). The proportion of people agreeing that employment and unemployment statistics reflect changes in the UK also increased between 2018 and 2021 (from 71% to 81%).

Figure 5.2 Percentage of people agreeing that statistics reflect changes in the UK

Base: All respondents who gave a response, excluding don't know and refusals

Source: British Social Attitudes 2014, 2016, 2018 and Public Confidence in Official Statistics 2021

5.3 Which statistics are free from political interference?

Whilst 74% of people agreed that, overall, the statistics produced by ONS are free from political interference (see section 4) there was more scepticism about the independence of some specific data series (Figure 5.3).

For all data series the proportion of people who agreed the statistics were free from political interference was higher than the proportion who disagreed. However, with the exception of the census - which was viewed as free from political interference by just over three-quarters of people (77%) – there was a sizeable minority who questioned the statistics' independence. Concerns about political interference were highest for crime statistics, about which 47% disagreed they were free from political interference.

Attitudes towards the independence of the CPI, GDP and census were unchanged compared with 2018. However, the proportion of people agreeing that employment and crime statistics were free from political interference increased from 2018 to 2021. These two series are still the ones people are least likely to agree are free from political independence. However, the gap in attitudes between these and other series narrowed somewhat in 2021.

Figure 5.3 Percentage of people agreeing that statistics are free from political interference

Base: All respondents who gave a response, excluding don't know and refusals

Source: British Social Attitudes 2014, 2016, 2018 and Public Confidence in Official Statistics 2021

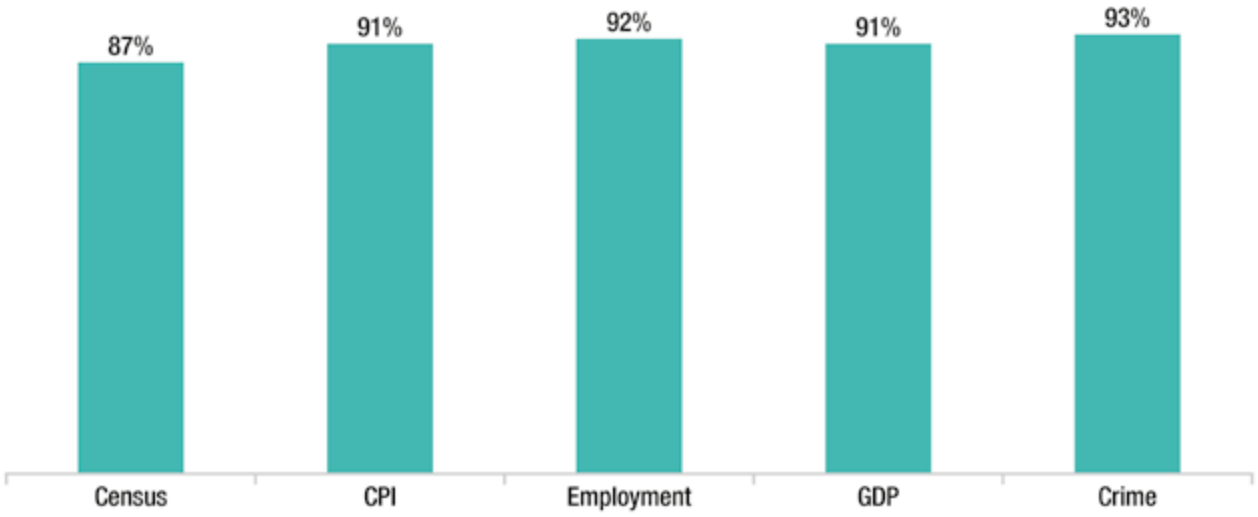
5.4 Which statistics are useful and timely?

People who had used the different statistics were asked additional questions about whether they thought these statistics were useful and timely. Most users agreed the data series they had used were useful (Figure 5.4). People were least likely to agree that the census was useful. The census was also the only data series about which attitudes were significantly different in 2021 compared with previous years. There was a drop of nine percentage points in the proportion who agreed the census was useful between 2018 and 2021 (from 96% to 87%). This change could potentially be explained by the increase in the proportion of census users between 2018 and 2021. As noted in section 5.1, some people may have conflated participating in the census with using the data series. These people may have been more likely to conclude the census is less useful than actual data users. Additionally, it may be that new users were less familiar with the census and so found it less useful than other users.

