

Meaningless statistics that don't add up

Being average is nothing to be proud of, says

DICK LUMSDEN

I don't know about you, but I am getting distinctly fed up with the word average. The weathermen tell us that we've had higher than average rainfall this winter, and higher than average temperatures, except when we had a couple of days when it plunged below average. I don't care about the average, I just care that it is wet or cold as I trudge wearily down the hill to Manningtree station of a morning.

The Government statistical boffins tell us what our average life expectancy is, and, on average, where it is best to live. But an adult male might fall under a bus at the age of 18, or he might live quite happily to be 110, the average is meaningless.

For all of my adult life I have been plagued by being shorter than average, heavier than average, with worse than average eyesight.

Every day when I open a newspaper or switch on TV, someone somewhere is using the word average as a pseudo-legitimate hook on which to hang a news story. Yet the reality is that pretty much each time an average is quoted, the range of extremes renders the point pretty meaningless.

And that is particularly true when we start to talk about money. I don't

know how much money Britain is (probably) a richer than average country and, on average, those of us who live here are probably better off than those in many other countries.

But again, the range from very poor to very rich is vast and no amount of surveys or forecasts can alter that – although they do make some pretty tantalising headlines.

In the last week for instance, we have been told that the combined wealth of the over 50s living in Britain today now exceeds £6.2 trillion. If we take this figure from Saga and divide it by the total number of over 50s (23.2 million according to the Government), the average wealth of each and every one of us is a shade over £267,000.

Yet the same survey tells us that the average wealth of someone in the top 20% is just over £1 million and for someone in the lowest 20% it is just £3,000. So how meaningless is an average across the board? And how many of you are now juggling the mental arithmetic to see if you are above or below average?

In comparison to Saga's wealth survey, another survey last week (from a financial lending company called Zopa) tells us that the average debt of each and every adult in the country is now £49,200. That is a staggering £2.5 trillion. Let's hope that it is the people at the top end of the wealth scale who owe most, otherwise none of it will ever get paid back and the country will be bust in no time.

However, if you stretch your



■ A view of Switzerland's monster mountains from the Mannlichen mountain

PICTURE: TONY RAY

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..... many of these surveys, you discover that, in most cases, the information was collected from a relatively small sample of people, but the researchers have applied mathematical models to scale the responses up to cover the whole population. So in reality, they are just made up numbers.

I say if we are going to work out an average for the adult population, we should ask each and every adult. With just under 60 million people over the age of 18, a 10-minute phone call to each of us would take

us all. So here's an idea. Why doesn't the Government hire 1,000 of the least wealthy people, and give them a job working on this research team so that they can earn a decent salary.

And every year we get to vote on the one average number we want to know and the team gets to it.

It could be anything from the average number of shoes we own, to the average number of cucumbers we eat.

Of course, the range would still have highs and lows, but at least it would be a real number – although still absolutely pointless.

And perhaps the most pointless, meaningless and facile average of them all is the United Nations-backed World Happiness Report. Undeterred by war, famine, disease, natural disasters, crime or global economic meltdown, researchers painstakingly racked up the scores across 186 countries to decide where, on average, the happiest people were in 2015.

Togo where a background of genocide, corruption and mass destruction of property is probably not conducive to great happiness.

Top of the pile? Switzerland, Iceland and Denmark. Clearly Toblerones, frozen food bargains and Lego are the keys to happiness.

And slap bang in the middle, the most averagely happy country on the planet (apparently) is Macedonia – so long as they aren't scrapping or rowing with Greece or Albania over some territorial dispute or other.

Average is a very dangerous and misleading word and I, for one, have had enough of it. I urge you all to read between the lines and carefully consider the extremes. Unless of course, you come out better than average in which case you can pat yourself on the back.

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■ Dick Lumsden is managing director of Owl Marketing Solutions, one of the few companies specialising in marketing and