

Eurostat: Stats in a Wrap

How do people use Eurostat data and products in their daily work?

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SPEAKERS

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Jonathan Elliott

Stats in a Wrap, the podcast series from Eurostat.

Jonathan Elliott

Welcome to another episode of Stats in a Wrap, the podcast all about statistics from Eurostat, the statistical office of the European Union. If you've been listening to our podcasts, you'll know that we think data are delicious! And we like nothing better than to slice and dice and wrap them into bite sized morsels whilst enjoying the intriguing stories, the fascinating conversations and startling truths about the everyday and not so everyday stats that surround us.

Today in the wrap café, we're going to be talking about you - well, you the people who aren't statisticians, but who use official statistics for their everyday work outside official circles. Yes, stats are the lifeblood of government policy, but they're also vital for a wide range of individuals and organisations trying to make sense of the many aspects of life in the EU; whether they're educators, businesspeople, academics or journalists, they need rock solid official stats on which to build their work.

So, we've invited three contributors from very different backgrounds to tell us about the many different ways they use statistics from Eurostat. In Luxembourg, Patrick Van Egmond, from the transport consultancy LuxMobility, advises governments on their transport strategies and often has to work with deeply held misconceptions in his clients on things like road safety. Patrick, welcome to Stats in a Wrap.

Patrick van Egmond

Moien, Jonathan, as we use to say in Luxembourg.

Jonathan Elliott

Meanwhile, in Portugal, Sérgio Guerreiro, from Turismo de Portugal, has to keep the country's restaurants, independent hotels, rental services, and others up to date on all the trends that affect the tourism industry. Welcome, Sérgio.

Sérgio Guerreiro

Great to be here and thank you very much for inviting me.

Jonathan Elliott

And teacher Tatjana von Bonkewitz has made it her mission to get her pupils in Luxembourg to use hard facts when it comes to news stories and received opinion.

Tatjana von Bonkewitz

Thanks a lot for having me. I'm really happy to be here.

Jonathan Elliott

Finally, giving us a perspective on the other side of the fence from Eurostat, Laia Guinovart assists 30 support centres that provide answers in 27 languages and coordinates requests between end users and experts in each field. Laia Guinovart from Eurostat, thank you very much for joining us today.

Laia Guinovart

Thank you, Jonathan, it's a pleasure.

Jonathan Elliott

Before we dive in, let's hear from our public on the streets outside the wrap café about what comes to mind when they hear the phrase 'official statistics'.

Person on street 1

Well basically, I know that it's a database of different questionnaires and people use data of Eurostat and different research, etc.

Person on street 2

Unfortunately, I have not used Eurostat for my job. I think also because of social media, the biggest ones are...have more visibility. And small ones, maybe it's harder to get to them, but I think it will be something very interesting to try, to explore. And I think it's a good opportunity for more people to get to know about it.

Jonathan Elliott

So, I'd like to start our discussion by going direct to Eurostat and Laia Guinovart to find out how you work with people who contact you with their queries and where you look for the information to help them. Can you just introduce us to your work?

Laia Guinovart

We receive questions from users, mainly governments, students, companies, etc, in various languages. And these questions are handled by the national statistical institutes of the Member States and enlargement countries, and they address basic queries.

But if they don't have the answer, the question is escalated to me in the central support. So, in many cases, I have the resources to respond, but when needed, I forward them to experts in the relevant statistical field to...for them to provide a detailed methodological explanation.

Jonathan Elliott

Now, as I understand it, your colleagues deal with different categories of inquiry. So, for example, some of them will be media enquiries from journalists.

Laia Guinovart

There is also another support, this is dedicated to journalists and fact-checkers. This is the media support. And then there is another support for the colleagues in the European institutions.

Jonathan Elliott

I had this romantic idea that you'd be sitting in a room with a desk and a telephone on it, and a large filing cabinet nearby, and people would ring you up and ask you a question, and you'd go and give them the answer. But it's not quite like that, is it?

Laia Guinovart

No! For us, it's very difficult sometimes to provide an answer on the phone, we really need to see the data the users are checking so we understand exactly the question. Because there are a lot of similar datasets, so we need to exactly know what dimensions they have selected. And so, I want to properly understand and analyse the request so we can provide an accurate answer.

Jonathan Elliott

Yeah, we bump into this a lot in Stats in a Wrap and that is the importance of asking a good question. It's a pretty critical part of statistical work. And we'll come back later in the podcast to this and your experience of people's questioning styles and the assumptions about definitions that they bring when they ask you questions. Let's step out of the wrap café again to hear a few words from our people in the street now.