In addition to agreeing that data series were useful, most data users also believed the statistical series asked about were timely, that is they were released quickly to the public. As detailed in Figure 5.5, in 2021, most of the public agreed that the CPI, employment and unemployment statistics, GDP and crime statistics were released quickly. This is similar to previous years. However, also like previous years, people were much less likely to agree that the census was timely, with only around two thirds (69%) of people agreeing that it was released quickly. This is perhaps understandable given the scale of the census and the fact that it is only conducted every 10 years.

Figure 5.4 Percentage of users who agree statistics are useful

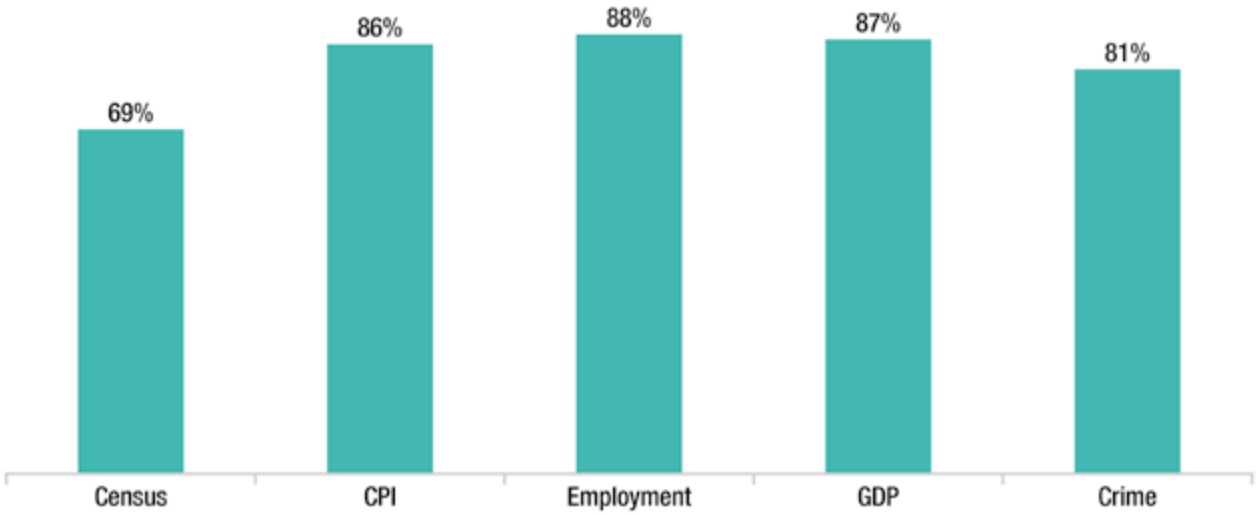
Base: Statistics users, excluding don't know and refusals



Source: Public Confidence in Official Statistics 2021

Figure 5.5 Percentage of users who agree statistics are released quickly

Base: Statistics users, excluding don't know and refusals



Source: Public Confidence in Official Statistics 2021

5.5 Differences by demographic characteristics

People's attitudes towards specific data series produced by ONS varied by education, occupation and age in similar ways to what was described for general attitudes to statistics in section 4.

People with a degree were most likely to have used many of the data series (35% used the CPI, 31% employment/unemployment statistics, 32% GDP, 36% crime statistics). Those with a degree were also the most likely to think that many of the statistics were accurate and to think they were free from political interference.

People in managerial and professional occupations (who were also more likely than other occupations to have a degree) were more likely than people in other occupations to have used the data series (29% used the CPI, 26% employment/unemployment statistics, 26% GDP, 33% crime statistics).

People aged 18 to 24-years old were most likely to have used employment and unemployment statistics (35%), GDP (34%) and crime statistics (46%). Broadly speaking, use of these data series decreased with age, falling to the lowest level among those aged 65+.


Reported cases

"People who had used COVID-19 statistics were very likely to agree that the statistics reflected changes in the UK but had mixed feelings about whether they were free from political interference"

6 Attitudes towards COVID-19 statistics

Key findings:

- 44% of the public report having using COVID-19 statistics. They were more commonly used than any of the other statistics asked about with the exception of the census.
- 79% of the public agree that COVID-19 statistics reflect changes in the UK. This is comparable to the other statistics produced by ONS.
- Attitudes on the independence of COVID-19 statistics are mixed. 53% of the public agree that COVID-19 statistics are free from political interference. This is the joint lowest of any of the statistics asked about.
- Almost all users of the statistics agree COVID-19 statistics are useful (92%) and timely (94%).

