

EDITORIAL: STATISTICIANS AGAINST THE CUTS?

'The extensive role social statistics play in the everyday workings of modern society goes hand in hand with the portrayal of statistical practice as a purely technical matter', claims the first sentence of 'Demystifying Social Statistics'. And, as the rest of the introduction makes clear, the authors wouldn't disagree if I add that this goes hand in hand with an equally erroneous picture of the statistician as someone who is just doing his or her, often highly skilled, job. What's more, even if statistics affect everyday life extensively, it's not the person in the street who uses them; they are instruments in the hands of the authorities for controlling everyday life, which is why most statisticians are employed by government or government controlled bodies. It seems to me that the same, more or less, applies to many other professional workers and their specialised skills: teachers, doctors, social workers, etc.

It's in the light of this situation that we have to see the present cuts in government (dis)services and possible reactions to them by 'radical' statisticians. Perhaps we can try to reconcile our roles as technicians of social control with aspirations to undermine authority by making more revealing statistics available, or presenting them in less misleading ways, or publicising their repressive role. But we can hardly kid ourselves that the contradiction has been overcome: those who are poor, homeless, discriminated against or just plain unhappy can experience their predicament directly, without any need for our statistics (fortunately!). A 'radical statistician', it seems to me, in the end means a statistician who doesn't want to be one (but sees nothing better to do), who wants a world without statisticians, or at any rate without statisticians who produce, present or teach statistics as they do now.

Bob Gilchrist ended the editorial to RSN 19 on an indecisive note: having defended the relative progressiveness of the ILEA he points out that it's controlled by a small group of people and unresponsive to pressure. But while he or I might use our opportunities to make a living by working in ILEA-run institutions, and do our best to make our work more 'radical', I can't honestly see who apart from us would be worse off if the ILEA and its statistics courses were wiped off the face of the earth. 'Progressive' education authorities, like 'progressive' local councils, seem ideologically most suited for administering the same system in 'decaying inner city areas'. It's perfectly understandable that statisticians, like everyone else, tend to defend their jobs, living standards, salaries and working conditions - but not especially radical.

That's how cuts in statistical services and teaching seem to me (and I hope it can be part of a continuing debate). The implications for RadStats of unemployment among its participants seem quite promising: increased time and energy to contribute to present and proposed activities and, most exciting of all, the prospect of forming an unemployed statisticians' subgroup, with the aim of examining what statistical activities might be useful outside, and after the collapse of, the present government institutions (and with the secondary aim, since it'll be the first subgroup unable to finance itself, of putting the group's embarrassingly large bank balance to good use).

# Black population 'will level out at 6pc by 2000'

By Lindsay Mackie  
Quackery Dec 87 1980

By the year 2000 the black population of Britain will be around 3.3 million and will stabilise after that to form 6 per cent of the total population, according to a new book of racial statistics.

The stabilisation of the numbers of black people in Britain will occur, say the authors of Britain's Black Population, because by the year 2000 almost all those eligible to enter Britain from the New Commonwealth will have arrived.

In addition, the age structure of the black population will more closely resemble that of the already stable white population, and the present differential in fertility is also expected to have disappeared.

The book has been prepared by the Runnymede Trust and the Radical Statistics Race Group.

The authors say that official statistics do not present a realistic view of Britain, but one developed in support of the system of power which exists in Britain — a system in which the state plays a particularly important role.

The book says that the collection of ethnic minority statistics should only be suspended if the Government's lot of minorities is believed to be improving the fields of education, health, housing and employment. The book prepared by the Runnymede Trust and the Radical Statistics Race Group says that in order to achieve a more realistic picture of the country, successive governments for the last 20 years have been forced by the pressure of public opinion to set up in 1978 — and is due to report the discrimination exercised against them by potential employers.

Available statistics document the discrimination and disadvantage suffered by blacks. Successive governments have declared that they wish to see these reduced, but helpful legislation has come slowly. And governments have favoured policies tackling the problems of general disadvantage in Inner Cities rather than the specific disadvantage faced by black people.

If this approach is to continue, it is difficult to justify the collection of information on "ethnic origin". And there is the fear that such information may be misused, not just by neo-fascist parties but by mainstream ones as well. After all, it has so far led only to attempts at further control of black immigration — sometimes by splitting families. On the other hand, it is difficult to see how ameliorative measures can be undertaken without the availability of such facts. Indeed the book's conclusion, that little has been done so far for black people in Britain, would have been impossible to reach if such statistics were totally unavailable.

The authors raise various questions about available statistics. For instance, perhaps a third of those included in the 1966 Census as "born in India" were in fact white people, born there in the days of the Raj, and many of them had parents and grand-parents born there as well. Before 1971, however, birthplace data are all that are available.

Reliable statistical information is necessary for informed debate and policy decisions. This thorough and detailed book goes a long way toward bringing the available information together, and exposing its limitations. It is an essential reference book for everyone concerned about immigration and black people in Britain.

