

Free at Last International Statistics Join the Open Access Party

By [Amanda Wakaruk](#)

Want to compare literacy rates across a continent? Need to know which countries received development aid over the past decade? Worry about the authority of the statistics you found using Google? Not anymore! Many official international statistics have been liberated for public consumption by their compilers and are now available openly on the internet.

Most statistics are collected by national agencies and compiled by international organizations that control for issues like reliability and harmonization. These organizations often support the development of statistical capacity and output in the home nation where quality can vary widely. While impressive strides have been achieved over the past four decades, the field is relatively young, and most reliable economic comparisons originate from the inter-war period. Furthermore, statistics are rooted in context; policies and politics shape their collection, compilation, and dissemination. Finding the series you need is only the beginning – interpretation, as always, requires critical thought.

1 UNData

data.un.org

The UNData portal was born of the United Nations Statistics Division's (UNSD¹) "Statistics as a Public Good" initiative (associated with Swedish health professor Hans Rosling of GapMinder² and Google Public Data) and since 2008 provides free access to series from over 24 databases (some of which were previously fee-based). Search by keyword using the main Google-esque interface or access specific series by clicking on "Databases" and then "Sources." The most active compilers of

the UN family all contribute: World Bank, International Labour Organization, World Health Organization, etc. Coverage therefore includes agriculture, education, employment, environment, health, human development, industry, economy, tourism, trade, etc. What makes this tool a treasure, however, is not breadth but depth: each search result produces a table followed by source notes including links to the originating publication, database, and/or agency. On the down side, its functionality (with options to limit, sort, and export data on the fly) is tempered by occasional glitches (e.g., numerical sorting might not do what you expect) and gaps in the data can be confusing to those unfamiliar with the series. While issues of functionality can be explained by the beta nature of the site (see data.un.org/History.aspx) the latter is often associated with the socio-political history of the field of international statistics.³



2 World dataBank (World Bank) data.worldbank.org

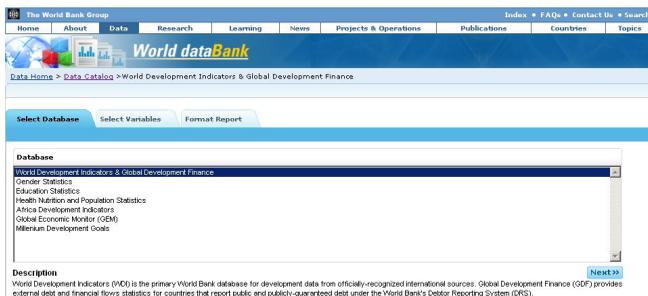
In late April 2010, the World Bank announced free, open access to over 2,000 indicators (with hundreds going back fifty years or more) previously available through (fee-based) databases like World Development Indicators, Global Development Finance, and Global Economic Monitor. Not only does this suite of products include variables about economic conditions (including financial indicators), education, gender, health, and population, it provides aggregates by income level and OECD inclusion. Furthermore, the Global Economic Monitor provides daily, monthly, and quarterly compilations of financial indicators (not always easy to find). To access the full spectrum of series from any database, click the “Databank” button  linked from all

statistics pre-dating the United Nations is short, making this publication (from its predecessor) an important one. *The Statistical Yearbook of the League of Nations*, available via a 2001 digitization project, includes figures from 1913-1944 that describe population, trade, finance, communications, and employment, although breadth of coverage can vary by year. It also includes input from countries that were not League members (e.g., United States, Russia). Want to compare national unemployment rates during the 1930s? How about the number of telephones or automobiles by country in the early 1920s? This is the place to find it.

4 National Statistical Agencies: UNSD Website unstats.un.org/unsd/methods/inter-natlinks/sd_natstat.asp

Don't forget the data collectors! Many national statistical agencies have been making their output available on their

sub-tab pages off the main page (Countries, Topics, etc.). But don't click too fast! There are also task-driven paths noted on these secondary pages ... find series by country, topic, database, or drill right into the indicators. Look closely for some of the finer features: the “notes” button provides information about the variable and its source; the “format report” function can re-orient output (e.g., it might make more sense to have the countries listed in the rows instead of the variables); the mapping function creates visual representation of retrieved series. If blank cells and missing years are evident, remember that the World Bank's statistical indicators evolved alongside its policies (e.g., economic well-being and infrastructure in the 1950s-1960s and health, nutrition, education, and family planning later on) and check the notes for context. If you're having problems, try Firefox and/or Explorer for PCs.



3 Statistical Yearbook of the League of Nations www.library.northwestern.edu/govinfo/collections/league/stat.html

The list of sources for reliable and comparable international

web sites for years. Just be very careful about comparing statistics drawn from separate statistical agencies. Let's not forget what happened to David Frum in 2006.⁴

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NOTES

1. The UNSD was preceded by the United Nations Statistical Office (UNSO).
2. GapMinder's tagline is: "unveiling the beauty of statistics for a fact based world view" (gapminder.org).
3. For more on the fascinating and very human progress of international statistical compilation and dissemination, see Ward, M. (2004), *Quantifying the world: UN ideas and statistics* (Bloomington, IA: Indiana University Press).
4. Frum mistakenly compared statistics from the US Bureau of Statistics and Statistics Canada, writing that "Canada's overall crime rate is now 50% higher than the crime rate in the United States," as part of the article "Reaping what we sow," published in the January 3, 2006, issue of the *National Post* (page A14). For added commentary on this statistical mishap, see: Gardner, D. (2006, February 15), "Crime story depends on the teller," *Ottawa Citizen*, p. A13.