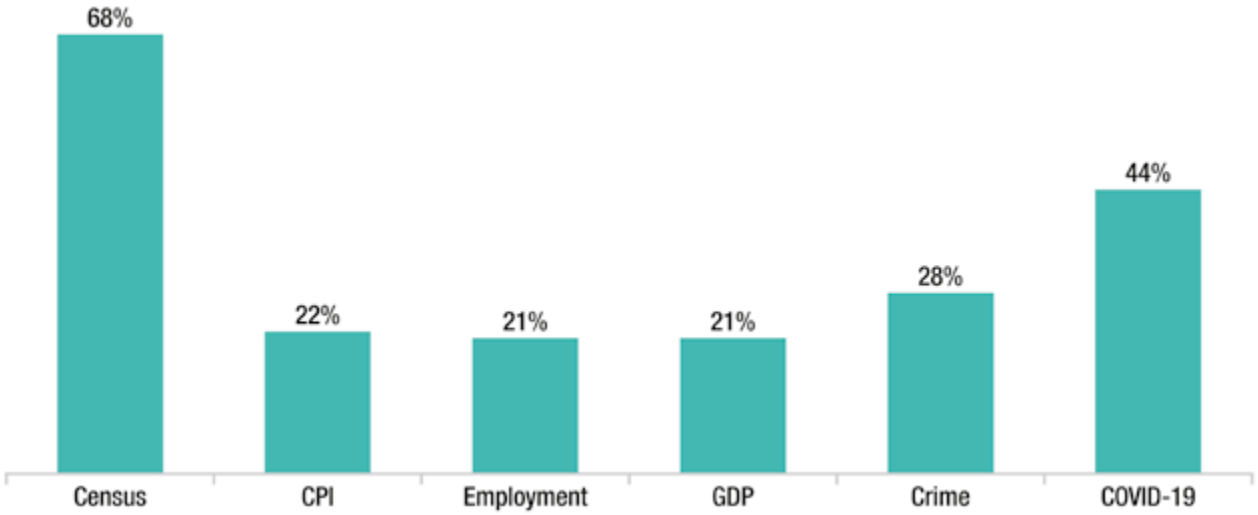
6.1 Use of COVID-19 statistics

The COVID-19 pandemic, which emerged in 2020 and continued throughout 2021, generated a range of new high-profile data series for which the Office for National Statistics (ONS) is responsible. Respondents were asked about their use of and attitudes towards COVID-19 statistics produced by ONS, using the same set of questions as those asked about other data series (see section 5).

People were far more likely to have used COVID-19 statistics compared with the other data series asked about, with the exception of the census (Figure 6.1). Over two-fifths of the public had used ONS' COVID-19 data (44%). The relatively high use of COVID-19 statistics is not surprising given the salience of the pandemic throughout 2021 and the regularity with which COVID-19 statistics appeared in the news. Those people who said that they saw statistics in the news daily were more likely to have used COVID-19 statistics (50%) compared to those who do not read or listen to the news (26%).

Figure 6.1 Percentage of people that used specific data series, including COVID-19 statistics