Person on street 3

I believe the majority of people that use Eurostat might be companies or also businesses that are trying to offer a service to the public and need large, big data, the famous big data to analyse what the public wants and what the public needs.

Person on street 4

I think the data will be used by the governments, by non-government organisations, by maybe also the citizens, people who want to know about their hobbies maybe. I think there's a huge community who uses this, but I think first the governments.

Jonathan Elliott

I want to talk to our users now, and perhaps we could start with Patrick Van Egmond at LuxMobility. First of all, tell us what is LuxMbability, and tell us a little bit about your work, before we dive into how you use data from Eurostat.

Patrick van Egmond

Yeah. Thank you, Jonathan, yeah. LuxMobility is a transport and mobility consultancy. We consult national governments, but also the European Commission on transport and mobility, whether it be on topics like introducing of cycling, parking, road safety, the Eurostat data is really the basis of where we start.

Jonathan Elliott

Give us some examples of how you've used Eurostat statistics.

Patrick van Egmond

Well, recently, we have finished a job with Transport Malta, Ministry of Transport, to make a sustainable urban mobility plan. Basically, they said to us, when starting that job: 'cycling is very dangerous in Malta, you can just not do it'.

That might be true, but the statistics showed that actually there were not so many accidents happening, and it was more what the newspapers wrote about it and what politicians had in their mind of how dangerous was than the actual danger. Eurostat data helped us to actually start an informative discussion with the politicians about, okay, where do we start and where do we would like to go to.

Jonathan Elliott

Of course, not everyone welcomes the truth. I mean, particularly if it conflicts with cherished to long held beliefs. What do you do if you have to work with a client whose views are not backed by the evidence – it's a potentially tricky situation, isn't it?

Patrick van Egmond

Yeah, absolutely. I think that the politicians, we all know them, they are there for the people. I think they do a great job. But sometimes in our studies, we don't like to go with what general thoughts are on certain mobility or transport topics. No, we really would like to start do a real study what is possible, what's not possible. In a second step, we can discuss how can this politically be brought to the public. But in the beginning, we just would like to see reality. For that Eurostat data is a key.

Jonathan Elliott

I'm going to come back to you in a minute, Patrick, but I'd like to ask Sérgio Guerreiro about his organisation. Sérgio, tell us a bit about what Turismo de Portugal does and your role in it.

Sérgio Guerreiro

I'm senior director for strategy and knowledge management at Turismo de Portugal. Turismo de Portugal is the national tourism administration authority here in Portugal. So, we deal with everything from regulation to planning to training of people. We are a funding agency. We're also a marketing agency, and we are frequent users of Eurostat because comparability of data from our competitors, let's call it like this, is crucial to the design of our policy in all senses.

We represent a sector in Portugal that is...95% to 98% of the companies are SMEs. So, we designed a data hub for the industry, where we concentrate more than 35 data sources, and we deliver to the tourism industry in one single platform <https://travelbi.turismodeportugal.pt/en> where we give freely access to companies of most recent trends of tourism industry, both in Portugal and internationally. So that's our relationship with Eurostat.

It is a fundamental data source for us, provide us some data that we are not have access, such as, for example, experimental statistics on short term rental, which is, I would say, a hot topic, I would say everywhere in the world regarding tourism, and Eurostat provide us very useful tool to understand where we are in terms of tourism development and behaviour.

Person on street 5

There should be more awareness with...of Eurostat, because very few people, at least in my country, know of the existence of Eurostat. And since I believe it's a very useful and, like, in our today's society,

very important institution, there should be more awareness of the services it provides and how they can be used for making our society better.

Jonathan Elliott

Tatjana, now let me come to you. You're a schoolteacher, and you're very passionate about getting your students to think critically and to use data sources really well in group discussions about social and political issues especially. Talk us through how you work with Eurostat when you're doing this.

Tatjana von Bonkewitz

Yeah, I guess what Patrick just said. It's something I encounter on a regular basis with my students, whether it's in literature, where we discuss, of course, also a bit of politics and history or in human science, and they come up with an idea, yeah, 'You can't ride a bike in Malta'; 'Everybody is rich in Luxembourg'. 'Men and women now earn the same - we don't need feminism anymore'.

And I want to challenge them, to undermine their positions with facts and figures, and to not just pick up what they've heard or what they've seen somewhere And Eurostat offers really good possibilities for them to play around with the data. There are different formats. They can search different topics, and I really encourage them to do that playfully. So, it's not so much found out how many people do this or that in a certain country, but I really want them to play around with the data.