Prabhu S. Guptaru

## Book review

### Britain's Black Population

By the Runnymede Trust and the Radical Statistics Race Group (Hememann, £13.50, paperback £4.95)

Damned lies, statistics and truth are difficult to separate in a subject as emotionally loaded as immigration. Black immigration, of course—for no one worries about white immigrants, or the fact that there are more Irish immigrants than Africans, Afro-Caribbeans, or Asians. Moreover, as a result of successive legislation—quite apart from that which is being considered at present—the total number of black people who are eligible ever to enter Britain is extremely limited.

*Britain's Black Population* presents analyses and comments on government policy and legislation up to the end of 1979, as well as the age, sex, marital status, birth and death rates, and immigration and settlement patterns of black people, and how they fare in employment, housing, and health and social services. The statistics are mainly derived from government sources, and these have developed in a piecemeal way to subserve political purposes. Information on immigration and employment is relatively complete, whereas that on health, education, housing, and social services is old and unreliable, or has never been collected.

Britain's Black Population, Runnymede Trust and Radical Statistics Race Group, Hememann Education Books.

It's been suggested that we could have a regular 'Social Product' column in the newsletter, with these two examples of the divergence between statistical and every other 'reality'. As the recession continues we should see plenty more examples of purely statistical cures to the world's problems, and readers are invited to send in reports of any cases they come across.

# Statistics get it wrong

By Michael Zander,  
Legal Correspondent

Official statistics over the past years on acquittal rates are unreliable. This emerged in a Commons written answer given yesterday by the Home Secretary, Mr Whitelaw, to Mr Nigel Forman (C, Sutton, Cheshire).

The error came to light in the course of research conducted for the Royal Commission on criminal procedure by Miss Julie Vennard, of the Home Office research unit. While studying contested trials in four large petty sessional divisions in 1979 she found a discrepancy of some 8 per cent between her figures on guilty pleas and those reported to the Home Office for the purposes of annual statistics. The proportion of guilty pleas at these courts was 82 per cent, not 90 per cent as reported.

But the effect on acquittal rates was much greater. The acquittal rate of those pleading not guilty in those four petty sessional divisions in 1979 was 25 per cent whereas the information supplied to the Home Office indicated an acquittal rate of about 55 per cent. Subsequently errors of the same type were discovered in the information reported for 1979 relating to some large Crown Court centres and it seems as if the faults may be widespread.

The 1979 criminal statistics did not include information on acquittal rates. There was simply a note that this was due to "pending investigation into a possible fault in the reporting of this information."

In the light of this discovery, statistics previously published which indicated that acquittal rates at magistrates' courts differed little from those at crown courts can no longer be regarded as valid. The Home Office has concluded that it is not feasible now to try to collect the figures for earlier years.

In his reply yesterday Mr Whitelaw said that "to obtain retrospectively comprehensive and accurate information would require a large-scale exercise for which resources are not at present available."

No decision has yet been taken as to what statistics on acquittal rates should be published in the future. Meanwhile, all existing figures on this aspect of the criminal justice system must be regarded for the time being as of doubtful value.

SUNDAY TIMES 19.4.80  
**THE COST OF  
ECONOMIES**  
More accidents  
are inevitable

**J. J. MALING**

Writer

IT HAS been generally agreed for many years that there are far too few factory inspectors. I believe that the average factory only gets an inspection for safety about once in four years. This is not the fault of the inspectors, for their work load is far too heavy.

As everyone who has ever worked in a factory knows (and that doesn't include many members of the present government) the only time you see a factory inspector is after a serious accident to find out why it happened, rather than before it to prevent it happening.

But the government proposes to cut the already hopelessly inadequate staff of 915 inspectors for the whole country to 850. This will inevitably lead to an increase in accidents, extra hospital requirements, extra industrial injury benefits paid and reduced production.

But don't imagine that the government is doing nothing to reduce the industrial accident statistics. At the present time an accident has to be reported (and is therefore included in the statistics) if it leads to a worker being off work for three or more days.

New regulations come into force on January 1, 1981. Then the day of the accident will not be reckoned in, nor will Sundays; so in most cases an accident will only be notifiable if it results in an injured person being off work for five days instead of three. In addition, there may be cases where a person is not capable of doing his own job, but can do some job. In such cases again, the accident need not be notified.

Thus the statistics, if not the accident rate, should move in the right direction soon; and if a series of jobs which could conveniently be done in hospital beds were introduced, the trend might be even more favourable.

CORRESPONDENCE

January 4, 1981

Dear Editor,

I was dismayed to find that the by now regular article in RSN - the only feature one could rely on - was discontinued with the last issue. I refer, of course, to our hero(ine) Radperson and her or his companion Supercomputer. What has happened to them? Please bring them back. I cannot bear RSN without them, and may even have to cancel my subscription unless they reappear very soon.

Yours sincerely,

A Concerned Statistician

January 9, 1981

Dear sir,

I notice that the current issue of Radical Statistics does not contain the customary cartoon, Radperson and Supercomputer. May I enquire as to the reason for this omission? Who is responsible for this subtle humour, anyway?

Yours,

A Reader

(Post card)

DEAR RSG

PLEASE BRING BACK RADPERSON AND SUPERCOMPUTER. MY KIDS LOVE THEM.  
SO DO I.

BEST WISHES

A. FAN