Base: All respondents who gave a response, excluding don't know and refusals



Source: Public Confidence in Official Statistics 2021

6.2 Perceptions of COVID-19 statistics

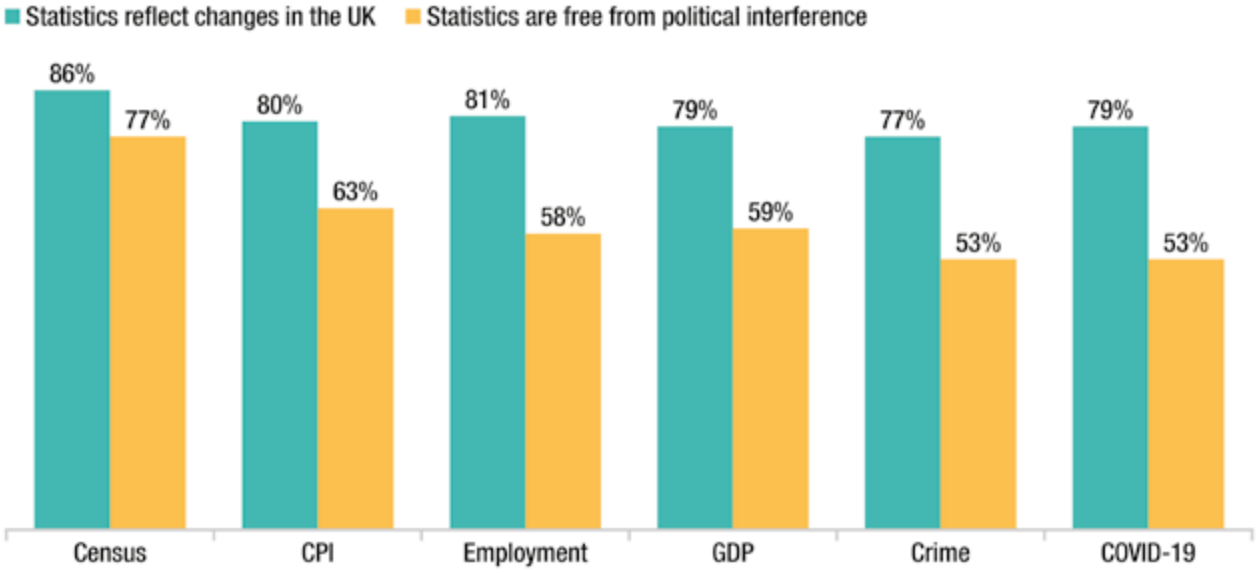
Most people (79%) agreed that COVID-19 statistics reflect changes experienced in the UK. This is in line with many of the other ONS statistics asked about (Figure 6.2). However, the strength of agreement was higher for COVID-19 statistics compared with other data series. Twenty percent of people strongly agreed that COVID-19 figures were accurate compared with only around one in ten that felt that way about the Consumer Price Index (CPI; 9%), employment and unemployment (12%), Gross Domestic Product (GDP; 10%) and crime statistics (10%). Given the saliency of the pandemic, the coverage of COVID-19, as well as awareness campaigns pushed by the government using these data, it is unsurprising that opinions were stronger about COVID-19 figures compared with other statistics.

Assessments of the independence of COVID-19 statistics were mixed. Just over half of people (53%) agreed that COVID-19 statistics were free from political interference whilst 47% disagreed (Figure 6.2). Agreement was lower than the other data series that were asked about, with the exception of crime statistics. The high-profile nature of COVID-19 statistics and the fact that they were often quoted publicly by politicians may help to explain their perceived lack of independence.

Almost all users of COVID-19 statistics agreed that the data series were useful (92%). This is comparable to other data series asked about (Figure 5.4). Almost all users of COVID-19 statistics also agreed that the statistics were released quickly (94%). This was higher than for any of the other data series asked about (Figure 5.5) and is consistent with the fact that COVID-19 statistics were released daily.

Figure 6.2 Percentage of people that agreed specific data series reflect changes in the UK and are free from political interference

Base: All respondents who gave a response, excluding don't know and refusals



Source: Public Confidence in Official Statistics 2021

6.3 Differences by demographic characteristics

As with the other data series covered by the survey, there was a clear association between people's attitudes towards COVID-19 statistics and their level of education. People educated to degree level or above were the most likely to have used COVID-19 statistics (60%), to agree that they were accurate (84%), and believe they were free of political interference (59%).

Also in line with the other data series included in PCOS, younger people were more likely to have used COVID-19 statistics; 52% of 18 to 24-year-olds, as well as 50% of both 25 to 34 and 35 to 44-year-olds had used COVID-19 statistics. In contrast, only 30% of those aged 65 or over had used the statistics. Despite being the age group least likely to use the statistics, users aged 65+ were the most likely to find the statistics useful (96%).

"Nearly everyone agrees there should be an independent body such as the UK Statistics Authority to speak out against the misuse of statistics"

7 Perceptions of UK Statistics Authority and Office for Statistics Regulation

Key findings:

- Less than half of the public have heard of the Authority or OSR. 19% of the public have some or a great deal of knowledge of the Authority whilst 29% have just heard the name. 17% have at least some knowledge of OSR whilst 24% had just heard the name.
- Although people do not necessarily know about the Authority or OSR there is strong support for their role. 96% of people agree there should be an independent body to speak out against the misuse of statistics and 94% agree such a body should ensure that statistics are produced free from political interference.