Jonathan Elliott

Patrick, one of the things we were talking about in preparing this podcast was how timeliness in statistics is important, especially in transport, a field which is incredibly diverse and fast moving with constantly evolving technology. I'm just wondering how you advise your clients at LuxMobility using official statistics, which can be more than a few months, possibly even a year old?

Patrick van Egmond

Depends a bit on which level we make these plans. Strategies that we work a lot on are sustainable urban mobility plans or national urban mobility plans. And there actually the Eurostat statistics are rather in line with what we need. For example, we see that car traffic for the daily commute is around 72% in Luxembourg. And then we're able to make a plan, say: okay, how can we bring it down to 65% by increasing people taking public transport or some cycling.

The moment that we work with local organisations or companies, and we like to make their mobility plan, Eurostat data form a bit the overall framework in which we try to move. We make, for example, use of real time data, tracking data, tracking people by mobile phones, try to combine in our calculations with the Eurostat data.

Jonathan Elliott

Sérgio, you're quite passionate about data literacy and helping your constituents to understand the significance of, say, sustainability data, because people in policy are not always natural statisticians. They know how to use statistics, but sometimes it's quite hard to unpack the tables, to interrogate the infographics and just to try and make sense of them and to communicate them.

Just tell us about your experience, because you have a wide variety of people who you have to serve and who you work with, and you have to communicate not just the raw data, but what's underneath it, how it was obtained, and what the significance of it is. Can you just tell us a bit more about that?

Sérgio Guerreiro

It's a great question, and I think it's one of the pressures that we have today for delivering data: timeliness is absolutely crucial, especially after the pandemic in our sector people don't want to rely on past statistics. They want to know what's the next chapter. So, it's constant pressure on that. And my perspective on this is: I like to believe in complementary data sources. So, I really much rely on official statistics because they are the common truth that we believe above all.

But then I complement it to do our work with other sources which are typically more timely and typically more granular - thinking about mobile data or credit card data that can give us more information to drive businesses from companies, understanding shifts of patterns. And I think this complementarity helps us to improve the quality of data that we give to people to take decisions. In the end of the day - that's our role.

Patrick van Egmond

That's very interesting, Sérgio. We make use of credit card data to see how much people come shopping in the weekend in the shopping centre. Do you use credit card data to see how much tourists are coming to Portugal?

Sérgio Guerreiro

No, we don't use that for volume, we use for behaviour. So, we can understand with the use of credit card data where people spend their money geographically, but also in terms of economic activities where the spending is done.

So, if it's in restaurants, if it's in hotels, if it's in transport or commercial sites. So, we can understand different kinds of patterns of tourists that visit Portugal, and basically give that data to our marketeers to understand how we can improve the spending in the country and make also developments in our tourism offer to be adjusted to the preferences of our visitors.

Tatjana von Bonkewitz

I was just thinking what you two are saying - you're in a very economical, fast-moving world, but one of the themes that really unites us is the fact that we say: 'we need good data to make decisions'. And I think that's something that today is so important, whether it's an economic environment or whether it's on a social level, where people just pick up something and take it as their decision, rather than fact-checking it. And that's where, for me, Eurostat, or others, really come in to help shape our society.

Person on street 6

We were using, like, official website of Eurostat to see the reflection of the number of migrants at the current stage. The website should be a little bit more user-friendly for people who doesn't use it that often, because in order to understand it and know how to use all of the tools on the website, you should be aware of it. You should use it more often, probably.

Jonathan Elliott

Sérgio, you're quite passionate about data literacy and helping your constituents and your people that you work with to understand the significance of, say, sustainability data. Because people in policy are not always natural statisticians. They know how to use statistics, but sometimes it's quite hard to

unpack the tables, to interrogate the infographics and try to make sense of them and to communicate them.

Just tell us about your experience, because you have a wide number of people who you have to serve and who you work with, and you have to communicate not just the raw data, but what's underneath it, how it was obtained, and what the significance of it is. Can you just tell us a bit more about that?

Sérgio Guerreiro

Yeah - it's a very good question, and it really connects with what Tatjana was saying. People today consume information in a very speedy way, so we need to change the way that we approach the users. It's not enough to have nice report with nice graphics and the really nice production if you don't communicate properly, that's one thing that we've learned. I run a team of people that work for data, and one thing that I always tell them is: listen to the consumer.

Let's check how people consume our data. What do they want? And we try to explain - so communication is a very important block of it. We started to pack our reports and our statistics with very fancy communication cards that can explain what is the most important thing that you're going to read in the report, and then we invite them to go there.

Jonathan Elliott

So, what you're saying is that the data has to serve the user. In other words, if the user can't understand and use the data quickly and usefully, it'll need to be repackaged, rethought, or represented in some way.