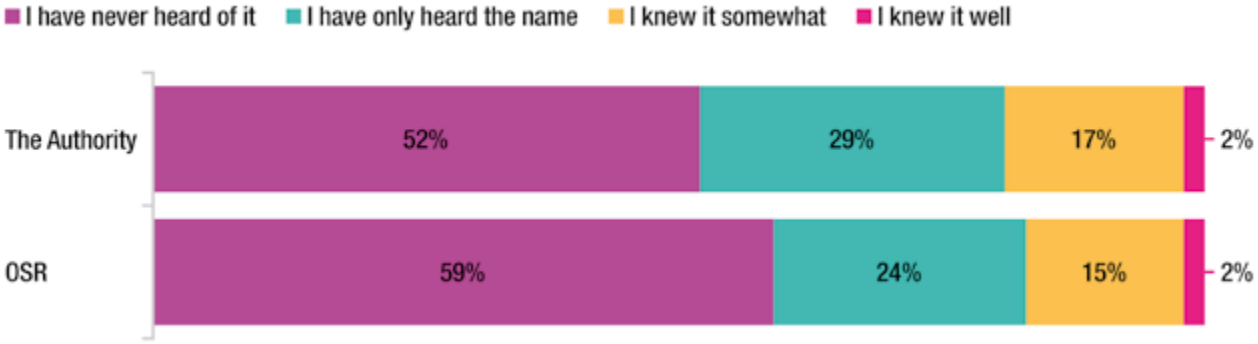
7.1 Knowledge of the Authority and OSR

As in previous years, people were asked about how well they knew the UK Statistics Authority (the Authority). They were also asked for the first time in 2021 how well they knew the Office for Statistics Regulation (OSR). People were less familiar with the Authority and OSR compared with the ONS as a whole (see section 2). Only 19% knew the Authority: two percent said they knew the Authority well and 17% said they knew it somewhat (Figure 7.1). Around half of the public (52%) had never heard of the Authority. Awareness of the Authority has increased from 2018 when 14% (vs 19% in 2021) reported knowing the organisation well or somewhat.

Knowledge of OSR was similar to knowledge of the Authority. Only two percent of people knew OSR well and only 15% knew it somewhat (Figure 7.1). Nearly three in five (59%) respondents had never heard of OSR.

Figure 7.1 Level of knowledge of UK Statistics Authority and Office for Statistics Regulation in 2021

Base: All respondents who gave a response, excluding don't know and refusals



Source: Public Confidence in Official Statistics 2021

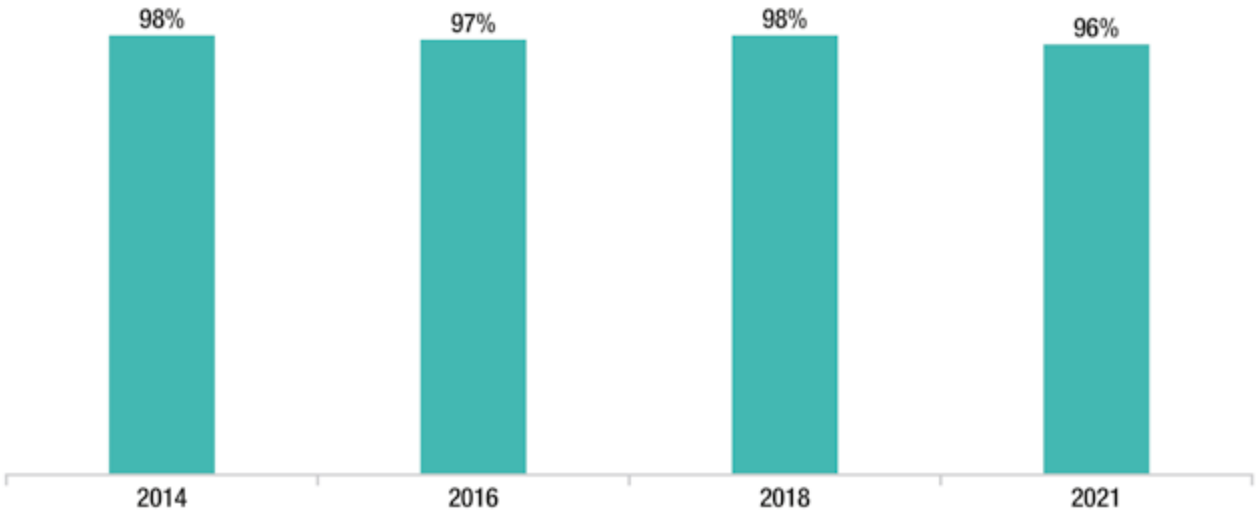
7.2 Importance of the Authority's role

Although the agency was not widely known, people agreed that the Authority's role is an important one.

Nearly everyone (96%) agreed that it is important for an independent body such as the Authority to speak out against the misuse of statistics (Figure 7.2), including 68% of the public that strongly agreed. This is a slight decrease from the level of agreement in 2018, but given the high levels of agreement in 2018, it was unlikely to increase.

Figure 7.2 Percentage of people that agree that it is important for UK Statistics Authority to speak out against misuse of statistics

Base: All respondents who gave a response, excluding don't know and refusals

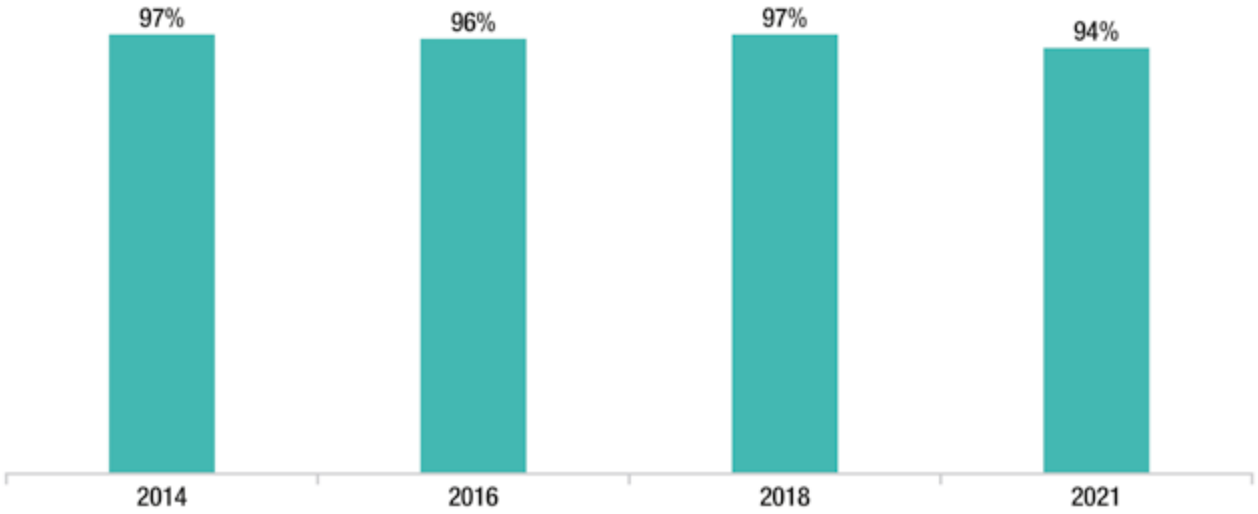


Source: British Social Attitudes 2014, 2016, 2018 and Public Confidence in Official Statistics 2021

Similarly, 94% of people agreed that it is important that an independent body ensures that official statistics are produced without political interference (Figure 7.3), including 61% who agreed strongly. Again, agreement here has decreased very slightly compared to 2018. However, nearly everyone still agreed that it is important for the Authority to ensure the independence of official statistics.

Figure 7.3 Percentage of people that agree that it is important for UK Statistics Authority to ensure that official statistics are produced without political interference

Base: All respondents who gave a response, excluding don't know and refusals



Source: British Social Attitudes 2014, 2016, 2018 and Public Confidence in Official Statistics 2021

7.3 Differences by demographic characteristics

Knowledge of the Authority varied by level of education. Those with some experience of higher education (either degree level or above (25%) or another type of higher education (27%)) were more likely to have knowledge of the Authority. People with education below degree level had consistently lower levels of knowledge (14% for those with A-levels, 14% below A-level, 16% no qualifications). Knowledge of OSR showed a less clear pattern of variation by education.

In the same way as they were more likely to have heard of ONS (see section 2) men were more likely than women to say they were aware of the Authority (23% vs 16%) and OSR (19% vs 15%).