Sérgio Guerreiro

Absolutely. And if you go to a very complex website, that is absolutely the truth. In our focus group we did, someone asked: 'well, do you have information on the golf courses?' And I said that we have information, it's hidden somewhere in our website, but it's there. So, there is something that we need to improve in terms of getting data accessible to user.

If we move to new generations, it's going to be more and more that, because they are from an instant generation. They want to click and have access to what they're searching. So, the more complex system we build, the harder it is to get to the user.

Jonathan Elliott

Yes, well: welcome to the ChatGPT revolution - I guess. I just wanted to come to Tatjana now: you're not a teacher of statistics, but I'm just wondering how much numeracy and number confidence you find in your pupils. What do you do about the need for confidence in handling basic maths and statistical literacy in the classroom?

Tatjana von Bonkewitz

So yes, you're absolutely right. So, mathematics is already a subject that many students in some way feel uncomfortable with or definitely fear. Statistics is kind of, like, even worse. By playing around, by really looking at, for example, trends, looking at graphs - and if I look at the Eurostat graphs, they're nice and colourful -so we can really interpret: what does it mean? What do I see? Oh, you know, the graphs get bigger, smaller, whatever...they can see that it's not just numbers.

We can actually put pictures onto those numbers. I help the students to go from the visual part more to the number parts. And certain things I will just tell them: this is a way to do it, because I really want to get them away from that fear of this black box statistics and the daunting formulas, but say it's something you can really touch, use, see and play with.

Jonathan Elliott

Again, it's back to that relatability issue, isn't it? It's about seeing numbers as a tool, rather than just a sort of scary thing you're supposed to know about. You actually just...you have to become the master and the user. Laia, as I mentioned earlier, you have on offer an amazing array of educational and learning tools at Eurostat.

Perhaps you could just talk us through what is actually out there for educators especially, and for people who want to improve their knowledge. Because there is so much to use, isn't there? Could you tell us a bit about that?

Laia Guinovart

Eurostat has done great efforts, I think, in last years, to make statistics more attractive to everyone. So, I'm very happy to hear what Tatjana is saying now, because I see the results. You can see there are more and more visualisation tools, and there are interactive graphs. You can actually play around with the figures. Besides, you have of course the Statistics Explained articles. This is kind of Wikipedia, so our statistics are described and explained in an easy way.

And of course, plenty of concepts are linked to our glossary, where you can find the definitions, which is very, very important also. An educational corner, where you can find videos for the students; they are organising contest also. So, there are a lot of initiatives to make statistics attractive. I'm very happy to hear that Tatjana is using all these resources.

Tatjana von Bonkewitz

Now, I have to say, especially the visualisations on social topics, that's something the students really, really like, because it's very close to them. And of course, anything that's in video or podcast format, as long as they don't have to read, that's even better.

Sérgio Guerreiro

We typically assume that the people that are looking for our data, they are experts in our data. But things are becoming more and more complex, and I use a lot Eurostat and the Statistics Explained to go through, for example, environmental data, which I'm not expert at all.

But with that, I would say statistics for dummies, in terms of tools, helps me to progress in terms of my knowledge and understand what is that kind of data means to and the complexity that we are living on I think that is a great asset. And congratulations, Laia on that particular spot, because I'm a heavy user of that to enrich me and to understand what I'm actually reading in terms of the information that is there.

Jonathan Elliott

And I should plug here the wonderful Key Figures on Europe, which is one of the most popular publications of Eurostat, and the 2024 edition is now available. It's packed with infographics which are as informative as they are beautiful, and I do urge you to obtain a copy.

Patrick, I just wanted to ask you about data literacy and statistical literacy in the people you work with. I mean only a few of us routinely handle complex statistical models and concepts and yet they're becoming increasingly important, especially in transport. What's your experience?

Patrick van Egmond

Now, of course, you meet all type of clients, and some have really good education in statistics, and then, in general, they understand what you're telling them. But many they want us to tell what they actually would like to hear up front already. So, they ask us actually to search for the data that proves their statement. And I think that's actually the hard part of our job, is that we can maybe start from there, but then slowly introduce, yeah, what are actually the realities.

To give an example, I have to think about this, for example... okay: we see that a small country like Luxembourg knows that 61% of its CO2 emissions is due to transport. But then - yeah, okay - a lot of that transport is actually done by cross border workers or trucks passing through Luxembourg on the 'Route du Soleil' to Spain and etc., and coming back. And then, well, we know that we have to work on that topic.

Person on street 7

This can be very useful, in my opinion, to the public, to also make self-based research. I myself find very useful information on statistics when I'm researching a topic, getting a deeper understanding of the topic.