Agreement with the need for an independent body to oversee the use and production of statistics was very high across all demographic groups. However, there were some differences by education and age. People with higher levels of education were more likely to agree that it is important for the Authority to speak out about misuse of official statistics (98% of people with a degree or higher compared with 89% of those with no qualifications) and that it was important for official figures to be free from political interference (97% vs 87%). This is despite people with no qualifications generally having more negative perceptions of the extent to which statistics are independent or honestly reported (see section 4). People aged 55 and over were the most likely to agree that it is important for the Authority to prevent misuse of statistics (98%) and ensure political independence (97%), while 25 to 34-year-olds were the least likely to agree (91% and 88% respectively).

Methodological note

Throughout this report, results are presented exclusive of 'don't know' and 'prefer not to say' responses, that is for all respondents able (and willing) to give an opinion rather than all adults 18+. As noted in the report introduction, there is a large difference in the level of 'don't know' responses in 2021 compared with 2018. As a result, the pattern of change over time observed after excluding 'don't know' responses may be different from that observed when looking at the whole sample inclusive of 'don't knows'.

The decision to present analyses exclusive of 'don't know' responses was taken for two reasons. First, the approach is consistent with that used for the majority of the analysis in previous years' reports. Second, it is not known whether the reduction in 'don't knows' in 2021 is driven by a genuine increase in knowledge and awareness across the population or the self-selection of more engaged respondents into the 2021 responding sample. Controlling for potential differences in sample composition by focusing on those respondents able to give an opinion in each year represents the most appropriate way to isolate real world change. It should however be acknowledged that ignoring the reduction in 'don't knows' may potentially lead to underestimating the extent of change and the extent to which there has been a hardening of both positive and negative attitudes towards official statistics.

Instances where significant differences in attitudes were observed 2018-2021 when looking at the whole sample inclusive of 'don't knows' but not when focusing on respondents able to give an opinion are detailed below. Table A.1 presents both sets of results for the 'Trust in ONS' measure by way of illustration. The accompanying technical report provides results inclusive of 'don't knows' for each question.

Trust in ONS

- All respondents able to give an opinion: No significant change between 2018 and 2021 in proportion agreeing or disagreeing that they trust ONS.
- All respondents: Significant increase between 2018 and 2021 in proportion agreeing that they trust ONS.

Trust in ONS statistics

- All respondents able to give an opinion: No significant change between 2018 and 2021 in proportion agreeing that they trust ONS statistics a great deal or tend to trust them.
- All respondents: Significant increase between 2018 and 2021 in proportion agreeing that they trust ONS statistics greatly or tend to trust ONS statistics.

Importance of ONS statistics

- All respondents able to give an opinion: No significant change between 2018 and 2021 in proportion that agree that ONS statistics are important to the country.
- All respondents: Significant increase between 2018 and 2021 in proportion that agree that ONS statistics are important to the country. Also significant increase in proportion that disagree.

Whether ONS statistics free from political interference

- All respondents able to give an opinion: No significant change between 2018 and 2021 in proportion that agree that ONS statistics are free from political interference.
- All respondents: Significant increase between 2018 and 2021 in proportion that agree that ONS statistics are free from political interference. Also significant increase in proportion that disagree.

Newspapers present statistics honestly

- All respondents able to give an opinion: the change in the proportion agreeing is not statistically significant.
- All respondents: Significant increase between 2018 and 2021 in proportion agreeing that newspapers present official statistics honestly. Also significant increase in proportion that disagree.

There are also a few instances where excluding ‘don’t knows’ can result in a statistically significant difference but in the opposite direction to when ‘don’t knows’ are included.

Agree/disagree important for an independent body to speak out publicly against misuse of statistics

- All respondents able to give an opinion: Significant decrease between 2018 and 2021 in proportion agreeing.
- All respondents: Significant increase between 2018 and 2021 in proportion agreeing. Also significant increase in the proportion that disagree.

Agree/disagree important for an independent body to ensure statistics are free from political interference

- All respondents able to give an opinion: Significant decrease between 2018 and 2021 in proportion agreeing.
- All respondents: Significant increase between 2018 and 2021 in proportion agreeing. Also significant increase in the proportion that disagree.

Table A.1: Do you tend to trust or tend not to trust ONS?

Base: All respondents/All respondents able to give an opinion

	2021	2018	2021	2018
Trust it a great deal	17%	10%	18%	14%
Tend to trust it	66%	57%	71%	75%
Tend to distrust it	9%	7%	10%	10%
Distrust it greatly	1%	1%	2%	2%
Don't know	7%	23%	-	-
Net trust	82%	68%	89%	88%
Unweighted base	*3,398*	*1,968*	*3,162*	*1,506*