Jonathan Elliott

Fascinating. That's, I mean, this is really important, isn't it? Because Laia: it's about the extent to which people not only understand the data, the statistics at one level, but they understand the methodology, the metadata, the process, how it was arrived at, what that statistic is actually comprised of, and what it means.

It's almost like going to a supermarket and looking at the ingredients of a product to make sure that it doesn't have any allergens or to make sure that it was made in a particular way if that matters to you. To what extent do you find people who might be experts or apparently very knowledgeable about statistics, but they make fundamental errors in comparing datasets with different methodologies?

For example: these statistics were arrived at in different ways, and yet they're used comparably. What's your experience of the deeper knowledge about statistics among some of the people who come to you with questions?

Laia Guinovart

Yeah, yeah. This creates plenty of misunderstandings with our figures, because as said we can have similar datasets, but they come from different data collections. Therefore, these figures are based on different methodologies. For instance, yesterday, there was a user that couldn't understand the difference between two datasets and I explained: okay, this one, the first one is based on demographic data.

This is not a survey; this is actual records and includes all the population. And she was comparing this to another dataset, very similar, about foreign born population in the country, but this data comes from a survey and doesn't include the same population. It's only about active people.

So, for everyone who needs to write about these statistics, they really need to visit our methodological files attached to the tables, where you can find the definitions and relevant information to correctly understand the data, because otherwise it can be tricky.

Jonathan Elliott

It's a lot of work for you and your team to help people unpack and understand all this complex information. I mean, it would seem reasonable to expect them to pay a fee of some kind, wouldn't it?

Laia Guinovart

No, no, no. This service is free of charge for any citizen of the world. Actually, it's funny, because sometimes we receive requests from users, sometimes from the US or China. They say: 'okay, I found this data, but do you have more to offer if I pay?'. Like - no, no, sorry! Our policy is to provide free access data for everyone in the world at the same time through our website. There is no paid service. You cannot get more. If it's not there, if it's not already available on the website, there is no data.

Jonathan Elliott

Patrick, are you observing an increased awareness of data overall? I mean, since the pandemic, for example, data and data literacy, data science, statistics and all that kind of thing is much more in the public eye. People are handling information more carefully, much more rigorously than perhaps they did, or they're more inclined to be sceptical or inquiring. Have you observed a change in the way that people use and talk about data?

Patrick van Egmond

What we see that people look on Google or use ChatGPT now to get all kind of information, we actually see that our clients are better informed about what goes on. I think the different reports that come out on climate change, all this climate reporting that a lot of governments, cities, big companies now have to do, actually make them come back to actually what are actually the figures.

And they start asking questions about, okay, how much does it actually impact all my employees coming by car to work? Or what does it mean to become a net zero city – an emission city? What do I have to do to become CO2 neutral? And as transport and mobility is a big part of that impact, they are aware that figures are important. So, I think in that sense, Eurostat plays a more central role in getting the answers to our present challenges that we have in Europe and the rest of the world.

Jonathan Elliott

Well, we've run out of time. Absolutely fascinating subjects, we could talk at considerably greater length. There are so many different avenues we could be going down, and maybe we should be going down, but unfortunately, we've reached the end of this episode. So it remains for me to say a big thank you to all the contributors for this amazingly interesting session about how people use data and statistics from Eurostat. Tatjana von Bonkewitz, thank you very much. Thanks for joining us.

Tatjana von Bonkewitz

Thank you very much for having me.

Jonathan Elliott

Lovely. And Laia Guinovart from Eurostat, thank you so much for joining us today.

Laia Guinovart

Thank you, Jonathan. It was a pleasure.

Jonathan Elliott

Patrick Van Egmond at LuxMobility, the transport consultancy, thank you so much for joining us at Stats in a Wrap today.

Patrick van Egmond

And I would like to thank also Eurostat. I learned something today.

Jonathan Elliott

Lovely. I hope we all did. And Sérgio in Lisbon. Thank you very much for taking the time to talk to us and help us through this amazingly complex and interesting subject. Thank you very much for joining us.

Sérgio Guerreiro

Thank you very much. It was really a pleasure, and I really enjoyed the conversation.

Jonathan Elliott

If you've enjoyed Stats in a Wrap, don't forget to follow us on social media and share our adventures with friends and colleagues where the show can be found on Spotify, Apple and all the usual places. And of course, join us for the next edition, when we'll be dishing up more flavoursome insights from Eurostat, this time about the critically important and much under-researched subject of gender-based violence. Join us then, but for now. Goodbye.